



# Reflections on Reflexive Theorizing: The Need for A Little More Conversation

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## Abstract

We investigate the nature and impact of recent ‘reflexive theorizing’ in the field of Organization Studies by examining articles that critically reflect on research, practice and the profession more generally with a view to defining, refining or changing future trajectories for the field. We identify a range of discursive practices used in these articles to establish authority, describe the field and make claims about the nature of theorizing. We then present three ‘ideal types’ that represent particular constellations of these discursive practices. We interrogate each of these ideal types in order to demonstrate how particular combinations of discursive practices can limit the potential of reflexive theorizing by shutting down conversations. Finally, we make a number of suggestions for weaving together discursive practices in ways that help to ensure that reflexive theorizing generates new forms of knowledge through conversations which are open to a wider range of voices, and where respect and generosity are evident.

## Keywords

discourse theory (metaphor, narratives, rhetoric etc.), domination, identity, power, resistance, risk, social constructionism

In this paper, we investigate the nature and impact of recent reflexive theorizing that has been conducted in the field of Organization Studies (OS)<sup>1</sup> by examining articles that critically reflect on the field, including the type of knowledge that they produce, the way in which

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they produce it, and the effect that this knowledge has. The launch of this new journal – *Organization Theory* – is an ideal time to consider what OS scholars think of their discipline, how they have gone about the process of reflecting on it, and what they advocate for its future. More importantly, we want to take this opportunity to caution against forms of reflexive theorizing, seen in some recent articles, which shut down new forms of knowledge under the auspices of ‘better science’ or promote simplistic provocations that suggest most of us are doing meaningless research. Instead, we want to encourage forms of reflexive theorizing that generate new forms of knowledge through conversations which are open to a wider range of voices, and where respect and generosity are evident.

Reflexive theorizing in OS is nothing new. In the 1980s, the ‘paradigm wars’ saw a surge of discussion and debate that sought to open up more heterodox ways of thinking (Hassard, 1993; also see Fabian, 2000). Reflecting on the proliferation of new perspectives, the editors of *The Handbook of Organization Studies* (Clegg, Hardy, & Nord, 1996) conceptualized theorizing as a series of multiple, overlapping conversations that reflected, reproduced and refuted earlier conversations (also see Cornelissen, 2019; Jack, Calás, Nkomo, & Peltonen, 2008). They saw the opportunity to start new conversations as a result of increased diversity in the conceptualization of OS: there was more disagreement, but also, more points of intersection. A decade later, however, the same editors noted that many conversations had become overly heated with the result that ‘people may have stopped listening and, hence, stopped learning from each other’ (Nord, Lawrence, Hardy, & Clegg, 2006, p. 1).

It seems that the heat may have intensified further. A wide range of articles has been published in the last decade under the auspices of reflexively theorizing on the field. These articles include deliberations on the state of OS research (e.g. Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Bell, Kothiyal, & Willmott, 2017; Suddaby, Hardy, & Quy, 2011), sometimes from the perspective of a particular journal or sub-discipline (e.g. Battilana,

Anteby, & Sengul, 2010; Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Newton, Deetz, & Reed, 2011; Parker & Thomas, 2011), and sometimes critiquing the conduct of the academic profession more generally (e.g. Baum, 2011; Tourish & Willmott, 2015). Other articles have scrutinized the relevance of theorizing in OS to business and/or emancipatory practice (e.g. Bartunek, 2019; Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; King & Learmonth, 2015). Another body of work has critiqued the lack of diversity in research practices and publications (e.g. Banerjee, 2011; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Love, 2020; Pullen & Rhodes, 2015; Steyaert, 2015). Many of these articles have been dismissive of the current state of OS. They have decried the pitiful state of research, the intensification and commodification of academic work, the consequences of corporatization, the field’s influence on business practice (or lack thereof), the absence of any emancipatory impact and the dearth of diversity. What is not clear to us, however, is whether these articles are capable of generating new conversations that might go some way to addressing their concerns. In fact, it seems to us that some articles are not intended to generate conversations at all.

In taking the concept of ‘conversation’ seriously as a basis of theorizing, we are referring to a particular type of conversation. Clegg and colleagues emphasized the importance of conversations with

emergent vocabularies and grammars, and with various degrees of discontinuity. Sometimes they are marked by voices from the centre of analysis and practice, sometimes they seem to come from left field, out of the blue. They reflect, reproduce and refute both the traditions of discourse that have shaped the study of organizations and the practices in which members of organizations engage. (Clegg et al., 1996, p. 3)

These writers also argued for inclusivity, warned against the privilege inherent in setting conversational parameters, counselled against conversations set up to establish ‘obligatory passage points’ (Callon, 1986) through which all subsequent contributors would be obliged to

pass, and advocated against conversational closure. Conversations are not speeches – rehearsed, polished for citational purposes, hermetically sealed, and with an ending known right at the start. Conversations are inviting and welcoming – approached by all participants as a tentative beginning to learning about an open-ended future(s). They require us to listen to others (Swan, 2017) coupled with a recognition that what we will hear will be mediated by the particularities and peculiarities of our own histories (Ahmed, 2000).

The aim of this paper is, then, to reflect on recent journal articles that have, in various ways, considered the ‘state of play’ in OS in order to explore how reflexive theorizing is conducted and to ascertain whether it is likely to generate the type of conversation described here. We start by identifying a range of discursive practices used in recent articles to establish authority, map out the field and make claims about the nature of theorizing (see Table A on p. 24 for more details). This allows us to identify some of the common ways in which reflexive theorizing is conducted. We then present three fictionalized ‘ideal types’ that represent different constellations of these discursive practices in order to construct ‘analytical accentuations’ (Swedberg, 2018) which we can scrutinize further. We show how these ideal types are unlikely to generate conversations that will encourage, sustain or enhance reflexive theorizing in OS. Finally, to escape the straitjacket imposed by these ideal types, we make a number of suggestions for weaving together discursive practices in ways that will help to ensure that reflexive theorizing generates new forms of knowledge through conversations that are open to a wider range of voices, and where respect and generosity are evident.

## Discursive Practices and Reflexive Theorizing

In this section, we first present a brief summary of common discursive practices discerned from recent journal articles. Our aim here is not to identify *all* the discursive practices deployed in

reflexive theorizing, but to draw attention to particular ones that are pertinent to our critique. We then construct three fictionalized, ideal types of reflexive theorizing – orthodox, iconoclastic and dissident – from these practices and assess their likely impact.

### *Discursive practices used in reflexive theorizing*

We identified six key discursive practices from a review of journal articles critically reflecting on the field of OS and published during the last ten years. We conducted an interpretive analysis that involved at least two of the authors reading each article and agreeing on the key discursive practices. In most cases, the practices were self-evident, and we did not use systematic coding. Accordingly, our conclusions should be seen as indicative and illustrative, rather than exhaustive. In Table A on p. 24, we provide more details of our analysis, as well as examples of quotations and references for each of the discursive practices introduced in this section.

The first – and most obvious – discursive practice concerns the language and rhetoric used in *writing* the article. Many articles rely on a *provocative* writing style, sometimes stating unequivocally that the explicit aim is to be polemical, provocative or perturbing. They often feature inflammatory expressions, incendiary metaphors, erotic language and other transgressive forms of writing to unsettle readers with a view to displacing accepted ways of thinking about the field. Another notable pattern is *alarmist* writing to indicate the existence of some form of crisis that requires immediate attention. Sometimes this is achieved simply by inserting the term into the title or by referring to a crisis – such as of relevance, confidence, or credibility – in the opening paragraphs. In some cases, doom-laden rhetoric pervades the entire article while, in others, the discussion is more muted, although references to long-standing, intractable problems or dangerous experiments nonetheless convey a degree of alarm. A third pattern is a reliance on *technical* writing involving dispassionate language as issues are described in measured

tones, arguments are worked through carefully and prosaically, terms are carefully defined, and the article is laid out according to familiar templates and professional norms. We noted some overlap among categories: provocative papers were often alarmist, but rarely technical; while some articles featured alarmist writing to set the scene, but then changed to technical writing when detailed arguments were presented.

Second, *selfing* refers to the discursive practice of constructing a particular kind of identity for the authorial Self. One common pattern is to establish the *Self as an expert*, thereby creating the traditional identity with whom we are acquainted in academic journals – a scientific researcher whose claims are supported by objective data. Such articles typically feature a wide range of techniques that convey impartiality, logic and precision. Examples include surveys of listed articles from multiple journals, keyword searches of selected journals, comparison data from different journals, extensive tables and graphs, propositions and/or hypotheses among others and, in some cases, multiple techniques are used. A somewhat different pattern constructs the Self as a *veteran* in the field, whose claims are supported by virtue of tenure, experience and seniority. In this case, the personal experience of the authors underpins their claims – the papers they have read, the reviews they have carried out, the rejections they have endured, the years they have spent in the profession, and the positions they have held. Both experts and veterans sometimes validate their claims by their *connections to other Selves*. In this case, reference is made to networks of like-minded colleagues who have voiced similar claims to those being promulgated in the article. Sometimes, it is these other Selves – particularly journal editors – who declare the expertise or experience of the authors, rather than, or in addition to, the authors themselves. In stark contrast to these ways of promoting and asserting the authority of the Self, some articles draw attention to the *Self as marginalized*. In this case, articles discuss the challenges involved in laying claim to authority when the author does *not* hold a dominant position in the field, perhaps because of gender, sexuality, ethnicity or

theoretical stance, as well as the dilemma of wanting to be part of the mainstream at the same time as being outside it.

A third discursive practice is *othering*, which occurs through the way in which other identities are ‘hailed’ and rendered (in)visible. One form of othering that we found to be particularly prevalent across a wide range of articles is the *silencing* of other identities, sometimes by ignoring the Other and sometimes by subjecting the Other to censure. In the former case, we often found a complete disregard for identities that might not have had access to the same privileges as those writing the article. In the latter case, extreme criticism is directed at various targets, ranging from named scholars, as is the case in many rebuttals and responses, through to groups of unnamed academics who are branded as having behaved inappropriately in some way. They may simply be incompetent – ‘imposters’ and ‘idiots’ who have made ‘trivial’ contributions by asking ‘narrow’ research questions or writing ‘dull’ papers. They may be researchers who have acted self-interestedly or even unethically to further their careers. They may be deans, department heads, reviewers and editors who have failed to do their job properly. In contrast to this practice, some articles, especially those informed by critical, feminist and post-colonial traditions, aimed at *exposing* identities that would otherwise remain hidden. These articles point out how certain identities – women, people of colour, members of the LGBTIQI community, indigenous peoples, those for whom English is not a first language and even critical theorists – are marginalized and excluded. These articles often make the case that, if such identities were given a voice, new ontological and epistemological vistas would open up in contemporary OS theorizing.

Fourth, *contextualizing* refers to the way reflexive theorizing is located in a wider institutional and political context. Some articles engage in *little or no* contextualizing by focusing on the immediate concerns of the article. If the context is mentioned at all, it is described in neutral terms that suggest it is benign or, if it is detrimental, it is presented as inevitable and immutable. Other articles adopt a Foucauldian

awareness of the complex web of power relations in which academics and knowledge are positioned. These articles provide a *political* assessment of the context by referring to the academic community writ large by, for example, acknowledging power struggles over the knowledge that we produce or noting how the neo-liberalist context in which we are situated results in the homogenization and commodification of knowledge. Some articles go even further to include the authorial subject in this web of power/knowledge relations. These articles are *politically self-aware* in displaying sensitivity to how the author is positioned within the academic landscape as a privileged and disciplined actor, as well as acknowledging the way in which the author has exercised power in crafting their article. They also often acknowledge the paradoxical nature of any project to change the field, admitting that it simply creates a different configuration of power/knowledge relations; it does not and cannot remove them.

Fifth, *temporalizing* refers to the way in which articles talk about and connect the past, present and future. Some articles look forward *into a bright new future* by proposing radical changes in scholarship that are clearly demarcated from past and present practices. Not only are current practices unsatisfactory, they are long-standing. There is, therefore, an enduring history of deficiency, which requires a major overhaul. If the necessary changes are made, the future holds new possibilities, novel insights and alternative ways of thinking and seeing. In other words, the past and present elide and must be repudiated, in which case, the future will be not only different, but better. It is to be embraced. Other articles also advocate for change from the present, but rather than reaching out to the future, they talk nostalgically about the past and advocate a return to it. Some articles do so by suggesting that standards have slipped in the present to the detriment of the profession and there is a need to return to the clarity and security of past practices. Other articles suggest that the freedom and inventiveness of the past have been replaced in the present with bureaucratic and dogmatic constraints that are hampering the profession. In both cases, a

halcyon past is juxtaposed against a far less appealing present; change is desired but by looking *back to the future* and invoking a return to past practices.

Finally, *aspiring* refers to the direction and form of reflexive theorizing called for in the article. Here, we noted a distinction between articles calling for *innovation* – more novel, interesting ideas often to be generated through debate, divergence and even destruction of the status quo – and articles that are cynical about the value of novelty and call for a more *incremental form of progression*. Somewhere between these two extremes lie articles that advocate for a form of *elaboration* – striving for innovation, but by engaging with existing research to stimulate new ideas through some kind of bridging or bricolage, rather than by destroying or ignoring it.

### *Ideal types of reflexive theorizing*

The aim of the previous section was to identify discursive practices commonly used in reflexive theorizing as a basis for assessing whether articles that engage in reflexive theorizing are likely to generate conversations. Our concern is not with any individual practice. However, we are concerned when *multiple* discursive practices reinforce each other in ways that stymie, rather than generate, conversations. Accordingly, we draw attention to three ideal types of article – orthodox, iconoclastic and dissident – associated with particular constellations of discursive practices. As we will show, articles that resemble one or other of these ideal types are unlikely to encourage, sustain or enhance reflexive theorizing.

Ideal types can be formed in different ways: features found empirically can be stripped back to produce a simplified version or, alternatively, features can be amalgamated into a unified abstraction (Swedberg, 2018). We adopt the latter approach by associating each ideal type with a specific constellation of the discursive practices discussed above, thereby arranging ‘diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena . . . into a unified analytical construct’ (Weber, 1904, p. 90, quoted in Morgan, 2006). It is important to remember that although ideal

types 'are generalizations constructed from experience,' they remain 'abstract, conceptualized fictions' (Morgan, 2006, p. 8). Accordingly, we do not claim that specific articles fall into one of the three ideal types (although readers may feel they have read articles that approach one or other of these extremes). Instead, we construct fictionalized, extreme versions of iconoclastic, orthodox and dissident texts to allow us to interrogate different forms of reflexive theorizing in OS.

*Orthodox Texts.* We refer to this ideal type as orthodox insofar as texts divert attention 'away from ambiguity and alternative readings and [. . .] undermine the formation of new perspectives' (Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002, p. 295). Orthodox texts promote mainstream institutions, established values and accepted practices based on normative assumptions that emphasize the unitary and orderly nature of organizations and the deployment of 'normal' science (see Clegg & Hardy, 1996).

### A Fictionalized Orthodox Text

Let us imagine an article – one of five – assembled by editors as a 'response' to an earlier article on a particular domain of OS published in the same journal. All the responses are highly critical of the original article, which originally appeared in a special issue. The editors justify the multiple responses on the grounds that criticism from informed experts – which, they argue, is the case of all the authors of the five articles – fosters debate and helps to inform developments in relation to both theory and practice. The editors also deviate into a discussion of various kinds of inappropriate behaviour – plagiarism, p-hacking, HARKing, Sokal events, Type I errors and self-citing, among others. The editors argue that exposing published articles to scrutiny as in the case here is important to reveal any unethical practices and to avoid a situation where a paper made its way through the peer review process to be published, but was then called into question as being unsound, inadequate, or alarmingly fabricated in some way. The editors conclude their introduction by arguing that all research must be held up to scrutiny to avoid such disasters.

The two authors of this particular article are well-known researchers in this domain, having published a number of articles in leading journals. They also hold senior editorial positions. As such, they have authored many other 'responses', 'dialogues', 'commentaries' and 'notes from the editors'. The authors of the remaining responses have a similar research and editorial pedigree.

This article is entitled 'Ignore the Science at your Peril.' It takes issue with the original article's approach, which relied on a qualitative analysis of academic and practitioner texts to propose radical changes to the methodological and theoretical approach underpinning the majority of work in this domain. This article argues that in promoting an innovative approach to the research theme in question, the original article privileges novelty over truth. Moreover, the authors argue, it ignores the findings of the work that uses established theories and, as such, misses an opportunity to contribute to insights that have been painstakingly and cumulatively made over the past two decades.

The writing style is measured, giving an impression of even-handedness and rational thought. Typical expert rhetoric is used – terms are defined, evidence is provided, citations are comprehensive. This rhetoric is marshalled to dispute the conclusions of the original article and to strengthen the various accusations.

The article starts by situating its critique in terms of recent trends in the broader field of OS, charging that journals are increasingly – but mistakenly – emphasizing surprising and counter-intuitive conclusions at the expense of a more solid and dependable research that is scientifically rigorous.

Evidence for this claim is provided through a review of recent articles in a subset of leading journals.

Content analysis and computer-aided qualitative data analysis software is used to track particular patterns in articles' abstracts that show whether these articles engage with established theories or proffer alternative ones, as well as whether the rationale for the article is motivated by a desire to answer existing questions or is couched in such terms as innovation and novelty. The growing obsession with novelty, the authors conclude, is driven by a relentless, but ultimately pointless, chase for impact citations on the part of journals. In their opinion, impact citations are a faulty measure of journal quality and an unbecoming aspiration for researchers: they produce fire and passion at the expense of more settled, mature science.

The article then turns its attention to the original article which, the authors argue, is symptomatic of the broader problem. They argue that it should have done more to build on the work of the architects of this area of research and to develop findings that hone knowledge slowly and precisely. This section also finds fault with the original article's definition of the key concept, which differs with traditional definitions, and criticizes it for not properly citing the early work undertaken in the field (including some of the authors' own work).

Next, the methodology of the original article is addressed, initially by questioning whether a qualitative approach is appropriate – or even needed – in this area of research. A table of exemplary quantitative articles is provided that spells out their contributions and concludes that the remaining gaps in knowledge would best be served by specific, quantitative studies, not qualitative ones like the original article.

The article goes on to make a number of further observations. It argues that the qualitative protocols proposed in the original article lead to 'spurious and erroneous' conclusions. It argues that journals need to develop data disclosure standards for qualitative articles as the best journals have done for quantitative articles. Having lamented the perils of subjective analyses in qualitative research more generally, a section entitled 'Fake Interpretations' dissects the conclusions of the original article. It is followed by a long list of bullet points that present the original authors' (subjective) analysis of each of the qualitative claims in the original article. Unsurprisingly, it concludes that each one is dubious and debatable, and fails to reflect rigorous, analytical scholarship, although little evidence is provided to support this conclusion.

The article concludes with a plea for more concerted attention on a few key theories. Instead of allowing 1,000 flowers to bloom, which results in new-fangled concepts and stalemate among competing theories, more rigour, reason and reliability are needed. This will not only aid theoretical development, it may even facilitate the transfer of scientific developments into the business sector where they can be put into practice through enhanced scientific credibility of management research.

The writing in orthodox texts mainly uses dispassionate language – terms are defined, citations are comprehensive, and claims are backed up by evidence often in tabular and graphic form. Such scientific rhetoric helps to construct a scientific, disciplined, expert authorial Self; as does the editors' introduction of the authors, reminding readers just how central, powerful – and connected – they are. Othering serves to silence a clear target – the authors of the original article who are in the crosshairs of all the articles in a response section curated by editors. The context is largely ignored – 'better' science is all that matters – even though extensive institutional and political resources have been marshalled in organizing this critique. Any relaxation in the commitment to science constitutes a crisis that can be addressed only by painstakingly and incrementally developing select theories through the progressive acquisition of knowledge. Accordingly, aspirations are for theories that can be tried and tested within the parameters of what the authors consider to be rational, objective social science.

A Darwinian understanding of 'an implicit competition between theories in their ability to capture reality' (Suddaby, 2014, p. 407) results

in orthodox texts promoting the homogenization of a particular kind of science – usually the one espoused by the authors. What is wanted is not new theories, which would merely add to the competition, but for existing theories to work better, thereby increasing their chances of survival. Articles portray a view of knowledge that is progressively and incrementally – rather than theatrically – accumulated. Accordingly, texts do not promote diversity or debate, which would simply challenge existing privileged positions. Instead they search for coalescence around grand theories proffered by a 'small band of scholars' with no inclination 'to incorporate pluralist appreciations' (Marshall, 2000, p. 171). These articles assume that, as 'theory progresses in its ability to proximate and predict reality, a single unified theory should emerge' (Suddaby, 2014, p. 408). Orthodox texts are thus rooted in the modernist project whereby truth is generated by the world of pure logos and characterized by scientific, measured language seemingly devoid of emotion (Clegg, 2013). The dominance of rationality ensures – and obscures – the persistence of hierarchical power structures that serve these academics well as 'keepers of the rational

flame'. In presenting science as pure and untainted, the institutional and political infrastructure, astride of which the authors sit, is ignored. Yet these authors are also gatekeepers, and supposedly neutral protocols – like bringing a large number of highly critical 'responses' to bear on to a single article and selecting the authors of those responses – can be harnessed only by those in privileged positions.

Such measures arise because, despite the dominance and privilege of the orthodoxy, there is an unspoken horror lurking in the shadows – the excessiveness of texts which 'disrupt or provoke' (Pullen & Rhodes, 2015, p. 88), threatening to undermine the 'rationality and order of the "masterful" texts' (Vachhani, 2015, p. 148) and break open the boundaries of the academy. Passion and pathos in research serve to 'cut into' truisms and 'open up that which cannot be controlled' (Berlant, 2004, p. 447), thereby jeopardizing the use of scientific empiricism and rigorous theorizing in crafting incremental developments in knowledge. There is no room in orthodox texts for surprise, formlessness or

unpredictability in new forms of knowledge (Berlant, 2004). Using rationality to regulate the terrain means it 'separates out mind, body, and passion; [and] separates out truth and knowledge from politics and ethics' (Hill Collins, 2013, cited in Vachhani, 2015, p. 159). Those who speak out against established 'truths' are deemed to be, at best, emotional and, at worst, unprofessional 'failing the very standards of reason and impartiality that form the basis of "good" judgement' (Ahmed 2004, p. 170).

*Iconoclastic Texts.* We refer to this ideal type as iconoclastic texts because they are oriented towards breaking with established theorizing – destroying mainstream institutions, established values and accepted practices (see Marsden & Townley, 1996, on 'contra science'). We are mindful that contemporary iconoclasts are often considered 'cool rebels' but are also aware that the original iconoclasts established a church that some might describe as oppressive as the one they undermined (see Kolrud & Prusac, 2014).

#### A Fictionalized Iconoclastic Text

Let us imagine an article that has been invited by the editors of the journal, who have labelled it an 'Editorial Selection'. It is preceded by a paragraph from these editors who describe its two authors as experienced, prestigious, erudite and astute commentators on the field, whose collective years as leading researchers in the field have resulted in the publication of numerous important articles.

The article itself starts with an inflammatory title; 'Theorizing in OS Needs Blowing Up' which segues into an incendiary metaphor about the need to demolish OS from the ground up in order to generate a space that is receptive to new, creative theories rather than the current hackneyed attempts that merely reinvent the wheel. The language is angry – the field is in crisis, jeopardized by barbarians at the gate on the one hand and careerist academics on the other. This article aims to provoke, prod, probe and piss people off. Only in this way – by being blown up – can OS be saved from itself.

This attack is deemed necessary because of the current crisis, which has arisen because we no longer adhere to the good old days (before search engines, league tables and university rankings), when academic writing had substance and elegance, when journals published inventive, innovative and interesting articles, and when researchers cared about real-life problems.

The article lists a long litany of complaints about contemporary theorizing in OS, including researchers who rarely address important problems, whose prose is leaden, who write longwinded literature reviews merely to lend (superfluous) gravitas, and who claim to provide theoretical contributions that are neither theoretical nor a contribution. Those held responsible for this state of affairs are unnamed researchers, who wish to expunge the field of debate and diversity. As the article progresses, the blame game snowballs to include editors, reviewers, editorial boards, publishing companies, university administrators, league tables, business schools, funding agencies and governments. In a section called 'The Young Pretenders', a vignette uses an example of CVs and promotion applications at one of the author's institutions to draw attention to another cause of the crisis – the unbridled ambition of early and mid-career researchers who have brazenly plied their trade using mundane, mainstream theories to increase their chances of success.

Claims are supported with the use of selective citations and reference to other senior colleagues whose views match exactly those of the authors. No other evidence is provided, although examples of two articles that do meet with the authors' standards are proffered. They are written by white European males and published some 30 years ago. In contrast to these exemplars, articles today are described as cautious, boring, tedious, and written with a pompous and pretentious style devoid of imagination, humour and artistry.

A footnote acknowledges that perhaps not *all* recent articles are cautious, boring and tedious but it fails to provide any samples of exemplary recent scholarship. A couple of humorous 'mea culpas' are provided, showing that the authors are not entirely innocent of some of the charges that they have laid. However, each confession is followed by a statement which suggests that, having seen the light with respect to their own work, the authors are vindicated in pointing out the shortcomings of others. Mention is made of the web of power/knowledge relations that envelope the field (with appropriate reference to Foucault), as well as the language games played by academics to ensure their work is published (with appropriate reference to Wittgenstein). This web of power relations apparently ensnares other researchers, especially those striving for recognition and promotion, but no mention is made of how the authors are also positioned within these relations or how their rhetoric also plays its part in language games.

The concluding part of the article suggests solutions to the problems identified by the authors. Having identified a crisis with multiple causes – orthodoxy in research practices, personal shortcomings among researchers, a disregard for a practical or ethical purpose in business schools, and an overall system characterized by dysfunction, suggestions reinforce the lessons already learned and put into practice by the authors organized in a series of alliterative bullet points. *Researchers should reread the classics; revise their assumptions; rewrite their articles; reconsider their career aspirations; and repudiate the demands of the modern profession.*

Iconoclastic texts are characterized by provocative, alarmist writing, expressing anger – sometimes paranoia – about the decline of the field. Nostalgia for the past is evident because the present is in crisis. Provocative claims are made, with the experience of the authorial Self, as well as reference to similar, like-minded Selves, often compensating for the absence of evidence. The voice that comes with a senior position in the field is reinforced by the power hierarchy, including the editors who invite and laud authors, absolving them of the need to substantiate their claims. Othering is implicit in this process – omnipotent authors, who have already made their careers, look down on other researchers in the field and find them wanting. Targets of disapproval range from homogenizing 'North-American-style' researchers to unadventurous, careerist colleagues. The power/knowledge relations in which the field is embedded are acknowledged (although not reflexively applied) and, to escape them, we must destroy the present and innovate, albeit by returning to the past.

Iconoclastic texts set up their own conditions for theorizing, often going for 'the man [sic] not the ball' by citing a lack of scholarship, a careerist mentality, or a capitulation to the conditions of the system. The result carries an exclusionary air born from not recognizing that the authors carry a specific heritage and lineage which, while it may well advocate for plurality, is not marked in any way by an ethos of hospitality or generosity. Drawing on the field's (and their own) past glories creates a self-oriented standard of theorizing. This history is not everyone's history (Page, 2017). The conditions of those occupying less privileged positions in the academy are ignored. Instead the commentary focuses on how others fall short of this benchmark, allowing for certain leaps of logic to be made. In the same way as nostalgia works through a fluctuation between fact and experience of a particular version of the past (Davis, 1979), iconoclastic texts cement together selective observations from the situated positioning of the authors. This position is one of privilege;

different observations are made on the grounds of legitimacy derived from seniority, longevity, impact and other markers that are not recognized as forms of privilege in the sense of an ‘invisible package of unearned assets’ (McIntosh, 1988, p. 1). As Svejnova (2019, p. 59) notes, the criticism does not only apply to those singled out as specific targets, but ‘also the rest of us, an “ongoing crowd” of meek and submissive organizational scholars who have no better (i.e., our own) idea(s) and ideals than blindly following those of the mighty ones.’ Consequently, the rest of ‘us’ are judged as failing to live up to expectations – pursuing career aspirations at the expense of innovative theory, significant contributions or practical outputs that might be useful to managers.

The iconoclastic text thus builds from a negative engagement with the field, which leads to an approach to theorizing that is proprietorial: it provides no stepladder, ways in or up without a bloodying of the field, while dispensing opprobrium on those who fail to meet specific, situated standards. In seeking to replace one approach to theorizing with another in the authors’ own image, these texts rely on reproducing an Other – those who fall foul of the iconoclastic benchmark by not being radical, sensational or ambitious ‘enough’ according to a bounded set of terms and conditions. In this way, these texts have a doubling effect of producing an equally oppressive regime. The finitude to ‘thinking otherwise’ advocated here is always prefaced by ‘thinking against’, which in turn can hinder new knowledge development and inclusivity

(see Eisenberg, 1987). There is, as a result, a theoretical momentum in iconoclastic texts of simultaneous displacement and replacement: the momentum to challenge dominant modes of theorizing serves to reproduce equally powerful voices and ideas, rather than engender a more transformative project.

Orthodox and iconoclastic texts feed off each other: the threat posed by iconoclasts is one reason why the orthodoxy needs to be continually fortified; and the rationality and homogeneity promoted by the orthodoxy are exactly what iconoclasts seek to usurp. However, the two sets of texts talk past each other. Rarely do we see conversations involving both parties: iconoclastic texts rail at the orthodoxy; while orthodox texts ignore many of the changes brought about by iconoclastic thinking. Yet, while apparently an anathema to each other, these two sets of texts are similar in many respects: both are able to be published because authors can leverage prevailing power relations to their advantage; both present omnipotent Selves who look down on others; and both – either deliberately or inadvertently – lay down strictures for future theorizing that involve a continuation of past practices.

*Dissident Texts.* We refer to the third ideal type as dissident: they engage in debate typically with the aim of acknowledging marginalization and bringing about change (see, for example, Dhaliwal, Nagarajan, & Varma, 2016, p. ii; Sparks, 1997). Dissident texts challenge the mainstream but, rather than trying to destroy it as with iconoclastic texts or reproduce it as with orthodox texts, they seek to move far beyond it.

#### A Fictionalized Dissident Text

Let us imagine an article published in a journal known for its critical stance in the field. The article was submitted in the usual way and has been through a traditional ‘revise and resubmit’ process. The two authors have published a number of articles on the role of philosophy in OS and are known for adopting a relatively radical stance in their writing.

The article is titled ‘Coming out of the OS closet: Impact through embodied theorizing.’ It starts by asserting that, rather than dwelling on past problems or celebrating how far we have come as a field, the aim is to open up the field to new voices and diverse bodies – both real and metaphorical. This will help to ensure that the field stays relevant, allow a wider range of scholars to have an impact, thereby democratizing the field and, potentially, leading to change in both academy and society.

The language is provocative – laced with sexualized and gendered metaphors. The authors appear to want to shock the reader into sitting up and taking notice through their transgressive writing. They call for theoretical promiscuity, where there are no limits to what can be said and done and with whom. Experimenting with radical forms of theorizing is the only way to challenge dominant discourses and engender new, more inclusive practices in research. The reader is encouraged to cast off the blinkers imposed by existing theorizing, which is deeply rooted in the masculine, heterosexual ideal. This phallic reductionism constrains everyone – female, male and trans academics. It needs to be replaced with bisexual, queer, gender-fluid, transdisciplinary collaborations. Masculinity has cast a ghoulish shadow over theorizing, resulting in a narrow view of knowledge by embedding it in the work of a small band of brothers whose work is repeatedly re-cited through an old boys' network. The authors argue that theorizing should not be a mirror reflecting back the field but, instead, a kaleidoscope that provides insights into the different selves that we might become. Good theory should challenge conventional conceptions and offer unexpected understandings – it should make us weak at the knees. To demonstrate the power of this new theoretical perspective, the article explores an organizational issue by comparing an established, male-oriented theoretical framework with a more radical form of theorizing in order to demonstrate the greater insight provided by the latter.

Claims to authority are made through the authors' deep engagement with theories rarely used in OS, including copious references to feminist, queer and post-humanist philosophers to reinforce the premise that theorizing is inevitably embodied and emotional. The authors also demonstrate their knowledge of the 'standard stock' of white, male philosophers whose names regularly appear in OS articles and, in fact, mention is made by the authors of how deeply they are immersed in this work, having read it in the original French or German.

The authors argue for a radically reflexive position, drawing on their embodied, everyday experiences to establish their motivation for opening up the field. The reader is led to believe that they know the authors intimately – what they value, how they have suffered, who they desire to be, and what they long for. The authors are not dispassionate observers but embodied subjects wanting to tease, disrupt and fuck with readers' minds.

Attention then turns from the authors' identities to their position in the field. They admit that they are complicit in the problems they are critiquing and acknowledge that they are products of the power relations in which they are situated, both empowered and disempowered by gender, class, race and sexuality. They also wrestle with the impossibility of their position – trying to be both inside and outside the web of power relations that they want to critique and proposing inclusivity from a privileged position. The article concludes with the assertion that an opportunity exists for a radical re-imagining of the field to bring about an equitable and sustainable future. There is a clarion call to use this new theoretical lens to reflect on everyday, embodied practices and narratives and embrace a collective commitment to screw the patriarchal power relations that limit the field's potential. Since current approaches are now flaccid and incapable of taking the field forward, the authors want a rebirth – born from the bringing together of many bodies where knowledge development is ongoing.

In dissident texts, the writing is provocative, subversive and antagonistic – located in what Berlant (2011, p. 441) calls 'the sensualist turn' – with references to emotions, body parts and sex acts that do not appear in most academic articles. Selfing here involves emotional openness and honesty, and frequently referring to personal experience in drawing attention to the marginalized situation of the authors and of others whose voices and ways of theorizing cannot reach the pages of journals. Othering mainly emphasizes exposure insofar as it hails

those other, marginalized identities that authors seek to include. However, othering can also silence – especially the gendered, racial and class-based voices that dominate the field. Dissident texts are sensitive to context – exploring the conditions that produce particular kinds of knowledge about particular kinds of identity, some of which are significantly privileged – such as male voices. Accordingly, rather than return to the past, dissident texts want to move far beyond it: aspiring to a multi-voiced, diverse future in which Selves and Others that have

hitherto been ignored or excluded are relocated front and centre.

The influence of dissident texts has, however, been largely confined to the promotion and inclusion of similar Selves, such as elite, professional, ‘western’ female academics, where there has been a tendency to simplify and reify the categories by which the Other is known (Swan, 2017). Differences between Self and Other have been assumed and appropriated in ways that often advantage the Self, thereby precluding actors from engaging in mutual recognition (Ahmed, 2000) and understanding ‘how different temporalities might attach to particular bodies’ (Page, 2017, p. 23). For example, in relation to gender, Mohanty (1984, p. 339) points out, the sisterhood cannot be assumed simply on this basis: ‘it must be forged in concrete, historical and political practice’. In theorizing within OS, there has been a failure to attend to intersections of race, class and gender – when feminist analyses have been deployed, they are drawn primarily ‘from white women’s feminist theorizing’ (Holvino, 2010, p. 251). The result is that, despite striving for inclusivity, many other identities remain invisible, including people of colour, non-Western ethnicities and indigenous cultures and even early career researchers, the university precariat, and those working outside ‘ivy league’, ‘sandstone’ or research-intensive institutions; while the established, masculine, heterosexual identity has been recognized, although ridiculed and vilified.

Dissident texts are aware of the paradoxes involved in their project. Through their reflexive positioning, authors acknowledge that they cannot exist without dominant norms – be they patriarchal, white, or middle class – which dominate the very writing that seeks to challenge them. Consequently, when it comes to aspirations, dissident texts recognise they are caught in a double bind: it is difficult to articulate a way forward because so much of the argumentation relies on positioning – and privileging – authors as agents of good praxis (see Ahmed, 2000), while offering alternatives simply constructs a new form of hierarchy and domination. Even in pointing to a new, better future, dissident texts

are in danger of ‘fixing’ both past and future by ‘having the problem solved ahead of time and feeling more evolved than one’s context’ (Freeman, 2010, p. xiii).

Dissident texts have had much to say about gender, but less about other marginalized identities. The provocation and titillation of eroticism works for gender and sexuality in ways that cannot easily be applied to other identities based on race, geography, language, stage of career or class. Writing ‘honestly’ and ‘openly’ about the Self usually involves writing about personal experiences, emotions and feelings in self-referential autoethnographies that may not be meaningful to other identities. Nor are dissident texts particularly accessible, drawing from erudite knowledge in philosophical treatises in ways that Grey and Sinclair (2006, p. 445) would surely describe as ‘tendentious, jargon-ridden, [and] laboured,’ and rarely translating into practical suggestions. Finally, the implications of successful dissidence create a dilemma even for those who espouse it. What would it mean to open OS theorizing up completely to sites of resistance and empowerment? To lay aside all existing ways of knowing, including the ‘go-to’ feminist and queer philosophers from whom dissidents derive much of their understanding? And to fully embrace *not* knowing? The loss of privilege, certainty and order could strike fear into the heart of even the most committed dissident.

In concluding this section, we suggest that the closer that articles come to one or other of these ideal types, the more they limit possibilities for new conversations. While individual discursive practices serve as useful rhetorical resources to stimulate conversation, when multiple strands of discursive practice pull each other tight, conversation is stifled. For example, orthodox texts that use technical writing to portray a scientific foundation for their claims, not only fail to contextualize the power/knowledge relations that lie behind it, they pull the discursive curtains tight in order to hide the political infrastructure that sustains their privilege and obscure its workings. Iconoclastic texts that construct a crisis and lay out a hostile future often forget that it is early career researchers, in

particular, who are caught in this net – they are the ones who have to navigate it without the advantages of seniority. These texts then pull the net tighter by silencing these researchers – they are precluded from the past for which these articles yearn and criticized when they try to leverage power/knowledge relations in ways that might benefit their futures. Even dissident texts striving to expose and empower Others can be unstitched by the double strands of esoteric writing and narcissistic contextualizing. In other words, the ideal types are straitjackets for reflexive theorizing, not a means of encouraging conversations that will sustain and enhance it.

### Weaving a Way Forward

So, what might a more conversational mode of reflexive theorizing look like? We propose a weaving metaphor<sup>2</sup> to show that discursive practices can be woven together in ways that generate conversations in which participants are neither domineering nor dominated, but are welcoming, inclusive and respectful of each other; where they listen, while recognizing there will be limits on what they are able to hear; and where they are both critical and appreciative of the past at the same time as being receptive to learning about open-ended, unknown futures (also see Hamann et al., 2020; Spiller, Wolfgramm, Henry, & Pouwhare, 2020). Our invocation of a craft metaphor is intended to acknowledge the complex and paradoxical nature of organizational theorizing, and speak to its ‘embodied, imaginative, ethical and political nature’ (Bell & Willmott, 2019, p. 2). It is not, then, a template or a list of particular practices but, rather, is intended to suggest ‘know-how’ that may help others weave new patterns in different ways. Accordingly, in the remainder of this section, we attempt to weave particular discursive practices together – not to produce an ideal type straitjacket with threads pulled tight in ways that stifle conversations – but to show how reflexive theorizing might be crafted in ways that *encourage* conversations.

Weaving is, of course, often seen as women’s work – and we would explicitly encourage

more women to publish on different forms of reflexive theorizing in OS. However, men are also weavers and, thus, not excluded from this endeavour. Neither gender, nor age, nor disability<sup>3</sup> necessarily preclude weaving. Weaving also cuts across geography – weaving traditions are found and admired in many different countries and it is a craft where indigenous knowledge is highly valued; and we would certainly encourage more diversity in reflexive theorizing in OS. We are, however, also mindful that some people weave under oppressive, coercive conditions, which serves as a reminder that, while seeking to broaden the inclusion of some identities, there is always the danger of unintentionally exploiting, marginalizing and silencing others.

Weaving requires collaboration and transformation: some raw material such as silk, wool, cotton, metal, grass, bark, etc. has to be extracted and fashioned into different kinds of fabric, which is then incorporated – aesthetically and practically – into other objects. Similarly, reflexive theorizing is not a virtuoso performance, but best done ‘between people rather than by man [sic]’ (Canovan, 2018, p. xx) and by ‘engaging otherness and enacting connectedness’ (Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe, 2014, p. 279). It involves working with raw materials of previously produced knowledge – whether admired or not – and turning it into new forms of argumentation that may copy, complement or critique the original ideas. Whatever we write comes from somewhere and was written or spoken by somebody; and further relational work is needed for it to take a form that speaks to a given context. Finally, there are always holes in weaving: sometimes the weave is pulled tight and holes are hard to spot; sometimes the holes are part of the fabric and eventual design; and some come from constant (mis)use. There are holes, too, in reflexive theorizing – to which others (editors, reviewers, readers) may point in order to stitch them more tightly or fashion them more creatively.

We now reflect on the discursive practices that we wove together in this article in order to suggest what a new conversational form of reflexive theorizing might look like. As far as

writing is concerned, we are suspicious of texts that hide behind science in order to ‘assume intellectual privilege in the discipline through the hegemonic structure of the selective reporting of “context” and “generalizability”’ (Jack et al., 2008, p. 874). We therefore advocate experimentation with less formulaic forms of writing that, instead of replicating certain techniques, lend themselves to more creative and embodied ways of writing (Sommerville, 1991) and liberate knowledge production ‘from its self-imposed conservatism’ (Rhodes, 2019, p. 24). At the same time, we recognize that there are times when more prosaic language may be appropriate. Transgressive writing is often accompanied by rhetorical gymnastics that serve to shine the spotlight primarily on the Self as author; there are times when Others need the limelight. We also counsel against the alarmist, aggressive and often hypermasculine writing that is becoming increasingly prevalent: whatever it does, it does not generate conversations or facilitate inclusivity. Similarly, we suggest avoiding overly rarefied language – making ideas accessible, regardless of the degree of intellectual erudition that underpins them, is a first step in opening up conversations with Others, rather than merely with Self-like clones. Accordingly, we have tried to weave a writing style that is, we hope, playful, powerful and accessible. We acknowledge that our writing inscribes, and is inscribed by, ideals of scholarship and intellectualism limited by the contours of our own cultural contexts. Nonetheless, we have tried to craft a pattern in which a wider range of identities who ‘endure the effort it takes to strive to persevere’ stand out from the fray (Povinelli, 2011, p. 9).

We started by using mainly technical writing and familiar citing patterns to review the literature in a way that, together with a bulky table on p. 24, lends considerable weight to our claims to be authoritative, expert Selves. We then presented vignettes of ideal types to draw attention to particular features and their effects. Of course, our crafting of these particular fictions was not innocent. As Morgan (2006) reminds us, such exaggerations are fashioned

to play the part required of them in promoting a particular approach at a particular time. So, we do not deny that we are ‘calling out’ power in a profound way by using particular discursive devices. Nonetheless, we hope to make conversations more inclusive, or at least more porous – less ‘holy’ by tightly stitching up omnipotent Selves and more ‘holey’ in allowing other identities and ways of knowing to be seen through the weave.

We also attempted to critically interrogate our Selves as authors (see Cunliffe, 2009; Skeggs, 2002) by taking contextualizing and temporalizing seriously. Contextualizing involves not only recognizing that the academic environment – the drive towards rankings, citations and ‘big hits’ – produces particular kinds of knowledge. It also means situating the Self realistically and honestly in that context. For example, as ‘senior’, tenured academics working for elite institutions (as most authors of articles on reflexive theorizing are), we have largely escaped the strictures of recent changes in the academic context. It did not exist when we started out and, by virtue of our current positions, we can navigate its constraints far more easily than early career researchers, those with different career trajectories or working in different kinds of institutions. In fact, this context creates an economy of valuation which, while it may mitigate against certain types of research, nonetheless increases the value of elite academics (including ourselves). Our privileged position increases the chances of publishing, even in the face of constraint; and, of course, the resulting publications are now worth more. So, instead of criticizing the Other for ‘selling out’, some Selves might admit they have been ‘bought out’.

Temporalizing should avoid reifying the past, regardless of whether the intention is to reject or resurrect it; better to frame versions of the past as open, incomplete and discordant (see Page, 2017). If authors are suspicious of both nostalgia for the past and the desire to do away with it, they are more likely to notice variations in the written, theoretical past that can provide resources – and constraints – for future theorizing. Accordingly, we reviewed past articles not simply to repudiate them, but to identify a reservoir of ideas that will

sustain a way forward into the future – weaving together previous, known approaches with new forms of reflexive theorizing. Keeping the past open also allows us to contemplate what has been forgotten and consider how knowledge might have otherwise formed. It reminds us that not all identities have the luxury of the pasts (or presents) of many of the authors who engage in reflexive theorizing, but this should not preclude these other identities from participating in conversations. In fact, they may well have *more* to say and contribute because of their particular, situated contexts.

Attending to reflexivity through contextualizing and temporalizing should also lead to more exposure of various Others. Rather than being fixed in place by pre-existing meanings as an audience for our theorizing, the Other may become the very *basis* of theorizing. If we are alert to the complexities and layered meanings of different contexts, identities and power relations (see Page, 2017) and resist the impulse to demonize or ‘stranger’ the Other (Ahmed, 2000; Swan, 2017), the nature of reflexive theorizing has the opportunity to transform. Rather than an opportunity to show (off) what authors know, it becomes a chance to engage with the limits of our knowledge. Moving beyond dialogical processes of rhetoric, persuasion and critique to question one’s own voice, conversations start from a position of authorial vulnerability that accepts one’s own not knowing and embraces indeterminate conditions of possibility. Conversations are incomplete and open-ended, allowing for the elevation of creativity and imagination to the same level of status as logic and analysis or experience and dissidence. In this way, dominant forms of theorizing, which serve mainly privileged members of the field, are less likely to be reproduced (see Moreton-Robinson, 2003).

Conversations are also, of course, about listening, which ‘starts with the assumption that one cannot see things from the other person’s perspective and waits to learn by listening to the other person’ (Young, 1997, p. 49). Listening develops our capacity to theorize more collaborative forms of communication, to enlarge our thoughts, and open up space to allow new

meaning to emerge (see Mason, 1993; Hamann et al., 2020). As Ahmed (2000, p. 156) writes, ‘to hear, or to give the other a hearing, is to be moved by the other, such that one ceases to inhabit the same place’. Conversations are thus marked by reciprocity as individualistic renditions of knowledge construction are rejected and the role of the Other in knowledge construction is embraced (Hamann et al., 2020; Love, 2020). Listening does not, however, equate with understanding, nor does reciprocity add up to symmetry. On the contrary, when ‘privileged people put themselves in the position of those who are less privileged, the assumptions derived from their privilege often allow them unknowingly to misrepresent the other’s situation’ (Young, 1997, p. 48). Power asymmetries and inequalities are not to be ignored or even recanted; nor should difference and particularity of the other position be obscured (Westwood & Jack, 2007).

There is, then, a fine art in weaving together selfing and othering: interrogating the Self can easily fall into narcissism, where the Other is forgotten. A generosity of spirit in talking about the Other can descend into claims to speak for – or over – them. Striving to grow and change alongside new theories (see Hibbert et al., 2014) can be an excuse for appropriating Others’ knowledge and culture. The more one thinks one ‘understands’ the Other, the less the opportunity for dialogue and the more for misunderstanding (see Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Young, 1997). Moreover, this relationship between Self and Other is ‘always in a state of flow, and is consistent with the notion of a respectful, collaborative, evolving narrative’ (Mason, 2015, p. 36).

Finally, we advocate careful consideration of the aspirations of reflexive theorizing. What is the point of the paper? What do authors really want to achieve? Who is the conversation for, and to what end? It is important to remember that, because it is seen as legitimate, important and scholarly, theorizing helps to position authors in the academy. It extracts value from earlier writings in ways that disproportionately benefit the Self. If theorizing sets parameters on the basis of derision and a self-referential new

norm, it creates precarious positions for Others, whether intentionally or otherwise (Drichel, 2007).

## Conclusions

Our aspirations in writing this article were influenced by our despondency on reading some recent articles. We were disheartened by the catastrophizing in recent articles that paint such a bleak picture of our field and vilify so many members of it. Where authors use ‘we’, but really mean ‘you’, i.e. those of ‘us’ who have neglected important issues in order to publish in leading journals, who resort to tortuous, pompous and verbose prose to create the illusion of theory development, or who make miniscule and meaningless increments to what is already known. We were discouraged by the way in which so many Others are excluded and criticized by those who seem unwilling to recognize their precarious positions. We were dejected by the masculinist and increasingly violent tenor in recent texts and at academic conferences, which remind us of Trump’s tweets or Question Time in the UK Parliament – people talking past each other and, in doing so, excluding countless others from the conversation. And, finally, we were downcast by witnessing omnipotent Selves and their outlandish claims, whose versions of ‘post truth’ and ‘selective amnesia’ culminate in a competition to deny that anything interesting or insightful has ever been published in recent times on anything of any significance.

Our aspiration is, then, to call such articles to account. We want reflexive theorizing to be more than a rhetorical soapbox for intellectual posturing – perpetuating dominance and difference and drifting into a cacophony of self-referential voices. Accordingly, we would like to see reflexive theorizing interweave different discursive practices in ways that open conversations up to a wider range of voices, where respect and generosity are evident and where forms of knowledge emerge in dialogue. It means resisting the urge to stitch straitjackets and, instead, weaving different textures, colours and patterns

that are challenging, and sometimes disruptive, but always carry a productive moment of possibility. Calling for more, less, new or interesting theorizing is, in our view, not simply a demand for conversation, but also an ethic of conversation.

## Author Note

Readers are referred to Table A on p. 24 for more details of the analysis of the discursive practices.

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## Notes

1. We use the term Organization Studies to refer to the broad field covered by this journal, including both theory and research (see Iedema, 2011). Terms such as ‘organization and management theory’ and ‘organization science’ are also used. While we recognize their historical, geographical and politics nuances, for our purposes here, we consider these terms to speak to the same body of work.
2. Please note that our use of the concept of weaving is very different from that of Empson (2020, p. 5) who uses the term in a more critical way: they are ‘preternaturally productive colleagues, capable of churning out an inexhaustible stream of articles in high status journals . . . [who] know how to play the game.’
3. For example, see Das, Borgos-Rodriguez, & Piper (2020).

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### Author biographies

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## Appendix: Discursive Practices Used in Reflexive Theorizing

In Table A below, we summarize the discursive practices discussed in the paper, as well as different categories associated with each practice. The table also provides illustrations of the practices and cites some of the articles using them. To identify these discursive practices, we explored a wide range of journal articles (including rebuttals and responses) published in the last ten years that critically reflect on the field, including the type of knowledge that they produce, the way in which they produce it, and

the effect that this knowledge has. Articles include commentaries on the state of OS research and nature of OS theorizing; views from individual journals and particular sub-disciplines (e.g. institutional theory, human resource management, international business); more specialist articles on the treatment of gender and diversity in the field; and papers on the impact of academic knowledge on business or emancipatory practice. We started by searching nine leading journals that publish such articles: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *British Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, *Organization*, *Organization Science*, and *Organization Studies*. As we identified articles in these journals, we also followed up on promising references that we found in their bibliographies, which led us to other relevant articles published in a range of other journals related to OS, such as *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *Gender Work & Organization*, *International Human Relations Journal*, among others. Our analysis was interpretive and involved two of the authors reading each article and agreeing on the key discursive practices. In most cases, the practices were self-evident, and we did not use systematic coding. Accordingly, our conclusions are indicative and illustrative, rather than exhaustive, since they derive from a partial analysis of an extensive, but inevitably incomplete, ‘pool’ of articles. We are also aware that by concentrating on journal articles, which are typically bounded by their own discursive – and elitist – repertoires, we may have ignored avenues for more heterodox, inclusive approaches.

**Table A.** Discursive Practices Identified in Articles on Reflexive Theorizing in OS.

Practice	Categories	Characteristics	Illustrative quotations	Indicative references
<b>Writing</b>	Provocative	States aim of being polemical, provocative and unsettling and/or Uses evocative metaphors and/or Uses erotic language to emphasize the role of embodiment and power and/or Engages in transgressive writing	'I will provide a polemical argument as to why the recent developments in the field are anti-intellectual and damaging, focusing on its tendency to be exclusionary and leading to formulaic, conservative and dull publications.' (Grey, 2010: 678) 'P=jk Science!? An Invitation to Humanize Organization Theory.' (Petriglieri, 2020: 1) 'Our view is that the discipline now requires a pre-war orientation, with attention being paid to the coming conflagration. What we mean . . . is a more direct engagement of our discipline with contemporary forms of organized destruction such as "war", "terror" or "insurgency".' (Reed & Burrell, 2019: 48) 'You don't want to read about the blood that drips down my leg, the pungent odour of being sexually aroused, the gashes and scars of childbirth, the grey hair, the skin imperfections that develop in the Sydney heat. In redressing this abjection, we need to talk about vulvas, vaginas, labia.' (Pullen, 2018: 125) We need 'to make this relational practice visible to . . . break free from the crisis of our profession.' (González-Morales, 2019: 303–4) 'Academia's emerging crisis of relevance.' (Hoffman, 2016: 77) 'There is an emerging crisis of confidence in management studies.' (Harley, 2019: 286) 'The strategic management field appears vulnerable to a credibility crisis.' (Bergh et al., 2017: 423) 'Science's reproducibility and replicability crisis: international business is not immune.' (Aguinis et al., 2017: 653) '[The ABS journal list] should be ignored by business schools, and regarded as a quaint but dangerous experiment.' (Tourish & Willmott, 2015: 38) From 'its earliest days, the field . . . has wrestled with fundamental questions concerning its nature and purpose.' (Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011: 355). 'There are four main parts to this article. First, we briefly review previous insights into borrowing in OMT in order to explore the preponderance and nature of borrowed theories in the field. Second, we present a classification of types of theory-building endeavor based on the idea of traveling theories and domestic theories . . . Third, we discuss conceptual blending and explain how this correspondence approach, based on analogical reasoning, can be used to enhance OMT theory development.' (Oswick et al., 2011: 318) 'In this article, we organize a systematic review of the literature on theory building in management around the five key elements of a good story . . . to provide a richer understanding of how specific theorizing tools facilitate aspects of the theorizing process.' (Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016: 59)	Grey, 2010; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011a; Banerjee, 2011; Mumby, 2011; Willmott 2011a; Fotaki & Harding, 2012; Thanem & Knights, 2012; Bell & Sinclair, 2014; Clukey, 2014; Fotaki et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2014; Parker, 2015; Kenny & Fotaki, 2015; Vachhani, 2015; Prasad, 2016; Pullen et al., 2016; Marinetto, 2018; Mehropouya & Willmott, 2018; Pullen, 2018; Alvesson & Spicer, 2019; Bell & de Gama, 2019; Reed & Burrell, 2019; Rhodes, 2019; Petriglieri, 2020 Davis, 2010; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Baum, 2011; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Jack et al., 2011; Willmott, 2011a, 2011b; Vaara & Durand, 2012; Mingers & Willmott, 2013; Tourish & Willmott, 2015; Hoffman, 2016; Aguinis, et al., 2017; Byington & Felps, 2017; Bergh et al., 2017; Honig et al., 2018; Mehropouya & Willmott, 2018; Fleming, 2019; González-Morales, 2019; Harley, 2019; Tourish, 2020 Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Battilana et al., 2010; Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2011; Oswick et al., 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Aguinis et al., 2014; Bartunek, 2014; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015; Romme et al., 2015; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016; Fisher & Aguinis, 2017; Tsoukas, 2017; Anderson et al., 2020
	Technical	Uses a dispassionate writing style and/or Adopts familiar professional norms concerning writing		

(Continued)

**Table A. (Continued)**

Practice	Categories	Characteristics	Illustrative quotations	Indicative references
<b>Selfing</b>	The Self as expert	Uses 'objective' forms of evidence to support claims	'Adopting an alternative definition and measure, we use number of pages as indexed by Google to assess scholarly impact on stakeholders outside the Academy. Based on a sample including 384 of the 550 most highly cited management scholars in the past three decades, results show that scholarly impact is a multidimensional construct and that the impact of scholarly research on internal stakeholders (i.e., other members of the Academy) cannot be equated with impact on external stakeholders (i.e., those outside the Academy). We illustrate these results with tables showing important changes in the rank ordering of individuals based on whether we operationalize impact considering internal stakeholders (i.e., number of citations) or external stakeholders.' (Aguinis et al., 2012: 105)  Our 'arguments are based on hundreds of published papers we have read, hundreds of reviews we have done, and several dozen review processes of our own submissions.' (Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013: 247)  'The suggestions I want to put forward could all be placed under the umbrella of leadership . . . those of us who are established scholars and who have both the ability and the responsibility to do what we can to address problems identified above.' (Harley, 2019: 292)  'For 11 years I was in regular contact with people who struggled to find solutions to very real problems. Six years as dean of my management school and five more as Director of the UC Davis Energy Efficiency Center (EEC) revealed a yawning gap between what I wrote and real issues facing organizations, leaders, and society.' (Biggart, 2016: 1383)  The 'contributors' 'privileged vantage point gave them a unique insight into what is being studied and how by management scholars around the world.' (The editors, 2015: 285)  'In fact, there are many other organizational scholars, young and old, who are worried about the same issues [. . .] I was recently told by a scholar who shall remain anonymous . . .' (Barley, 2016: 2, 4)  Our appraisal is informed by 'regular reports by journal editors at editorial board meetings aimed at providing evidence that their journals should be included on the A-list, informal conversations with colleagues, prevalent institutional practices at research-driven universities, and our own firsthand experience in leadership roles at several universities as well as professional organizations.' (Aguinis et al., 2020: 137)	Bartunek & Rynes, 2010; Battilana et al., 2010; Meyer & Boxenbaum, 2010; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Aguinis et al., 2012; Aguinis et al., 2014; Hussain, 2015; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2016; Bergh et al., 2017; Byington & Felps, 2017; Fisher & Aguinis, 2017; Kraimer et al., 2019  Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Birkinshaw et al., 2014; The editors, 2015; Biggart, 2016; Reed & Burrell, 2019  Barley, 2016; Harley, 2019; Phillips, 2020; Aguinis et al., 2020
	The Self as veteran	Refers to authors' tenure, experience and seniority to support claims and/or Editors' introductions emphasize authors' tenure, experience and seniority		
	The Self as connected to other Selves	Claims of the author are validated by their association with a network of colleagues		

(Continued)

**Table A. (Continued)**

Practice	Categories	Characteristics	Illustrative quotations	Indicative references
The Self as marginalized	Emphasizes the difficulties in claiming authority when marginalized	<p>"In short, we, like many other critical researchers, seek to challenge and undermine those very institutions which provide us with much that we desire: we want to remain outside but at the same time wish to be inside." (Fotaki &amp; Harding, 2012: 164)</p> <p>As scholars based (mostly) in African contexts, we are 'vexed by the somewhat one-sided nature of "bringing Africa in" . . . as long as we "learn the language and rules of the game" . . . and adopt basic assumptions of the established mainstream journals.' (Hamann et al., 2020: 2)</p> <p>"There has been some discussion in the field of "imposter syndrome" . . . But I think another dynamic is also now at work. If you begin to believe that publishing papers is mainly a performative game played to boost your career, then one option is to really become an imposter. That is, you could pretend to be a scientist conducting rigorous research but cut corners, use big words to create the illusion of theory development, produce tautologous hypotheses and pray that outsiders will be too baffled and bored by your prose to see through what you are doing. Given enough practice, you may even fool yourself." (Tourish, 2020: 18)</p> <p>"As readers, it often strikes us how trivial many of the published "contributions" are, frequently consisting in correcting imperfections, adding empirical evidence, or developing whatever is seen as incomplete, in a steady movement toward more total and perfect knowledge, through an accumulation of footnotes upon footnotes." (Alvesson &amp; Gabriel, 2013: 249)</p> <p>"Both the elite US journals and those European journals that seek . . . to join that elite have become increasingly formulaic and dull. A tiny research question is posed, followed by a compendious literature review (that might almost be computer generated) and perhaps a discussion of methodology (or, more commonly, method); then some findings are presented, some suggestions for further work are made, an acknowledgement of limitations is offered and a modest conclusion is given." (Grey, 2010: 691)</p> <p>"A strong specialization often means a narrow worldview, an inclination to take too much for granted and often being oblivious about what is going on outside one's specialized field. In addition, individuals with strong domain expertise frequently develop a rigid mindset . . . People become <i>Fachidioten</i>, specialty idiots as the Germans would say." (Alvesson &amp; Sandberg, 2014: 968)</p> <p>Career benefits 'associated with engaging in noncredible research practices (NCRPs; e.g., data manipulation, fabricating results, data hoarding, undisclosed HARKing) result in many academics choosing self-interest over collective welfare.' (Byington &amp; Felps, 2017: 142)</p>	<p>Holvino, 2010; Ford et al., 2010; Fotaki &amp; Harding, 2012; Bell &amp; Sinclair, 2014; Pullen et al., 2016; Bothello &amp; Roulet, 2019; Spiller et al., 2020; Hamann et al., 2020; Love 2020</p>	
<b>Othering</b>	Silences	<p>Criticizes other named scholars and/or specific papers and/or</p> <p>Criticizes unnamed scholars such as early career researchers, US scholarship, adherents of a particular theory, the patriarchy and/or</p> <p>Criticizes other academic colleagues</p>	<p>Gabriel, 2010; Grey, 2010; Meyer &amp; Boxenbaum, 2010; Alvesson &amp; Kärreman, 2011b; MacDonald &amp; Kam, 2011; Mumby, 2011; Rowlinson &amp; Hassard, 2011; Fotaki &amp; Harding, 2012; Grant &amp; Hardy, 2012; Homig &amp; Bedi, 2012; Alvesson &amp; Gabriel, 2013; Alvesson &amp; Sandberg, 2014; Harley et al., 2014; Banks et al., 2015; Byington &amp; Felps, 2017; Kiriakos &amp; Tienari, 2018; Alvesson &amp; Spicer, 2019; Bartunek, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Fleming, 2019; Harley, 2019; Tourish, 2020; Pirson et al., 2019; Reed &amp; Burrell, 2019; Stackman et al., 2019; Shaw &amp; Baer, 2020</p>	

(Continued)

**Table A.** (Continued)

Practice	Categories	Characteristics	Illustrative quotations	Indicative references
	Exposes	Recognizes that certain identities are excluded and/or marginalized when they should be included and have an equal voice	<p>'At the least, feminist ways of reading and writing, steeped within critical perspective on power relationships, offer ways of seeing and thinking differently. They help stimulate questions we should ask of contemporary organizations but might not have thought about.' (Harding et al., 2012: 60)</p> <p>We 'miss the opportunity to see how organizational life has variations that we haven't even yet conceived of because we have been stuck in a Northern-based worldview.' (quoted in Hamann et al., 2020: 4)</p> <p>Indigenous research is now fueling the research agenda 'despite the fact that Indigenous voices and experiences were largely written out of theorizations prior to and during the twentieth century.' (Love, 2020: 6)</p> <p>Faculty 'compete against each other for the finite number of pages available in the few A journals. Just as individual faculty within a department are competing with each other, departments within a college are also engaged in competition. At an even higher level, different business schools are also occupied in cutthroat competition, as are the universities that house them.' (Aguinis et al., 2020: 137)</p> <p>The field of OS 'comprises a heterogeneous body of knowledge which, in effect, is a history of the (on-going) power struggles that produce it.' (Willmott, 2013: 53)</p> <p>'There is something deeply troubling at the heart of what I dub the neoliberal business school. By "neoliberal" I mean their overt commercialization, so they resemble a private firm, replete with management hierarchies, customers . . . cut-throat careerism and a myopic focus on "outputs" and KPIs.' (Fleming, 2019: 1)</p> <p>'Before we can explore how to make business schools more critical, we need to explore our motives and to ask what it is about our own practices that, we seem to believe, make them superior to those of our mainstream colleagues.' (Ford et al., 2010: 573)</p> <p>To suggest more feminine writing to challenge the dominance of masculine writing would 'simply evince a reversed form of domination, one still resting on a divisive and binarized notion of gender that gives up nothing of the reciprocal and oppressive rationality that it notionally would seek to resist.' (Rhodes, 2019: 32)</p> <p>Thinking 'critically about and queering methodological practices can enable us to understand both organizational research and organizing processes differently, which in turn can generate new insights about the social world.' (McDonald, 2017: 144)</p> <p>A 'focus on erotic possibilities can lead to new understandings: in the importance of bodies to mediate knowing; in the love of writing and pursuit of a wisdom of love; and in the nurturing and pleasurable relations . . . between colleagues, teachers and students.' (Bell &amp; Sinclair, 2014: 277)</p>	<p>Ford et al., 2010; Holvino, 2010; Harding et al., 2012; Steyaert &amp; Janssens, 2012; Pullen &amp; Rhodes, 2015; Steyaert, 2015; Vachhani, 2015; Pullen et al., 2016; Rumens, 2016; Swan, 2017; Ergene et al., 2018; Bothello &amp; Roulet, 2019; Belkhir et al., 2019; Gonzalez-Morales, 2019; Spiller et al., 2020; Love, 2020; Yoshikawa, 2019; Hamann et al., 2020</p> <p>Aguinis &amp; Vaschetto, 2011; Baum, 2011; Honig et al., 2014; Davis, 2015a; Honig et al., 2018</p> <p>Gabriel, 2010; Grey, 2010; MacDonald &amp; Kam, 2011; Sandberg &amp; Alvesson, 2011; Willmott, 2011a; 2011b; Alvesson &amp; Sandberg, 2013; Mingers &amp; Willmott, 2013; Fleming, 2019</p> <p>Ford et al., 2010; Fotaki &amp; Harding, 2012; Learmonth et al., 2012; King &amp; Learmonth, 2015; Callahan, 2018; Rhodes, 2019</p> <p>Bell &amp; Sinclair, 2014; Barley, 2016; Moulin de Souza, Brewis &amp; Rumens, 2016; Rumens, 2016; McDonald, 2017; Ergene, Calás &amp; Smircich, 2018</p>
<b>Contextualizing</b>	Little or none	Context is either not mentioned at all or is discussed in neutral terms		
	Political	Discusses the power/knowledge relations in which the academic community and the knowledge it produces are situated		
	Politically self-aware	Discusses power/knowledge relations and situates the author within them Acknowledges the paradoxical nature of their project		
<b>Temporalizing</b>	Into a bright new future	Proposes radical changes in future scholarship		

(Continued)

Table A. (Continued)

Practice	Categories	Characteristics	Illustrative quotations	Indicative references
	Back to the future	Talks nostalgically about the past and proposes a return to it	<p>'We inevitably rely on our long experience in this field, making it possible to see how things have developed away from a craft production of research to an increasingly bureaucratic, mass-produced mode.' (Alvesson &amp; Gabriel, 2013: 247)</p> <p>All of our journals 'must clarify and raise their data disclosure standards for qualitative papers, just as some have [already] done for quantitative papers.' (Argyres, 2019: 270)</p> <p>Perhaps 'our best bet is to return to the mission laid out by Thompson [in 1956].' (Davis, 2015a: 186)</p> <p>How 'vivid, inspiring and memorable this is [referring to Charles Darwin's 1859 conclusion to <i>The Origin of Species</i>]. I can't immediately think of an equivalent in our writings about organizations.' (Tourish, 2020: 23)</p>	Alvesson & Gabriel, 2013; Tourish & Willmott, 2015; Tourish, 2020; Argyres, 2019; Aquinas et al., 2020
<b>Aspiring</b>	Innovation	Calls for more novel, interesting ideas through debate, divergence and destruction	<p>We need 'more researchers with a broader outlook, curious, reflective, willing and able to question their own frameworks and consider alternative positions, and eager to produce new insights at the risk of some short-term instrumental sacrifices, that is, a more critical and path-(up)setting scholarship mode.' (Alvesson &amp; Sandberg, 2013: 143)</p> <p>We 'contend that organization theory needs to reignite a fierce dialogue over "organization".' (Reed &amp; Burrell, 2019: 39)</p>	Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Suddaby et al., 2011; Willmott, 2011c; Alvesson, 2013; Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2014; Barkema et al., 2015; Harley, 2015; Cornelissen, 2017; Reed & Burrell, 2019
	Incremental progression	Calls for more convergence and questions the value of novelty	<p>Answering questions about the world correctly 'should be at least as valuable as raising interesting new questions that prompt a lot of articles.' (Davis, 2015b: 315)</p> <p>'Theory elaboration is the process of conceptualizing and executing empirical research using preexisting conceptual ideas or a preliminary model as a basis for developing new theoretical insights.' (Fisher &amp; Aguinis, 2017: 441)</p>	Davis, 2010, 2015a, 2015b; Barley, 2016; Fisher & Aguinis, 2017; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020
	Elaboration	Calls for innovation through inclusivity and by building on existing work	<p>'OS's distinct identity is inclusive, encompassing both majority and minority perspectives, not shaming students of the former for being part of larger or more "mainstream" endeavours and not neglecting the latter for their potentially narrower pursuits.' (Svejenova, 2019: 61)</p> <p>We propose that 'scholars frequently use the script of bricolage to assemble various building blocks into new organizational theories.' (Boxenbaum &amp; Rouleau, 2011: 273)</p> <p>'Complex theorizing is conjunctive: it seeks to make 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: 132)</p>	Holvino, 2010; Boxenbaum & Rouleau, 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Learmonth et al., 2012; Hartman, 2014; Tsoukas, 2017; Ergene et al., 2018; Svejenova, 2019; Schwarz, 2020