

Theory as method: introduction to supertheoretical options for organization and management research

Theory as
method

Steffen Roth

*Excelia Business School, La Rochelle, France and
University of Witten-Herdecke, Witten, Germany*

Albert Mills

Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada

Bill Lee

The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, and

Dariusz Jemielniak

Kozminski University, Warszawa, Poland

Received 21 June 2021
Revised 21 June 2021
Accepted 27 June 2021

Abstract

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

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

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

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

Keywords Functionalism, Functionalization, Theoretical monism, Theory method

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

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

As with other dualisms, the mere existence of two sides suggests side-taking. Since the undisputed decline of Parsons-type grand theories, the balance of power between theory and method has clearly tilted in favour of the latter. Empiricist self-definitions of science and

The authors are grateful to Miguel Pérez-Valls (University of Almería) and Augusto Sales (KPMG Global Strategy Rio de Janeiro) for their continuing support of management and organization theory activities at the European Academy of Management (EURAM) conferences. We extend our gratitude to the EURAM Strategic Interest Group on Research Methods and Research Practice (RM&RP) for its acting as a host for the theory sessions at the EURAM Conference 2019 in Lisbon.

One author gratefully acknowledges financial support from the Research Council of Lithuania and the European Regional Development Fund-ERDF/FEDER (National R&D Project 01.2.2-LMT- K-718-02- 0019).



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

On the other side of the demarcation line, anti-theorism has for long now been countered by equally eloquent campaigns “against method” (Morgan, 1983). Here the idea is it is not theories (Pick, 2017) but methods that cage rather than capture the realities of their research fields because methods tend to preserve older, and not better, theories (Feyerabend, 1970). Perhaps this is summed up well by Law (2004), who refers to “After Method”, and by Magnusson and Szijarto (2013) who liken methodology to ideology. Much of this problematic is captured by debate around the theory–method character of actor network theory (Law and Hassard, 1999).

Both radical positions have ever since been accused of anti-scientism and provoked serious anti-anti-science backlashes (Bristow and Robinson, 2018), various attempts at triangulation (Cox and Hassard, 2005), and countless forms of retreats to the comfort zones between the extremes. Against this backdrop, the true challenge might be not to choose between but rather develop scientific approaches that can accommodate both concerns. Needless to say that these approaches are particularly relevant whenever we cannot simply make a singular claim, and then step outside society and simply measure whether this claim is true or not.

The importance of the above considerations, controversies, commitments and compromises notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that there has always been a minority of scholars who think that the categorical separation of theory and method is a category mistake (Elias, 1978; Luhmann, 2017) not only because the “separation of method from theory can potentially lead to the misuse of the technique, a misinterpretation of the results, or simply the creation of a mutated version” (Bourne and Jankowicz, 2018, p. 127) of the original theory. Rather, true to this camp, theories necessarily act as methodologies as soon as they apply their own distinctions or categories not only to their research objects but also to themselves. As such self-referential theories indicate how their observations – including their self-observations – come about; these observations can be replicated using these theories, which consequently constitute “a knowledge of the way to knowledge” which Hjorth and Reay (2018, p. 11) have recently defined as “method/ology”. The quality of such reflexive theory–methods would then be not in their robustness against falsification or the richness of the data they are grounded on. Neither would it be in the number of problems solved by or for these theories. Rather, these theory–methods would need to be measured against the scales and scopes of scientific problems they allow to generate (Merton, 1959).

This special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* is therefore devoted to conditions and examples of how theories may safely be applied as methods in the fields of management research and organization studies.

The subsequent section provides a brief outline of the minimum requirements for a successful refunctionalization of theory as method. Introductions to nine use cases of theories as methods, in the form of nine contributions to this special issue, and a concluding section follow suit.

Theories as methods: interplay and function

Didactical reasons for the categorial separation of theory and method notwithstanding, there has been longstanding interest for the various interplays between theory and method (see, e.g. [van Maanen et al., 2007](#)).

Foundational research in this context was undertaken by [Merton \(1968a, p. 42f\)](#), who held that for any idea to be of theoretical value, it must also generate rather than just solve distinctive problems for the scientific discourse at stake. In so doing, Merton clearly codified theories by their capacity to generate follow-up questions pertaining to the generalizability, transferability or measurability of the proposed arguments or explanations. Theories therefore imply reference to empirical research and thus also appear as methods for the creation of research problems that may be resolved by research methods of another type. Against this backdrop, [Merton \(1968b, p. 229\)](#) observes that

There is a growing interplay between theory, which states the case for the significance of certain variables; methodology, which works out the logic of empirical inquiry involving these variables; and technique, which develops the tools and procedures for measuring the variables.

As tight as it may be, an interplay is not yet an equivalent of the functional equivalence implied in the claim of “theory as method”. But what if a theory were universal enough to generate this interplay by itself?

[Merton \(1968a, p. 68\)](#), however, would have rejected such attempts at monistic theoretical conquests of methodological terrain:

Total sociological systems of theory—such as Marx’s historical materialism, Parsons’ theory of social systems and Sorokin’s integral sociology—represent general theoretical orientations rather than the rigorous and tightknit systems envisaged in the search for a “unified theory” in physics.

Merton was later joined in his rejection of *Parsonian-type* grand theories by another seminal functionalist, although for different reasons. [Luhmann \(2012, p. 4f\)](#) rejects Parsons’ social theory because

It fails to answer the question of cognitive self-implication (. . .). Parsons consequently does not himself occur in any of the many boxes of his own theory. And this is ultimately why the theory cannot distinguish systematically between social system and society; it only offers impressionistic, more or less feuilletonistic views of modern society.

Parsons’ general theoretical orientation and appetite for grand theory, however, is shared by [Luhmann \(1995, p. XLVIII\)](#), who certainly reassures his readers that his own theory “claims neither to reflect the complete reality of its object, nor to exhaust all the possibilities of knowing its object. But it does claim universality for its grasp of its object in the sense that it deals with everything social and not just sections”. This combination of universal claim and aspiration at self-implication, however, implies that his theory applies to itself: “Theories that claim universality are easily recognized by the fact that they appear as their own object” (id.). The idea of such universalistic “supertheories” ([Luhmann, 1995, p. 6](#)), therefore, implies that these theories must work as methods of self-observation, too. Consequently, we find that a theory turns into a method as soon as it is capable to apply its own mode of observation not only to its object of observation, but also to itself, or more precisely: a theory becomes a research method as soon as it can treat itself as an object of observation and, by this virtue, is able to indicate how its own observations are generated and can be replicated. If a theory has

developed this capability, however, then what is true for its self-referential observations must be true for its hetero-referential observations as well.

As Luhmann's (1995, p. 6) "systems theory is a particularly impressive supertheory", it particularly recommends itself to explorations of applications of theories as methods. Moreover, there is an apparent congruence between the functionalist approaches of Luhmann or Merton on the one hand and the general idea of functionalization in the sense of explorations of additional purposes on the other hand.

There is hence little surprise that this special issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* on "Theory as method. Methodological options for organization and management research" unites a total of five use cases (Neisig, 2020; Roth, 2021; Sakai, 2020; Valentinov and Hajdu, 2019; van Assche *et al.*, 2019) of social systems theory as method.

As mentioned earlier, however, Luhmann's supertheory of social systems claims universality rather than exclusivity or a monopoly for its grasp of the social world. Consequently, in this special issue, we also find examples of other theories turned method. These examples include Bourdieu's social theory (van Hilten, 2019), "bracketing" as a phenomenological theory (Dörfler and Stierand, 2020), and institutional work theory (Gidley, 2020). Last not least, one article is devoted to the role of abduction in the self-transformation of theories in the eyes of change (Shadnam, 2020).

Nine cases for theory as method

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

In their article "Integrating instrumental and normative stakeholder theories: a systems theory approach", Valentinov and Hajdu (2019) demonstrate how social systems theory in the tradition of Niklas Luhmann (1989, 1995) can be instrumental in navigating the tensions between the instrumental and normative branches of stakeholder theory. To this end, the authors recode the classical conflict between the two approaches into the binary "theory language" of social systems theory. As a result of the exercise, the authors show that both variants of classical stakeholder theory fail to fully account for the polycontextural nature of the modern, functionally differentiated society. Whereas instrumental stakeholder theory reduces stakeholder relationships to a strategy of long-term profit maximization, normative stakeholder theory holds that there is a moral obligation to accommodate stakeholder expectations. Thus, the divergent lines of argument appear as orthogonal perspectives within the binary architecture of social systems theory. The instrumental argument insists on the ultimate prevalence of the economic code (payment/non-payment) and thus on an overidentification of an organization (the firm) with one function system (the economy). The normative argument is then drawn in moral rather than economic code as it disapproves

the economic reductionism inherent in the former argument. Yet, the normative perspective is reductionist too, insofar as it overidentifies society with its political system and then fails to systematically reflect whether and when a firm's corporate social responsibility activities should be oriented mainly to political and not to, for example, religious, scientific or educational stakeholders (Roth *et al.*, 2020). Against this backdrop, Valentinov and Hajdu call for more awareness among managers and researchers that firms are not segments of the economic system, but rather specific forms of multifunctional organizations in which the codes of all function systems can be managed without morally predetermined default prevalence. As a result, both instrumental and normative stakeholder approaches appear not as competing solutions to one and the same type of problem, but rather as coordinate solutions to different types of decision problems.

Roth's (2021) article "Draw your organization! A solution-focused theory-method for business school challenges and change" starts from the assumption that a comprehensive knowledge of popular criticisms and problems of business schools is not required for workable solutions to appear. In drawing on Spencer Brown (1979), Roth outlines a theory-method based on the distinction between true and false distinctions that facilitates the shift from a problem- to a solution-focus. He then shows how this approach is instrumental for the further development of established management tools as well as for research-based teaching in a diverse range of educational settings. The latter application is exemplified by two classroom exercises illustrating that business students retain reductionist concepts of management and organization despite the paradigmatic plurality of our disciplines. Roth concludes that his theory method acts as a two-way mirror in which the student caricatures of our core concepts appear as reflections of our disciplines' traditional "economy and society" focus and a corresponding overestimation of economic and political problems. Against this backdrop, Roth promotes a smart specialization strategy, in the context of which innovative business schools engage in systematic explorations of both old solutions and new problems associated with the non-economic and non-political aspects of management and organization.

van Assche *et al.* (2019) address the usefulness of methods as bridging devices. The most important bridging devices in the context of this special issue are those that bridge empirics to theory and theory to praxis, although Assche *et al.* also view methods as bridging *inter alia* analysis to strategy, the past to the future, one discipline to another discipline and one narrative to another narrative. By highlighting how different forms of logic and reasoning may be considered as meta-methods, van Assche *et al.* (2019) show how the development of a new theory can inform the development of new technical methods. In this case, the theory was evolutionary governance theory, and the particular methods were the analysis techniques of "path" and "context mapping". Notably, these methods did not only provide a bridge between the theory being used and the empirical evidence that was being gathered, but they may also be seen as providing a bridge between different disciplines as van Assche *et al.* (2019) were applying "path" and "context mapping" to the field of Governance when they had previously been used in the cognate areas of public policy, public administration, planning and economic development.

Sakai (2020) zeroes in on how the theory of the functional differentiation of society can be useful in historical studies. In his paper, the author attempts to build a new method, based on Luhmann's semantic analysis and adapted to a study of modern insurance in the nineteenth century Germany. The applicability of Sakai's approach to historical-comparative studies is well explained, and amounts to a novel contribution to social studies methods, offering a reformulation of a semantic study as a middle-range theory.

Neisig (2020) draws on Luhmann's work to "investigate a position for engaged scholarship bridging the gulf between theorizing and practice using Design Thinking." To that end, Neisig seeks to "combine Luhmann's social systems theory with the concept of engaged scholarship based on Design Thinking." The paper goes on to illustrate how such a research

position “might be applied to problems of polycentric networks as a theoretical/methodological case.” The article begins by laying out an account of a “Luhmannian way of understanding the position of science in society: and various positions on the rigour-relevance gap.” This is followed by an outline of “polycentric networks and their collaborative system and shared semantic reservoir.” Third, “Neisig discusses engaged scholarship with the purpose of assisting the emergence of a shared semantic reservoir for a polycentric network” and how they may play out in a “Luhmannian perspective with contributions from Design Thinking.” In conclusion, Neisig contends that “it is conceptually possible to construct a role for engaged scholarship compatible with social systems theory”.

Dörfler and Stierand’s (2020) article provides insights into the usefulness of the theoretical concept of bracketing and its application as a method which they illustrate by reference to empirical findings from two different studies of extraordinary achievers. Working within a phenomenological standpoint informed from reading the work of Husserl in its original German composition, Dörfler and Stierand (2020) show how – in the course of conducting research – the concept of bracketing can help to make sense of the subjective ways of knowing and the subjective elements in what is known. Their aim in doing this is not to bracket out the subjective in pursuit of production of an impossible objective understanding, but instead to provide a more comprehensive appreciation of the different dimensions of both the subjective experience of researching and the subjectivity in the information that is composed. This approach utilizes researchers’ pre-understandings as a source of insight rather than as something that is considered unhelpful and in need of elimination. Dörfler and Stierand describe the process of their application of the concept of bracketing to studies of Nobel Prize winners and Michelin starred chefs. Their process entails progressing through cycles of reflexive thinking individually to produce an appreciation of how one’s subjectivity may have influenced the research process and what is known and then working with a collaborator who has not been involved in the collection of the empirical evidence. The collaborator can provide a new challenge to the assumptions of the initial researcher until both participants obtain a transpersonal understanding of the evidence.

The central focus of van Hilten’s (2019) article “A theory of (research) practice makes sense in sensemaking: Applying Bourdieu’s critical social theory to the study of sensemaking change” is to provide an alternative theoretical approach to extant notions of sensemaking, specifically Weickian (e.g. Weick, 1995) and critical sensemaking (e.g. Mills *et al.*, 2010) approaches. To that end, the author draws on the work of Bourdieu’s critical social theory to propose a new theory of sensemaking. Through a lengthy critique, van Hilten argues that extant sensemaking theory usefully provides “a framework to understanding how people make sense of things but leaves researchers with methodological choices requiring apriori decisions of how the theory is to be understood and used.” van Hilten argues that extant sensemaking accounts “do not provide an avenue to predict or anticipate outcome.” She contends that while sensemaking “is commonly used as the basis for understanding ‘how’ people make sense of situations, it deals with the process, but not the theory of how sense is made.” van Hilten goes on to contend that a “more explicit conceptualization of the sensemaking process itself is vital for theorizing how power influences the understandings that actors create.” From this positioning, van Hilten goes on to suggest that Bourdieu’s critical social theory provides an existing alternative to the sensemaking approach that incorporates power, accommodates agency, allows for individual as well as collective sensemaking, retrospective and perspective sensemaking: This alternative provides a theory of sensemaking (why people make sense as they do), and, at the same time, provides the basis for methodology and analysis.” van Hilten provides an exploration of the potential of a Bourdieuan sensemaking approach through a case study of an information technology (IT) organization. Here she applies key Bourdieusian concepts (e.g. habitus, doxa, field and capital) to a series of interviews and documents to reveal the potential of a “Bourdiesian sensemaking” approach.

Gidley's (2020) paper continues the methodological explorations. He proposes a new approach to organizational studies through intentional breaches of institutional order. In what he calls a "researcher initiated institutional disruption (RIID)", he suggests that it is through breaks in the organizational routine and the expected conduct that the institutional features emerge the most. While coming with some obvious risks and ethical considerations, RIID is an interesting way of testing the institutional boundaries and provoking the emergence of rules.

Shadnam (2020) provides a paper about concepts that – in the context of this special issue – may be considered as methods of theorising in the management and organization disciplines. The paper highlights a need to understand the role that organizational shifts may play in the development of new theories of organization. By drawing on Pierce's classification of three forms of logical reasoning – of deduction, induction and abduction – Shadnam puts forward three models for developing new theories in organizational research. The first, which Shadnam describes as "armchair theorizing" because it is not related to empirical reality in any meaningful way, is reflective of the principles of deduction of inferring new propositions or theories from existing theories. The second which Shadnam describes as "present capturing" is linked to inductive reasoning because its objective is to study external reality as a means to composing a new theory. Shadnam suggests that both of these two approaches have been popular amongst writers in the organizational field, but he highlights that there is a third possibility that remains under-exploited. He calls this third approach "change sensitizing" and it is linked to abductive reasoning as it involves an iterative relationship between sensitivity to changes in organizations and consideration of the implications of such changes for theories of organization. Shadnam then provides guidance in the form of four stages for operationalising a "change sensitizing" approach. These stages are: identifying an aspect of organizational life that has been subject to serious change; experimenting with existing theories to explore their potential to explain that change; choosing one of the theories that has key tenets that have been challenged by the serious change to organizational life being investigated; and transforming that theory into a new theory of organization by modifications that can accommodate the organizational shift.

Conclusions

One important realization from all contributions to this special issue is that certain types of theory may be used as methods. Another, probably less obvious, finding is that functionalization does not necessarily change its object. Whereas the repurposing of a glass bottle as a hammer may have dramatic consequences for the bottle, the same is not true for a hammer turned weapon. In the social world, the traces of functionalization are even less tangible, prominent witness being the Fountain by Marcel Duchamp. The fact that Duchamp decided in 1917 to refunctionalize a porcelain urinal and turn it into the now world-famous piece of art had little impact on the urinal's original functionality. This example suggests that the use of theories as methods is not necessarily harmful for the former either and particularly not for the more robust ones.

In the light of the contributions to this special issue, it is also worthy to review the following oddity: It is perfectly acceptable for researchers to devote the lion's share of their attention to one specific research field (international management, finance, etc.) or method (structural equations, digital hermeneutics, etc.). Whereas researchers who do so are likely to be considered experts in their field or method at some point of their career, there is a strong inclination to problematize the "theoretical monism" of scholars whose career is or has been devoted to the design or enhancement of *one* specific theory. Against this backdrop, the remarkable capacity of supertheories to act as both theory and method not only sheds new light on the role and value of "theoretical fidelity" but also calls for a reassessment of both the

general relationship between and the relative value of expertise in a specific theory, method and research field or topic.

References

- Alcadipani, R. and Hassard, J. (2010), "Actor-network theory, organizations and critique: towards a politics of organizing", *Organization*, Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 419-435.
- Alvesson, M. and Sandberg, J. (2013), "Has management studies lost its way? Ideas for more imaginative and innovative research", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 50 No. 1, pp. 128-152.
- Bedeian, A.G. (2004), "Peer review and the social construction of knowledge in the management discipline", *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 196-216.
- Booth, C. and Rowlinson, M. (2006), "Management and organizational history: prospects", *Management and Organizational History*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 5-30.
- Bourne, D. and Jankowicz, D.A. (2018), "The repertory grid technique", in Ciesielska, M. and Jemielniak, D. (Eds), *Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, pp. 127-149.
- Bristow, A. and Robinson, S. (2018), "Brexiting CMS", *Organization*, Vol. 25 No. 5, pp. 636-648, doi: [10.1177/1350508418786057](https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508418786057).
- Collins, H.M. and Pinch, T.J. (1982), *Frames of Meaning: The Social Construction of Extraordinary Science*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.
- Collins, H. and Pinch, T. (1993), *The Golem: What Everyone Should Know about Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Cox, J.W. and Hassard, J. (2005), "Triangulation in organizational research: a re-presentation", *Organization*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 109-133.
- Dörfler, V. and Stierand, M. (2020), "Bracketing: a phenomenological theory applied through transpersonal reflexivity", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-12-2019-0393](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-12-2019-0393).
- Durepos, G.A. and Mills, A.J. (2012), *Antihistory: Theorizing the Past, History, and Historiography in Management and Organization Studies*, Information Age Publishing, Charlotte, NC.
- Elias, N. (1978), "What is sociology?", Mennell, S. and Morrissey, G., Trans., Hutchinson, London.
- Esping-Andersen, G. (2000), "Two societies, one sociology, and no theory", *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51 No. 1, pp. 59-77.
- Fendt, J. and Sachs, W. (2008), "Grounded theory method in management research: users' perspectives", *Organizational Research Methods*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 430-455.
- Feyerabend, P. (1970), *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theorie of Knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Gidley, D. (2020), "Creating institutional disruption: an alternative method to study institutions", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0200](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0200).
- Godfrey, P.C. and Hill, C.W. (1995), "The problem of unobservables in strategic management research", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 7, pp. 519-533.
- Hjorth, D. and Reay, T. (2018), "Organization studies: moving entrepreneurially ahead", *Organization Studies*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 7-18.
- Law, J. (2004), *After Method. Mess in Social Science Research*, Routledge, New York.
- Law, J. and Hassard, J. (1999), *Actor Network Theory and After*, Blackwell/Sociological Review, Oxford, Malden, MA.
- Luhmann, N. (1989), *Ecological Communication*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Luhmann, N. (2012), *Theory of Society*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, Vol. 1.

-
- Luhmann, N. (1995), *Social Systems*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Luhmann, N. (2017), "The theory of society as science", *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Vol. 46 No. 4, pp. 219-248.
- Magnusson, S.G. and Szijarto, I.M. (2013), *What Is Microhistory? Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London.
- Merton, R.K. (1959), "Notes on problem-finding in sociology", in Merton, R.K., Broom, L. and Cottrell, L.S. Jr. (Eds), *Sociology Today: Problems and Perspectives*, Basic Books, New York, pp. ix-xxxiv.
- Merton, R.K. (1968a), *On Theoretical Sociology: Five Essays, Old and New*, The Free Press, New York.
- Merton, R.K. (1968b), *Social Theory and Social Structure*, The Free Press, New York.
- Mills, J.H., Thurlow, A. and Mills, A.J. (2010), "Making sense of sensemaking: the critical sensemaking approach", *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. 182-195.
- Morgan, G. (Ed.) (1983), *Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, Calif.
- Neisig, M. (2020), "Social systems theory and engaged scholarship: co-designing a semantic reservoir in a polycentric network", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-09-2019-0302](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-09-2019-0302).
- Parker, M. (2002), "No theory", *Organization*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 181-184.
- Pick, D. (2017), "Rethinking organization theory: the fold, the rhizome and the seam between organization and the literary", *Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 800-818.
- Roth, S. (2021), "Draw your organization! A solution-focused theory-method for business school challenges and change", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-06-2020-0163](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2020-0163).
- Roth, S., Valentinov, V., Heidingsfelder, M. and Pérez-Valls, M. (2020), "CSR beyond economy and society: a post-capitalist approach", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 165 No. 3, pp. 411-423.
- Sakai, K. (2020), "Functional differentiation of society as a middle-range theory", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0205](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0205).
- Sayes, E. (2014), "Actor-network theory and methodology: just what does it mean to say that nonhumans have agency?", *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 134-149.
- Shadnam, M. (2020), "New theories and organization research: from the eyes of change", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-07-2019-0209](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-07-2019-0209).
- Spencer Brown, G. (1979), *Laws of Form*, E.P. Dutton, New York.
- Valentinov, V. and Hajdu, A. (2019), "Integrating instrumental and normative stakeholder theories: a systems theory approach", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-07-2019-0219](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-07-2019-0219).
- van Hilten, A. (2019), "A theory of (research) practice makes sense in sensemaking: applying Bourdieu's critical social theory to the study of sensemaking change", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0177](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0177).
- van Maanen, J., Sørensen, J.B. and Mitchell, T.R. (2007), "The interplay between theory and method", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32 No. 4, pp. 1145-1154.
- van Assche, K., Beunen, R., Gruezmacher, M., Duineveld, M., Deacon, L., Summers, R., Hallstrom, L. and Jones, K. (2019), "Research methods as bridging devices: path and context mapping in governance", *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, ahead-of-print. doi: [10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0185](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-06-2019-0185).
- Weick, K.E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Wilson, C. (1996), "Instruments and ideologies: the social construction of knowledge and its critics", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 33 No. 2, pp. 167-181.
-

Wolfswinkel, J.F., Furtmueller, E. and Wilderom, C.P. (2013), "Using grounded theory as a method for rigorously reviewing literature", *European Journal of Information Systems*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 45-55.

About the authors

Steffen Roth is Full Professor of Management at the La Rochelle Business School, France, and Visiting Professor of Management and Organization at the University of Witten-Herdecke, Germany. He holds the title of Professor of Social Sciences at the Kazimieras Simonavičius University; the title of Adjunct Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Turku; a Habilitation in Economic and Environmental Sociology awarded by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research; a PhD in Sociology from the University of Geneva; and a PhD in Economics and Management from the Chemnitz University of Technology. He is the field editor for social systems theory of *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*. The journals his research has been published in include *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Ecological Economics*, *Administration and Society*, *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, *European Management Journal*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, and *Futures*. Steffen Roth is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: roths@excelia-group.com

Albert Mills is a Professor Emeritus of Management at the Sobey School of Business, NS, Canada, and a 0.2 Professor of Management Innovation at the University of Eastern Finland. He is the Co-Chair of the International Critical Management Studies association and former Co-Chair of the Critical Management Studies Division of the Academy of Management. He is the Co-Editor of the journal *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, serves as an Associate Editor of *Organization*; the *International Journal of Work Innovation*; and *Gender, Work and Organization*; and he is a member of several editorial boards, including the *Academy of Management Learning and Education*; the *Journal of Management History*; the *Journal of Management Education* and several others. Albert has also co-edited several special issues of scholarly journals, including *Human Relations* and *Culture and Organization*. His publications include 48 books, monographs and special issues; 109 chapters in edited collections; and 136 journal articles.

Bill Lee is a Full Professor of Accounting at the Sheffield University, UK. He has helped establish academic communities interested in research methods and was the inaugural secretary – and subsequent convenor and chair – of the Research Methodology special interest group of the British Academy of Management (BAM) and the inaugural chair of the Research Methods and Research Practice strategic interest group of the European Academy of Management (EURAM). He co-edits the *Mastering Business Research Methods* book series for Sage Publications. He is an associate editor of the *European Management Review* and *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management* and a member of the editorial advisory board of three other journals. He has published widely across journals in the accounting and management fields and cognate disciplines, including in *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *Omega*, *Organization Studies* and *Work, Employment and Society*.

Dariusz Jemielniak is a Full Professor of Management at the Kozminski University, Warsaw, Poland, where he heads the MINDS (Management in Networked and Digital Societies) department. Most recently, he authored of *Common Knowledge? An Ethnography of Wikipedia* (2014, Stanford University Press, winner of Dorothy Lee Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Culture in 2015, and the Chair of the Polish Academy of Sciences academia award in 2016), as well as *Collaborative Society* (2019, MIT Press, co-authored by A. Przegalinska), and *Big Thick Data: Doing Digital Social Sciences* (forthcoming at Oxford University Press). In 2015 he joined Wikimedia Foundation Board of Trustees. He had extended appointments at Cornell University (2004–2005), Harvard University (2007, 2011–2012, 2015–2018), University of California Berkeley (2008), MIT (2015–2016).

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com