Relationally Reflexive Practice: A Generative Approach to Theory Development in Qualitative Research

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Abstract
In this article we explain how the development of new organization theory faces several mutually reinforcing problems, which collectively suppress generative debate and the creation of new and alternative theories. We argue that to overcome these problems, researchers should adopt relationally reflexive practices. This does not lead to an alternative method but instead informs how methods are applied. Specifically, we advocate a stance toward the application of qualitative methods that legitimizes insights from the situated life-with-others of the researcher. We argue that this stance can improve our abilities for generative theorizing in the field of management and organization studies.

Keywords
relationality, reflexivity, theory development, methodology, research methods

Introduction

> The adoption of novel methodological practices is very slow. Although some of the reviews refer to "changes," "improvements" and "important trends," a close examination of the data actually show that changes take place very slowly and usually do not happen in less than two to three decades. (Aguinis, Pierce, Bosco, & Muslin, 2009, p. 75)

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In a recent special feature topic in *Organizational Research Methods*, Davis (2010) reviewed the progress in organization theory development in recent decades and found that there was little evidence for a proliferation of novel approaches—in fact, quite the reverse. He concluded that "a half-dozen paradigms maintain hegemony year after year, facing little danger that new evidence will pile up against them, with [neo-institutional theory] at the head of the class" (Davis, 2010, p. 705). Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) also argue that despite a proliferation of "rigorous" research, there is a shortage of innovative and high-impact research—a claim supported by Aguinis et al. (2009) in the previous quote, who extend the lack of innovation to methodology. We concur, and argue that we need to develop research methodologies and practices that lead to new and possibly more contextualized theoretical insights. In addressing this need, we aim to supplement the improvements offered by Alvesson and Sandberg (2013; addressing institutional norms that constrain theory development) and Davis (2010; addressing poor research practices commonly associated with quantitative research designs). Our work adds to these debates by addressing epistemological constraints that go beyond institutional conditions and by developing generative research practices associated with qualitative rather than quantitative approaches.

Accordingly, in this article, we develop and describe qualitative research practices that support generative theorizing. We follow Carlsen and Dutton (2011) in defining generativity as a creative engagement with experience that has "the potential to produce more enduring expansive and transformative consequences with regard to 1) the development of ideas, 2) the development of researchers, their practices and relationships, and 3) the thought-action repertoires of people in the researched organization" (p. 15). All three of these elements go hand in hand, but our focus is particularly on the second aspect—the development of researchers, their practices, and relationships through a relationally reflexive approach to the craft of qualitative research. As we shall argue, a relationally reflexive approach involves practices that address the need, spelled out by Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013), to "question the way we position ourselves in relation to others in the research in our methodology, interactions, and research accounts" (p. 385). Our article builds on this questioning approach by examining how researchers can develop their practices in a move toward more generative theorizing.

In order to develop our perspective on supporting generative theorizing through relationally reflexive practices, the remainder of this article proceeds in three main parts. First, we reflect on the barriers to generative theorizing that stimulated our development of a relationally reflexive response. Second, we describe in detail the nature of relational reflexivity and the practices through which a relationally reflexive research methodology is constructed. In particular we characterize two kinds of relationally reflexive practice—engaging otherness and enacting connectedness—across three phases of the research process. Finally, we describe how this approach allows for generative theory development, through illustrating its application to a specific methodology, action research, and by drawing out the general implications.

Constraints in Organization Theory Development

There are several reasons why the craft of developing generative theories in organization studies has become more challenging. In this part of the article we will discuss three key problems that obstruct the development of new theories in the field of management and organization studies, or at least make it more difficult for new theories to emerge and to be disseminated. In doing so we supplement the work of Alvesson and Sandberg (2013), who focused on the institutional conditions and norms that influence theory development, by drawing attention to three epistemological issues: conservative knowledge communities, misleading rhetoric about "progress," and ideological constraints.

Table 1. Relationally Reflexive Practices in the Theory-Building Process.

Theory-Building Stage	Relationally Reflexive Practice	
	Engaging Otherness	Enacting Connectedness
1. Pre-research conceptualization: the latent resources for theory building	Engaging otherness to increase the richness of scholarly conversations. Actively seeking alternative views outside one's community.	Enacting connectedness to construct scholarly selves differently.
2. Emerging theorizations in the process of conducting research	Engaging otherness to transform theoretical assumptions. Conversations across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries.	Enacting connectedness to construct different conversations with data.
3. The refinement of theory in its (broader) context	Engaging otherness to increase the richness of contextual conversations.	Enacting connectedness to construct our shared contexts differently.

Conservative Knowledge Communities

Van Maanen (1988) drew attention to the idea that as researchers we are situated within knowledge communities, each with its own theoretical concerns, methodological commitments, and forms of theory development and writing. Since then, a *genrefication* of academic life has emerged (Swales, 2004), where researchers contribute to the further development of the field through theory building from within particular knowledge communities that embrace epistemological and rhetorical "genre" (e.g., Cornelissen, 2006; Guest, 2007; Hambrick, 2007; Mizruchi & Fein, 1999; Usdiken & Pasadeos, 1995). Within knowledge communities and research genres, participation becomes a taken-for-granted part of an academic's "daily normality," which focuses on developing the product (theories and models) rather than exploring *how* these products have been generated.

This genrefication and daily normality can influence and limit theory development in a number of ways. Intellectual isolation can occur that effectively limits debate and creativity (Amin & Roberts, 2008; Chia & Holt, 2008). Gergen (1997), for example, argues that members within a particular knowledge community distance themselves from other communities and rarely disagree with each other because they strive to retain the legitimacy of their community. The lack of consideration of competing views, which might result in generative debate, are rarely considered. Knowledge communities become conservative, closed, and inertial (Sull, 2001).

For example, elite journals tend to seek to increase the size of their audience by espousing a particular epistemology, and authors tend to seek to use theories that most other scholars are using in order to maximize the number of times others cite their work. These two interlocking motives mean that there is a strong focus on a few favored theories by a large community of readers and a neglect of new and challenging theories with a smaller community of readers—much as the quote from Davis (2010), in the introduction of this article, argues.

Thus, established theory creeps forward through conservative incrementalism since there are strong voices—both explicit and implicit—that call for consolidation around points of consensus (Rousseau, 2006; Rynes, 2006, 2007) and methodologically competent and consistent studies. While consolidation is a legitimating mechanism, it does not necessarily lead to radically new and interesting theories (Bartunek, Rynes, & Ireland, 2006). Indeed, Gergen (1997) argues that transformation of theoretical understandings only occurs when "the unspoken subtext, the body of discourse upon which the critique depends for its coherence but which is itself unspecified" (p. 12) is articulated. New generative theories come from weak ties, heterogeneity, and conventions of negation that are "argumentative strategies intended to displace a given system of intelligibility" (Gergen, 1997, p. 11). As we show later in this article (see Table 1), the practices we advocate support the influence

of weak ties (less familiar contacts) and heterogeneity (diversity in thought and practice) through engaging with others and underpins negation (a radical contestation of consensus) through connecting our conversations and self-constructions in different ways.

Misleading Rhetoric About "Progress"

Almost as a standard of "good practice," literature reviews within theory articles demonstrate gaps or contradictions in theory. To do so, a literature review offers a historical narrative of serializing contributions, in order to show stages in the development of ideas within the field (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). For example, theory development with regard to the phenomenon of "leadership" is usually portrayed as a sequence: trait theory (1920s/1930s), behavioral theory (1940s onwards), contingency theory (late 1960s onwards), charismatic theory (1980s/early 1990s), transformational and transactional (1980s/late 1990s), nature of leadership (late 1990s), and emotional intelligence (late 1990s)—each theory providing (allegedly) ever more compelling arguments of leaders' skills and competences (e.g., Bass, Waldman, & Avolio, 1987; Burns, 1978; Groves & LaRocca, 2011; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007; Van Vugt, 2006).

More generally, it has been argued that the display of positivistic assumptions and deductive methods that fit with normative conceptions of "progress" or "novelty" is more about rhetoric, technique, and gap-filling than underpinning genuine advances (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Corvellec, 1997; Davis, 2010; McKinley, 2010). By attributing "progressive coherence" to the literature, theorists assume that theoretical developments mature and develop in a consistent serially constructed direction. But, for example with regard to leadership theories, it can be argued that what we witness is different foci changing over time in line with management trends and paradigmatic shifts such as critical (e.g., Collinson, 2005; Tomlinson, O'Reilly, & Wallace, 2013) and social constructionist approaches (e.g., Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Thus, an implicit argument that an ordered past body of work fits into a narrative of future development that "suggests what can be done next" (Myers, 1991, p. 46) can be misleading, focused more on rhetoric than rigor (Fisher, 1999). Such an argument ignores the disjunctures and incorporation of interdisciplinary insights that can lead to methodological and theoretical advances: advances that may also be ideologically constrained by the politics of progress, as we discuss in the following.

Ideological Constraints

As we have noted, even if theory development follows a putative trajectory of scientific progress, this arc often remains within the prevailing boundaries of conventional wisdom and the "intelligibility nuclei" of the particular knowledge community (Gergen, 1997). The limiting effect on the development of new and innovative theories is further compounded by the ideological nature of knowledge generation. The assumptions underpinning theory and knowledge claims are value statements based on taken-for-granted ideologies that justify the status quo, protect the dominant interests of highly influential knowledge communities (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Rhodes, 2009; Stoddart, 2007), and privilege certain ways of thinking over others (Deetz, 1996).

Theory development can be constrained by methodological and theoretical "fashions" that are employed in rote ways (Abrahamson, 1999; Denzin, 2009) in order to get published in elite journals underpinned by particular ideologies. Qualitative researchers in particular often feel constrained by the need to conform to normative expectations of legitimacy by using mixed-method, quasi-scientific, and quasi-experimental methodologies (and/or quantitative and highly structured forms of presentation), which do not lead to new ways of thinking and generative theories.

Another example of ideological constraints on theory development in organization studies is offered by the case of the UK's Association of Business Schools (ABS), which offers clear

statements about how academic endeavors should be organized and how the outputs of these endeavors should be valued. ABS claim they are the "representative body and *authoritative voice* [italics added] for all the leading business schools of UK universities, higher education institutions and independent management colleges" (ABS, 2011). Through its systematization of journal rankings, ABS espouses a particular ideological position that leads to a "tendency to be exclusionary and conservative to the detriment of intellectual innovation within organization studies" (Grey, 2010, p. 677). New and low-ranked journals that encourage innovative theories and methodologies are urged by ABS to: "consider the ways in which the ratings of these journals can be improved or the journals discontinued" (Harvey, Kelly, Morris, & Rowlinson, 2011, p. 30). In short: accept the authority and underpinning ideology of our system or leave the field.

But the ABS stance is simply illustrative of a more general issue. Suddaby, Hardy, and Huy (2011) express this issue succinctly when they ask: "Have recent changes in the field compromised our ability to innovate theoretically? [and is the problem] that there is nothing bold left to say, or is it, with the long-standing drive to publish, not perish, coupled with the more recent rush to dominate the rankings and league tables, that there is no longer any place left in which to say it?" (p. 246). Academics feel pressured to follow conservative and positivistic norms in order to get published in highly ranked journals, rather than challenging dominant theories and ideologies through alternative outlets—especially books, which "provide the space within which we can be novel and where we do not have to pay such expensive homage to those who have gone before" (Suddaby et al., 2011, p. 246).

The Constraints in Summary, and Efforts to Address Them

To summarize, we suggest that a combination of conservative knowledge generation and ideological constraints imposed by institutions, paradigmatic communities, and individuals has limited theoretical and methodological innovation. However, there have been some initiatives seeking to bring diverse perspectives into dialogue. Fabian (2000) noted the existence of several disciplinary approaches (e.g., multiparadigm integration) that created theoretical pressures and "beneficial tension" within management scholarship, but she added: "Few of these pressures have been integrated into one discussion, and, thus, the difficulty of ever arriving at a single discipline approach has been masked by their absence in the conversation" (p. 366).

Nevertheless, recently there have been further attempts to bridge communities, such as: cross-division paper sessions at some conferences and groups with a field or conceptual focus, rather than a theoretical focus, and multiparadigm inquiry (Clegg, 2005; Hassard, 1991; Kirkwood & Campbell-Hunt, 2007; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002; Schultz & Hatch, 1996). We have a great deal of sympathy for such initiatives, but we suggest that because of their relative infrequency, and the concomitant absence of effective socialization in these processes, they cannot reach their full potential. Thus there is a need to consider how practices can be developed through longer-term engagement in reimagined research processes, such that the necessary bridging abilities can emerge and flourish over time. Accordingly, our intention in the following section is to seek to introduce research practices—based on *relationally reflexive practice* (Cunliffe, 2011)—that help articulate the "unspoken subtext" and lead to more generative theory building within and across knowledge communities.

The Idea of Relationally Reflexive Research Practice

If we are to develop new and useful theories of organization, we need to address the problems we have alluded to (i.e., too little generative theory development, misleading rhetoric, ideological

constraints, and conservative knowledge communities). We believe that we need to move to more generative theory-building communities through *relationally reflexive research practice.*

We will begin by defining relational practice as a starting point in differentiating our approach from other reflexive research methodologies. Relational practice refers to the social processes, practices, and relationships occurring between people in their everyday life as a person, manager, and/or researcher (Lambrechts, Grieten, Bouwen, & Corthouts, 2009; Steyaert & Van Looy, 2010). This focuses attention on the unfolding of multiple understandings and the development of new ways of theorizing that are embedded in a "network of possible connections and relations with [their] surroundings" (Shotter, 1996, p. 305). By *reflexivity* we mean—as a minimum—*methodological self-consciousness*, namely, a researcher's consciousness of her or his own assumptions and prejudices (Lynch, 2000, p. 29). Going further, this is a call toward the demanding practice of "continuous, intentional and systematic self-introspection" (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, p. 144) but one that also examines "the conceptual frameworks within which we work—the assumed and/or chosen ones of our discipline, culture, and historical moment" (Harding, 1996, p. 159). By combining relational practice with reflexivity we suggest that researchers attend to critically questioning the multiple and possible connections with their surroundings: their limits and prejudices, their possible relationships to the situation they are in (their discipline, culture, and historical context), as well as the constitutive role of researcher-participant relationships.

We contrast relationally reflexive practice with two other noted conceptualizations of reflexivity, both of which focus on reflexivity as a methodology from a researcher-centric perspective. Johnson and Duberley's (2003) approach perhaps best subsumes a number of definitions of reflexivity from a methodological perspective. They propose a metatheory incorporating a taxonomy of three forms of reflexivity:

- methodological reflexivity—a tool used to preserve objectivity by examining the impact of the researcher and research method on the research;
- epistemic reflexivity—which examines the impact of knowledge norms and conventions;
- hyper-reflexivity—which deconstructs texts to reveal alternative readings.

Alvesson, Hardy, and Harley (2008) are also concerned about the need for greater reflexivity in research, in particular by classifying the textual practices that enable reflexive researchers to engage in intellectual critique. Combining the different textual practices, they identify a framework of two forms of reflexive practice: D-reflexivity, which deconstructs and destabilizes texts and knowledge claims, and R-reflexivity, which reconstructs and re-presents alternative and marginalized readings. This framework offers a way of *writing up* research from a reflexive perspective.

The two aforementioned conceptualizations have been chosen as being representative of work on reflexivity and research and because they offer useful ways of engaging a reflexive methodology. We wish to build on these ideas, particularly the notion of R-reflexivity, by exploring the practices that constitute reflexive practice from a relational perspective rather than the individual researcher perspective suggested by most authors. Importantly, relationally reflexive research practice is an alternative to objectivist approaches such as Johnson and Duberley's (2003) methodological reflexivity because it allows "researchers to study the intersubjective and interdependent nature of organizational life" (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000, p. 150) and focus on how a researcher is embedded within many interrelated social contexts. It also brings to the fore the power relationships between participants and researchers (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Hall & Callery, 2001).

We argue that relationally reflexive research practice offers a generative approach to theory development because it can help the researcher follow often unexplored avenues: By paying close attention to the potential of relationships, we may be exposed to new contexts, new ideas, and new

possibilities for theorizing. In the next section we will argue how relationally reflexive research practice relates to the enactment of research and possibilities for the crafting of more novel theories.

The Crafting of Relationally Reflexive Research Practice

We argue that opening up our conservative theory-building communities can be addressed in three ways: by making connections between existing, recognized, but isolated theory-building communities (Guest, 2007); by making the contextualized nature of the relational processes of theory production explicit; and by breaking down, at least to a degree, the academic-practice boundaries that inform and constrain the refinement of theory construction between our communities. We see relationally reflexive research practice as a means of addressing these challenges. Such practices may be applied to any interpretive method—which seeks to "understand reality construction [through recovering] situated meanings, and systematic divergences in meaning" (Gephart, 2004, p. 456)—in order to increase its generative potential. In offering these insights we join Carlsen and Dutton (2011, pp. 17-19) in their mission to enable researchers to provide fuller accounts of their experiences, build developmental resources from their experiences, and invite imagination and intuition back into the craft. We also agree with Carlsen and Dutton (2011, p. 19) that for these ideas to impact on research practice, they must engage with others. This means, for us, that we cannot and should not tell researchers *precisely* what they should do. This is because the practices we describe in the following depend on the nature of the researcher, the "others" involved in the research, and their relationship: a relationship of deep or transient engagement.

Our immediate focus is thus on two particular kinds of relationally reflexive practice: *engaging otherness*, exploring differences as a means of breaking down boundaries and opening conversations to new voices, and *enacting connectedness*, developing new relational constructions in relation to our communities, data, and research contexts. We set out how these two kinds of practice are involved in three phases of theory building: pre-research conceptualizations, emerging theorizations in the conduct of research, and the refinement of theory in context. The practices and phases are summarized in Table 1.

Stage 1: Pre-Research Conceptualization

Engaging Otherness (1)—to Increase the Richness of Scholarly Conversations. There is a need for reflexive practice that allows the richness of our conversations to be enhanced through the interplay of multiple perspectives and assumptions. This involves engagement between groups that work from different worldviews yet have something relevant to say to the same field of research. By juxtaposing differences, we begin to articulate and question assumptions underlying our knowledge community and paradigm and explore new possibilities. Thompson and Perry (2004) observe, "there is no 'objective' ground for choosing a paradigm" (p. 403), and therefore by considering alternative paradigms we may: develop mastery within our own community as we better understand its foundations and uniqueness, incorporate new theories and methods within our community based on other paradigms, or seek different kinds of methods and participation with others. However, this means recognizing the possibility that there are alternative structures and foundations for theorization offered by other communities (Van Maanen, Sorenson, & Mitchell, 2007). Reflexivity occurs in challenging the relationship between the researcher's and the other's worldviews and the latent construction of (preferred) theories. This challenge is best achieved through participation in collectivities that deliberately cross boundaries. This is the kind of collectivity where, as Becker (1993) puts it, "qualitative and quantitative workers alike, have ... just to get on with it, and take account of what must be taken account of to make sense of the world" (p. 220; cf. Schultz & Hatch, 1996).

A collectivity that can challenge unexamined worldviews is something that researchers often need to build for themselves, through the longer-term development of interdisciplinary groups and initiatives. However, unchallenged worldviews can also be disrupted in the short term by "discipline-hopping" conversations with groups that are different from our usual community contacts. A good example is connected with a recent project involving Author 1 (B. Hardy & Hibbert, 2012). While Author 1 was concerned with the socially constructed nature of troubling incidents for managers, the coauthor was concerned with hormonal responses to such moments of shock. Working together and starting from such radically different disciplinary paradigms meant juxtaposing the subtext of two different disciplines as Gergen (1997) suggests—leading the authors to articulate the assumptions inherent in their own disciplines, and similarities and differences, as a means of coming to some agreement. As they comment in the article, their new perspective involved:

> going beyond traditional and stylized views that natural scientific perspectives are reductionist and neglect the social, and that social scientific perspectives are speculative and neglect the agency of the individual. By illustrating the social impact of physiological factors through behavior and interoception,[1] and the physiological impact of social factors through environmental influence and reflexion, we show that there is greater potential for linkage and commonality than has hitherto been articulated. (B. Hardy & Hibbert, 2012, p. 23)

Developing the practice of engaging otherness therefore entails that researchers be involved in multidisciplinary conversations, since this makes assumptions visible (cf. Lewis & Kelemen, 2002) and brings new richness to the conversation for both parties. For us, this kind of challenge relates to the refinement of methodology and theory (as we shall discuss later) but needs to begin with conversations about ideas before we enter the field. Large, diverse conference settings and interdisciplinary conferences around specific issues offer such an opportunity. While such conferences can be difficult to navigate, they offer tremendous diversity and opportunities to participate in a range of developmental workshop conversations with a diverse range of conversation partners. Such conversations help us reflexively question our worldview and its intuitive application in terms of data collection, analysis, and theorizing. In this way, researchers may develop a richer conceptual repertoire. This process also occurs in diverse research teams: Barley, Meyer, and Gash (1988) reflected on their earlier study on "cultures of culture": "without Gash's insistent emphasis on the techniques that won her the label of 'psychologist', Barley and Meyer may have succumbed to a 'true believer' syndrome, which might have resulted in findings more open to criticism" (Frost & Stablein, 1992, p. 250).

Enacting Connectedness (1)—to Construct Scholarly Selves Differently. Reflexive practices that question and explicate our methodological practices and theorizing processes help us to make space for alternatives. For example, how might we value and defend the "reliability" and "validity" of our practice of interpretive discourse analysis for theory building against methods of coding? Addressing this kind of question requires participation in groups that are prepared to defer value judgments about how theory emerges. The kinds of groups we have in mind are those, like the critical management studies community, that are prepared to accept that the evidential basis of theory is not always clear at the outset. Such groups will perceive unexpected insights and surprising alternatives that indicate new areas to explore—conversely the risk is that by exposing the assumptions underlying the researcher's theorizing process (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011; Cunliffe, 2003), this will be judged as unsatisfactory from an alternative paradigm.

We argue that serendipity is to be valued, especially where rare exceptions suggest new insights for novel theoretical constructions (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011; Huxham & Hibbert, 2011). Having suspended judgment until novelty emerges, researchers are then faced with the challenge of deciding

whether and how to combine their insights, such that individual theories-in-use are not the dominant driver of the process of theorization. This occurred during Gersick's (1988) research on team project work; she had put forward a tentative theory-in-use of midpoint transitions and her reviewers were so critical that the paper was "hanging by a thread." This convinced her that theory in her field was inadequate to explain her data, so she abandoned it and decided to read more widely outside of her field in the natural sciences. "During a purely social conversation at a party, Warren Bennis suggested that if I wanted a good book, I should try anything by Stephen Jay Gould. I read *The Panda's Thumb* (1980) . . . . I was astonished and delighted . . . . I now saw a larger theoretical context for my work: punctuated equilibrium" (Gersick, 1992, p. 60). Punctuated equilibrium was "a new concept from the field of natural history that hitherto has not been applied to groups" (Gersick, 1988, p. 16).

   Another example can be drawn from the career journey of one of the authors of this article. Author 3 (like the other authors) has been socialized and educated for the most part of his life in a Western context. But having now worked for more than 2 years in an Asian context and collaborated with many Asian scholars he has realized that even fundamental ways of reasoning and theorizing differ. Foundations for traditional Western logic and reasoning are Greek dual logic (yes or no, either/or). In contrast, Asian theorizing is not necessarily based on (or confined to) this dual logic and also might not regard inconsistency as a problem. So, when trying to understand how research partners (practitioners as well as academics) make sense of phenomena and explain them, he increasingly put *his* approach aside and tried to see the phenomena also in *their* (e.g., "Japanese" or "Thai") way—though with limits and difficulties.

   The general conclusion we draw from this is that developing this practice requires researchers to reflexively "notice their noticing" in relationship with others. The use of research diaries is helpful in this process because they can offer a basis for connecting a researcher's observations with their life history. We are not advocating the elimination of sensitivities derived from researchers' experiences, but instead being open about and legitimating these sources of insights. Overall, this aspect of enacting connectedness leads us to the construction of ourselves as scholars in relation to our social milieus and histories; by reflexively engaging with our connectedness, we are able to better see who we are and the place from which we speak. This should result in theory builders being more open to changing their minds and expressing opinions different from those that they once advocated. In doing so, they will destabilize the contexts that are shaping their construction of themselves, as well as their construction of theories. Over time, the relational connections that constitute our life-with-others are reconfigured.

Stage 2: Emerging Conceptualizations in the Process of Research

Engaging Otherness (2)—to Transform Theoretical Assumptions. Reflexive engagement, as described previously, shows our own relational connectedness to the phenomena we seek to research. This understanding, combined with the enriched conversations resulting from the preceding practice, should lead to more relational encounters with other research participants, in which understandings are not just enlarged but transformed. The kind of relational reflexivity that we see as offering deep and useful levels of challenge is radical and places individuals' fundamental assumptions and taken-for-granted patterns of thought at genuine risk. This aspect of radical, relational reflexivity is envisaged in the concept of "pluralistic theoretical communities" (C. Hardy & Clegg, 1997; C. Hardy, Phillips, & Clegg, 2001)—that is, groups of people of varied opinion from divergent paradigms in vigorous debate with each other.

   This kind of conversation is difficult as it challenges the comforting assumption that paradigms are incommensurable, by entertaining alternative views through a pragmatic consideration of whether (and how) we might arrive at a more convincing theory by doing so (cf. Hassard, 1991). This challenge applies equally to those of a postmodern bent—who are forced uncomfortably toward

a concrete, comparative argument—as it does toward positivists who might struggle to take other perspectives seriously (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Boje, 2006; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997; Parker, 1995). This requires contestation in deliberately broad communities and networks that encompass radically different perspectives, for this enables different intersubjective constructions. In such spaces one may experience transformative reflection, signaled by painfully or excitedly changing one's mind. Thus, the ability to accommodate radical alternatives in our processes of theorization involves reflexive practices that also modify the researcher's theories-in-use. An example of this experience is the collaboration between B. Hardy and Hibbert (2012), which we alluded to earlier. Part of this collaboration involved the examination of an incident of a colleague "being struck," of being discomforted by their own actions and the way in which it challenged their values and reasoning (cf. Cunliffe, 2003). The two authors considered the incident separately. One approached it from a sociological perspective and the other from a physiological perspective. Both authors then engaged in dialogue about the incident, and both developed transformed perspectives as a result. In the first article resulting from their interdisciplinary collaboration, the authors concluded:

> On the one hand we wish to make an entreaty to social scientists to reach down into the body to explore the intra-person origins of behavior, and the inter-somatic ways in which social rela- tions can be associated with the arousal, presentation and interpretation of physiological states. This could involve considering both the impact of afferent social information and the impact of efferent bodily processes on the social fabric. On the other hand, we wish to make a balan- cing entreaty to natural scientists to reach out from the body to explore the impact of efferent bodily processes on society and also the afferent impact of social processes on the body. (B. Hardy & Hibbert, 2012, pp. 19-20)

A similar process has also been discussed, in more general terms, by Romani, Primecz, and Topçu (2011).

Enacting this practice means engaging in problem-oriented dialogue rather than disciplinary debate. It means working with very different researchers who are willing to bring their contributions to bear on a problem, with the expectation that such contributions will all be partial and open to reframing.

Enacting Connectedness (2)—to Construct Different Conversations With Data. Having explored the boundaries of our presumptions, comfortable communities, and paradigms, the relationally reflexive researcher is in a position to develop their conversations with data in a different way. This can be uncomfortable because it means abandoning any assumption that data are independent of the researcher's viewpoint, theoretical or otherwise. Our own theoretical reasoning needs to acknowl- edge and address the fact that "I know that I am caught up and comprehended in the world that I take as my object" (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 115). We are not, therefore, dealing with the unproblematic support of validity claims through the "elimination of bias" (Giddens, 1990). Instead we are becom- ing aware that we have a role in the life and construction of theory and enter into this life through a conversation that constitutes the theory and the researcher.

The moments of conversation with data are strongly influenced by our prior understandings, themselves shaped by our route in arriving at that moment (Gadamer, 1998; Heidegger, 1962, 1999). Thus in working generatively with data we face the difficult question posed by Galibert (2004): "How can we be astonished by what is most familiar, and make familiar what is strange?" (p. 456). To address this question, we need to see ourselves as fellow participants with our research "subjects," seeking to "walk alongside" them in such a way that we are engaged enough to support an interpretive approach to the generation of insights about them (Weeks, 2000). The kind of engaged perspective that is envisaged does not lead to precise, programmatic research. Instead, it

means that insights will most likely emerge over time (Pettigrew, 2003; Prasad, 2002) and surprises will illuminate our understandings: we must "allow ourselves to be struck, moved, arrested, and so on" (Shotter, 2008, p. 279). For this reason, Suddaby (2006) has suggested that those working with grounded approaches "must become both patient and tolerant of ambiguity, because it is the ongoing interaction between researcher and data that generates the fundament of successful grounded research" (p. 638). This leads to a need to expand our conversation and allow other voices the chance to speak. This is intrinsic to processes of theory production that seek to work interpretively from data, rather than seeing theory building terminating when data collection begins (McKinley, 2010; Rindova, 2008).

For example, when Author 3 investigated collaborative work practices among lower-skilled Thai employees in so-called "One Tambon One Product" organizations (OTOP), he interpreted the system of piece rate pay as a power-based form of performance control and exploitation. However, the Thai workers saw it much more as a fair system that guaranteed their status as independent entrepreneurs (e.g., if they didn't want to, they simply did not produce or deliver the products). Once again we are indicating another role for conversation, this time focusing on contesting and/or enriching the emerging theorizations that we somewhat presumptuously bring to bear on the situations we research. It is to be expected that a critical management scholar (e.g., the author involved in the OTOP project) will use power as a theoretical explanation for their observations, and they can be explicit about this stance. But this needs to be enacted in a collaborative context—with other researchers and/or research participants—such that alternatives to preferred theories are also entertained.

Stage 3: Refining Theories in Context

Engaging Otherness (3)—to Increase the Richness of Contextual Conversations. As we enter into conversations with our data, we engage with the context in which it—and we—are situated. During the process of relating data to theory, researchers may realize that they are projecting their worldviews onto the context. This needs to be countered through insider-outsider conversations in collaborative processes with research partners in two ways. First, these conversations need to be situated in the moment of interaction with research participants, and with other collaborators, as emerging insights are captured and refined (Le & Jarzabkowski, 2011). This conversation brings practitioners into the process of theory construction: a process that collaborative researchers Orr (academic) and Bennett (practitioner) say involves "relations between protagonists which are mutually constituting and uplifting but also at times disturbing and debilitating" (Orr & Bennett, 2012, p. 428), because of the political landscape and different forms of identity work each is embedded within.

The engagement with otherness means acknowledging the constitutive nature of our research conversations and leads to the need for a stance of humility, which seeks to "respond non-defensively to negative feedback or unexpected input by evaluating it open-mindedly and building on it" (Martin, 2011, p. 206; see also Clegg, 2011). Second, recognizing that in practice there are many voices that cannot be involved in the interpretive process, workshops with broad practitioner audiences should form part of the evaluation of draft outputs. In this way emerging theory will integrate the researcher's "reflective conversations with the data" within a pattern that is a shared creation between researcher, research participants, and research "users." The process of open collaboration will also lead to a degree of exposure, however, as exploring worldviews leads to the identification and challenge of presumptions.

The example of collaboration within Thai OTOPs, described previously, provides an example of this practice. Different understandings of the pay system with regard to people's identities emerged. But these different understandings only emerged after the researcher, the owner of the OTOP, and two of the employees had a relatively open conversation about the advantages and disadvantages of the piece rate pay system (with a language barrier on the side of the researcher bridged by an

interpreter). This kind of open conversation with research participants is one way of developing this practice. Another is to present emerging theories to practitioner audiences who are very similar to the research participants and seek critical conversations with them. This kind of interaction helps us to investigate whether our theories seem realistic for practitioners who have not been influenced by extensive prior conversations with researchers.

Enacting Connectedness (3)—to Construct our Shared Contexts Differently. A commitment to conversation with research participants can be seen as troubling if the researcher sees herself or himself losing the position of presumed objectivity and distance. Relationally reflexive practice can be methodologically innovative because it can mean researching with rather than researching about practitioners and their contexts (e.g., Kempster & Stewart, 2010; Marcos & Denyer, 2012) and leads to theory building as a process of coproduction (Tranfield, Denyer, Marcos, & Burr, 2004). Through conversation, relationally reflexive practice can overcome the conservatism experienced within knowledge-building communities by contrasting different and possibly divergent perspectives and paradigms as a means of constructing new insights rooted in "between-ness" (Cunliffe, 2003). This can offer the potential for relational transformation.

In general, we argue that relevant and useful theory can be refined through connecting with the practice community that it claims to speak about and for (Brownlie, Hewer, & Tadajewski, 2009; Reibstein, Day, & Wind, 2009). For example, some researchers investigating networks, open source software, grassroots movements, commons-based peer production, or similar phenomena communicate via online forums and publish in open-access e-journals. That is, they employ the same media and practices that they investigate. To some extent, these new forms might even start to break the hegemony of elite journals and large global publishers. At least, in that area they change the way that communication and collaboration between researcher, informants, editors, and readers unfolds. Such research practices inevitably reveal and suppress the "comfortable" research conversations that constitute conventional academic lives at the same time as they reveal the potential value of conversations that bridge theory and practice.

Developing this practice involves conversations with practitioners that overlap with those alluded to previously. But the difference here is that we go beyond discussing our emerging theoretical ideas to discussing ourselves; that is, to allow practitioners to know something of who we are, why we think the way we do, and the influence of our peer community upon us. These are the questions implicit in every organizational research project (to greater or lesser degrees of focus on each aspect) and a true peer connection to the practitioners in our research context means that we need to allow them to "research us" too. In this way the refined theory sits in an enriched understanding of context that is constituted by researchers and practitioners together. Moreover, the conversation and context need to extend beyond the immediate setting of the research in two ways. First, it encompasses practitioners in different but related contexts with whom we join in conversation about the theories we develop; their adaptation and application of what is offered will lead to new theoretical possibilities (cf. Huxham & Hibbert, 2011). Second, it encompasses academics who have not been engaged in the research; to conversations with them, we bring contextually situated refined theory and the alternative possibilities that spring from conversation with diverse practitioners. Thus the final situation of the researcher is not closed around a narrow community, but opened out through a wider range of different relational connections. The context constituted through relationally reflexive practice is therefore broad and always changing.

Toward Transformed, Open Communities

In this final part of the article, we draw out the impact of the relationally reflexive practices described previously in two ways. First, we illustrate their generative potential through application

Table 2. Relationally Reflexive Practices in an Action Research Theory-Building Process.

Theory-Building Stage	Relationally Reflexive Practice	Action Research Application Examples	Generative Potentials Enacted
1. Pre-research conceptualiza-tion: the latent resources for theory building	Engaging otherness—to increase the richness of scholarly conversations. Actively seeking alternative views outside one's community.	Framing initial questions after broader interdisciplinary engagement before entering the field (cf. Huxham & Vangen, 2003).	Researchers able to interpret phenomena in new and different ways from the outset.
	Enacting connectedness—to construct scholarly selves differently.	Assumptions used knowingly to guide some interactions and interpretation in the field, but not all of them (cf. Shotter, 2010).	Researchers able to use their own lenses for observation, but are not limited by them.
2. Emerging theorizations in the process of conducting research	Engaging otherness—to transform theoretical assumptions. Conversations across paradigmatic and disciplinary boundaries.	Incremental cycles of investigation, theorization, and action involve participants and academic communities (cf. Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Mason, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2001)	Emerging theories are critiqued and alternative theoretical constructions explored.
	Enacting connectedness—to construct different conversations with data.	Interpretation of data recognizes the inherent ambiguity in data (cf. Golden Biddle & Locke, 1997, p. 108).	Interpretation of data involves engagement with different theories.
3. The refinement of theory in its (broader) context	Engaging otherness—to increase the richness of contextual conversations.	Research subjects and other practitioners have voices in the development of theory (cf. Heracleous, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).	Increased opportunities to take different options for theory development into account.
	Enacting connectedness—to construct our shared contexts differently.	Conversations with practitioners (in other settings) and academics about the refinement and adaptation of theories (cf. Huxham & Vangen, 2003).	Theories are closely linked to the empirical context yet alternative refinements for different contexts are also surfaced.

to an action research approach. Second, we develop some general conclusions about how we might develop an ongoing, generative process of connected conversations.

An Application Example: Action Research

In Table 2, we illustrate the impact of the key relationally reflexive practices on action research methodologies and draw out the generative potentials enacted in these examples.

Our approach enhances the generative potential of action research, particularly in relation to Phases 1 and 3 outlined in Table 2. In relation to Phase 1, we articulate a different approach to action research from that advocated by Huxham and Vangen (2003). They argue against researchers taking a particular perspective and instead suggest that researchers should take a stance that "accepts the management ideologies of those being researched" (Huxham & Vangen, 2003, p. 385). We think that there is room to go beyond an acceptance of management ideologies (Diefenbach, 2009). Instead, we argue that researchers need to be aware of their own perspective and its usefulness as a lens for interpreting their observations—but they should also enhance their "peripheral vision" by conversation with diverse academic communities. In part we therefore agree with Shotter's (2010) alternative argument for the role of researchers' theoretical insights in the action research process; he describes "a form of research or inquiry situated within a place where there is a focus on an actual, ongoing practice, shared both by the practitioners of the practice and a group of researchers or inquirers well versed in traditions of thought that might help provide some useful ways of making a new kind of sense of the practice in question" (p. 281). However, while we agree with Shotter the value of researchers "well versed in traditions of thought," we have highlighted the ways in which this can also be constraining. We advocate "playing" with a range of theoretical perspectives before entering the research setting, through engagement and connecting with different schools of thought with which we are less familiar. We are not negating the utility of tradition, but instead emphasizing that we need to be aware of the way in which it shapes our communities and their interpretations (Hibbert & Huxham, 2010). Tradition brings some understandings into view and makes others more obscure (Hibbert & Huxham, 2011) and playing with other communities gives us perspectives that are less easy to deploy but give a wider field of view. By engaging and connecting with different communities, we add breadth to our interpretive depth.

In general, action research methods are well developed in relation to the "middle part" of our process, shown as Phase 2 in Table 2. Action researchers such as Mason (2012) and Reason and Bradbury (2001) argue for the development of emerging theorizations clearly situated in the research context, in conversation with participants, as do we. This approach is particularly apparent in conceptualizations of action research that explicitly involve participatory or democratic processes, for example that characterized as "insider" action research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). In insider action research, the researchers will already have engaged in conversations that illuminate the important pre-understandings, knowledge conceptualizations, jargons, and so on that help to make sense of what is happening in the research setting. But bringing relationally reflexive practice to the process stops researchers relying solely on the insider perspective and helps them to recognize the ambiguity inherent in data; there are multiple plausible interpretations that provide "hooks" (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997) to the range of theoretical perspectives explored through engagement with diverse academic communities. Thus bringing relationally reflexive research practice to this aspect of action research—making sense of data in the field—is more generative, as it increases the range of emergent theorizations that can be developed.

Phase 3 of our relationally reflexive approach also adds to the theory-building potential of action research. Specifically, we have more to say about the life of practical, contextually specific theory in onward conversation and argue that generativity is enabled by adaptation and application in practice. We advocate taking the inclusive approach (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Reason & Bradbury, 2001) further, by involving practitioners outside the research setting, who will adapt context-specific theories to their own situations. This is subtly different to the approach adopted by Huxham and Vangen (2003), who seek to develop theory in "practitioner language" from the outset, such that it is generalizable to a range of practice settings. We agree that working toward common language is helpful but suggest that this should not be at the loss of context-specific richness. Each new context calls for further conversation, adaptation, and application that leads to the construction of alternatives and counterarguments. In this way, it can seem that relationally reflexive practice leads to

theory that is always under the threat of delegitimation. Each new theory is always already rendered fallible and incomplete since it is also expected to change in the face of new reflections and changing circumstances. Yet we believe that it is not the completeness of the theory that counts, but the potential for the stimulation of further theoretical conversation. Thus the end result of the process we advocate is generative theorizing that won't stand still.

Conclusion: Toward a Generative Process of Connected Conversations

Through engaging with action research as an example we have shown how our relationally reflexive approach can enhance the generative potential of a particular qualitative methodology. Similar consideration could be given to other interpretive approaches, such as organizational ethnography, where the benefits of our approach are similar. Thus the "generative potentials" described in Table 2 also have a broader range of application, but this will need to be considered in relation to the specific approach adopted in research projects and communities. Thus, while we believe in the approach, we also believe that others will have views and ideas that can and should lead to changes to it, conceptually and operationally. We would not be true to the relationally reflexive stance that we advocate if we did not accept this. Nevertheless our stance also allows *us* to offer critique, and in this article we first set out to reveal the general constraints on the craft of qualitative research, especially with regard to how such constraints impact on theory building and the actions of communities engaged in this endeavor. We have sought to "shake up" the conservatism of our communities, which we argue is unhelpfully constraining, in setting out our critique.

Our article goes beyond critique and supplements the work of Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) on institutional constraints by addressing related epistemological issues. In addressing these concerns, we have suggested another way of enacting qualitative research methods for developing theory, by identifying relationally reflexive practices. These practices are centered on engaging otherness and enacting connectedness; we envisage an arc of conversation, in the process of theory building, that swings between them. In summary terms, we believe that the practices of relational reflexivity can lead to novel theory development because: (a) all who participate in the research have better opportunities to voice their interpretations; (b) all participants are confronted with differing accounts and, hence, need to consider more aspects; (c) more open conversations will generate more perspectives, ideas, and insight that inform emerging theoretical insights; and (d) the refined theories are more closely tied to particular contexts and thus generate richer detail. Moreover, these practices have to be seen as constitutive conversations in a researcher's life-with-others. In setting out our approach we build on the work of Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013) in this area.

What our process recognizes, above all, is the constitutive role of conversations between researchers and the communities in which they participate. These conversations provide the basis for impact on overlapping domains of theory and practice. We can go further, though, in seeing that our conversations provide the means to extend beyond the obvious and immediate bounds of the research context. From multiple conversations it will also become more evident that the generation and interpretation of data also depend on the actors involved. As a corollary, these actors, including researchers and practitioners, need to be collaboratively engaged as a part of the theory-building process. This opens the door to relational reflexivity in the genuine and open encounter with otherness and the ability to see the necessity of between-ness in the situated reflexive construction of theory. Thus, the kind of theory-building process that we seek to build through collaborative conversation provides a "safe space" for encountering otherness and leads to opportunities for reflexive learning, a sense of connectedness, and growth for all. A sense of connectedness leads in turn to new perceptions about the nature and boundaries of the communities that researchers inhabit. In our conceptualization, the spaces researchers inhabit go beyond even the worthy notion of "pluralistic theoretical communities" (C. Hardy & Clegg, 1997; C. Hardy et al., 2001) to become porous and dynamic

relational contexts—contexts where theory and practice, scholars and practitioners are all in conversation.

The theory-building process outlined in this article also leads to the development of "theories" that engage and resonate with others (both academics and practitioners) because they offer not just intellectual but also practical and policy outputs. This form of theorizing can transform our identities as researchers as well as our relationship with others—with the contexts and people with whom we are connected. Furthermore, this form of theory development can lead to new insights for all because it enables those engaged in the process to "testify to the reality of lived experience while at the same time undermining the self-evident character of that reality" (Rhodes, 2009, p. 656). It may also allow theory to expand and change beyond the original context of its formulation by recognizing that theory is always incomplete and may emerge in practical application. By taking part in the relationally reflexive conversations that support this process, researchers also gain new alternative insights and the impetus to develop new variants and expressions of theory. For a relationally reflexive researcher, the theory-building process is iterative and developmental. Researchers grow and change alongside their theories.

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Note

1. An awareness of one's own bodily sensations.

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