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Meanings of theory: clarifying theory through typification

Abstract

Developing and evaluating scientific knowledge and its value requires a clear – or at least not too unclear – understanding of what ‘theory’ means. We argue that common definitions of theory are too restrictive, as they do not acknowledge the existence of multiple kinds of scientific knowledge, but largely recognize only one kind as ‘theory’, namely explanatory knowledge. We elaborate a typology that broadens and clarifies the meaning of ‘theory’. Consisting of five basic theory types – explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting and provoking theories – the typology offers a framework that enables researchers to develop and assess knowledge in more varied ways and for a broader set of purposes than is typically recognized, as well as providing a more level playing field within the academic community.

Key words: scientific knowledge, theoretical contribution, theory, theory development

INTRODUCTION

‘Theory’ is a core element of management and organization studies (MOS) and social science more broadly (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007). It is frequently argued that a key task for scholars is to develop theories that advance our knowledge of social reality (Davis, 1971; Kincaid, 2012; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017; Swedberg, 2014). As *ASQ* pointedly declares in its guidance to authors, ‘theory is how we move to further research and improved practice’. Indeed, ‘developing theories is what we are meant to do as academic researchers and it sets us apart from practitioners and consultants’ (Gregor, 2006, p. 613); it is ultimately what makes MOS, sociology, psychology, etc. count as specific social science disciplines (Abend, 2008; Reed, 2011).

Given its centrality, what precisely does ‘theory’ mean within MOS and social science more broadly? This question is critical because without a clear understanding of what theory means and stands for beyond a celebratory term, it is difficult to develop and evaluate theories, and ultimately to advance human understanding beyond mere empirical description and hypothesis testing. As several scholars have demonstrated, the word ‘theory’ can take on many different meanings depending on how and in what context it is used (e.g., Abend, 2008; Thomas, 1997). At the most general level, ‘theory’ commonly refers to some sort of knowledge or intellectual

endeavour (Thomas, 1997). Within academia, theory denotes a distinct form of abstract conceptual knowledge, namely scientific knowledge, typically seen as the ‘highest’ form (Liedman, 2013, p. 41; Shapira, 2011, p. 1312).

Although the word ‘theory’ is almost omnipresent in research texts, it is rarely defined precisely and systematically. Most MOS scholars use the term as if everybody is in agreement about what it means and there is no need for further clarification. Expressions such as ‘theory development’, ‘theory building’, ‘theory evaluation’ and ‘theoretical contribution’ are frequently used in research texts and journal guidelines as if the meaning of ‘theory’ is obvious to researchers. This, however, is not the case.

MOS researchers frequently complain that the meaning of ‘theory’ is ambiguous and therefore in need of further clarification (Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Corvellec, 2013; DiMaggio, 1995; Ferris, Hochwarter and Buckley, 2012; Hambrick, 2007; Nicklin and Spector, 2016; Shapira, 2011; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Weick, 1989, 1995). As Tourish (2019, p. 23) notes, ‘it seems reasonable to expect some standard definitions that tell us what theory is in fine detail. I haven’t found this to be the case. Rather, there are plentiful definitions that are characterised by their *vagueness*.’ Similar complaints have been raised in other areas of the social sciences, such as sociology (Abend, 2008), psychology (Gelso, 2006), education (Thomas, 1997) and information systems (Gregor, 2006). Looking briefly at the many definitions of ‘theory’ may give the impression that there is a range of different views of what theory means and stands for (e.g. Gay and Weaver, 2011; Metcalfe, 2004). But upon closer examination (as our review of theory literature shows), there appears to be more consensus than disagreement. Although existing definitions of ‘theory’ vary in terms of degree of detail and specificity, they converge on the idea of ‘theory’ as conceptual knowledge that aims to *explain* phenomena.

Consequently, despite widespread acknowledgement that multiple forms of knowledge exist within MOS (Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and Kelemen, 2002; Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017), only explanatory knowledge achieves the epithet ‘theory’ according to the prevalent meaning. But there are, as we develop below, other possible meanings of theory besides the focus on explanation. Moreover, the dominance of the latter meaning leads to significant epistemological and political-practical problems.

First, the dominant explanatory meaning of theory is likely to encourage explanatory knowledge pursuits over others, as they are considered more important, superior and prestigious. The kinds of knowledge that do not fit neatly into the dominant explanation-prediction view of

theory are often ruled out (Symon, Cassel and Johnson, 2018). This leads many researchers who develop another kind of scientific knowledge to ‘force-fit’ it into an explanatory mould so they can claim ‘theory’ (Abend, Petre, and Sauder, 2013; Gephart, 2004), or to drop their ‘theory’ ambitions (Daly, 1997) by only claiming an ‘interpretive account’ (Patriotta and Gruber, 2015) or a ‘practice-based account’ (O’Leary and Sandberg, 2017). Although ‘theory’ is not necessarily the ultimate objective of all research (Hambrick, 2007), the ambition in this paper is to advocate for a more ‘advanced’ view of theory that is more inclusive of the varied knowledge about organizational phenomena.

Second, only regarding explanatory knowledge as ‘theory’ tends to limit the ways we theorize. As former senior Editors of *AMR*, Delbridge and Fiss (2013, p. 329) note, ‘this hegemony of correlational net-effects [i.e. explanation-prediction] theorizing in *AMR* stifles other styles of theorizing, such as process, narrative, or essay forms, leading to a relatively (and inappropriately) homogeneous management research field and an impoverished understanding of our phenomena of interest’. It tends to block creative work along other paths than those focused on explanation and effects of variables.

Third, and crucially, the domination of this singular meaning of theory is also likely to impede researchers and practitioners from developing multidimensional understandings of aspects of reality, as there is a tendency to take what is to be explained as given. Organizational phenomena are typically messy and complex, and therefore require not only explanatory, but also other kinds of scientific knowledge to provide more informed and comprehensive insights about them (e.g. Astley and Zammuto 1992; Morgan, 1997; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011). Focusing only on explanation discourages researchers from coming up with alternative lines of reasoning that construct organizational phenomena in new and novel ways.

Fourth, the dominant meaning of ‘theory’ disfavours many forms of research that do not pursue the development of explanatory knowledge, which is likely to contribute to skewed status, resource and publication opportunities for researchers, heavily impacting the overall production of influential knowledge (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). It is, for example, well known that several top-tier journals tend to favour explanatory knowledge (Harley, 2019), which makes it significantly harder to publish in those journals if the knowledge purported is not explanatory. These political-practical implications, in turn, amplify the epistemological consequences as they encourage a specific kind of knowledge to be developed over others. ‘Theory’ then becomes a political-practical control device.

Any definition of theory, including the one we elaborate in this paper, is, of course, partly epistemological and partly political-practical, reflecting as well as supporting interests, ambitions, privileges and rewards. In this paper, we aim for a broader, more pluralistic, and inclusive understanding of theory than just explanatory knowledge and try, as far as possible, to hold back idiosyncratic preferences and pushing for a sectional agenda. We therefore try not to favour any particular meta-theoretical position, other than embracing the general and long-held meta-theoretical assumption within academia that all knowledge is uncertain, and that all knowledge development is based on some fundamental assumptions that researchers make about reality (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Davis, 1971; Kuhn, 1970; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2004). Hence, while it is clear that we find the domination of explanation theory problematic, similar to Abend (2008) we generally support onto-epistemological pluralism and projects that are not committed too strictly to a specific theoretical position within academia.

The purpose of this paper, then, is threefold: first, to elaborate a more precise general definition of theory that clarifies what structural elements scientific knowledge requires (as a minimum) to qualify as ‘theory’; second, and most importantly, to elaborate and propose a typology that facilitates consideration of a variety of meanings of ‘theory’; and finally, to illustrate how the typology offers a framework that enables researchers to advance knowledge development through pointing at a range of different theory types and levelling the playing field within the MOS community.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by providing a more detailed review of how ‘theory’ is commonly defined within MOS. We thereafter outline a general definition of theory – that is, a proposal for what elements, as a minimum, are reasonable to consider for any scientific knowledge to qualify as theory. Using the general definition as a basis, we propose a typology that acknowledges multiple kinds of knowledge as ‘theory’. Finally, we discuss how the typology of different theory types may enable researchers to develop and assess knowledge of organizational phenomena in considerably more varied ways than are typically recognized.

HOW THE THEORY LITERATURE DEFINES ‘THEORY’

Several attempts have been made to define the meaning of ‘theory’ (e.g. *AMR*, 1989, 1999, 2011; *ASQ*, 1995; Dubin, 1976; Freese, 1980; Jacoby and Jaccard, 2010; *JMS*, 2013, 2017; *JOB*, 2016; Kaplan, 1964; Merton, 1967; *OPR*, 2012; Shapira, 2011; Wacker, 1998; Whetten, Felin and King, 2009). A commonly cited definition across different intellectual schools, paradigms and scientific

disciplines, is Bacharach's (1989, p. 496), which stipulates that 'theory' is 'a statement of relations among concepts within a boundary set of assumptions and constraints'.

While many provide more detailed descriptions of what kinds of scientific knowledge qualify as 'theory', they typically converge in their emphasis on *explanation* as the most critical element (e.g. Kaplan, 1964; Merton, 1967; Shepherd and Suddaby 2017; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Van de Ven, 1989). A typical example is Whetten (1989), who argues that although a complete theory comprises several critical elements, such as specific constructs or variables, and how and why they are related to each other, he emphasizes 'why' as the most critical element because it postulates 'why we should expect certain relationships in our data' (p. 491). In a similar vein, Pentland (1999, p. 711) puts forward a case of narrative theorizing in which he defines theory by referring to DiMaggio's (1995) 'theory as narrative view: an explanation is a story that describes the process, or sequence of events, that connects cause and effect'. Even the paradigm and multi-paradigm literature, which perhaps most clearly demonstrates the existence of multiple forms of knowledge within MOS (e.g. Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Hassard, 1991; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and Kelemen, 2002), also commonly defines 'theory' in the singular. The prevalent meaning of theory as explanatory knowledge is also evident more broadly within the philosophy of science (e.g. Keat and Urry, 2011; Reed, 2011; Suppe, 1979; Swedberg, 2014). As Metcalfe (2004, p. 16) notes in his extensive review of definitions of theory: 'the cornerstone appears to be "explanation"', and Schatzki (2009, p. 36) in his review of social theory: '"theory" in many social disciplines [has] meant explanatory theory'. It could be claimed that 'explanation' is (close to) an academic field assumption about what defines theory, as it appears to span several different intellectual schools, paradigms and scientific disciplines.

Only a few critical voices have been raised against the near-hegemonic meaning of theory as conceptual explanatory knowledge in MOS and social science more generally. DiMaggio (1995) points briefly to two additional views: theory for providing 'sudden enlightenments' about phenomena, and theory for providing 'a narrative account' of phenomena. A small number of scholars outside MOS, such as in information systems (Gregor, 2006), sociology (Abend, 2008) and education (Thomas, 1997), have also argued for other possible meanings of theory than the dominant explanatory view. As outlined earlier, this dominant and singular meaning of theory gives rise to significant epistemological and political-practical problems within the MOS community and beyond.

TOWARDS A BROADER AND MORE PRECISE DEFINITION OF THEORY

In this section, we address the shortcomings of current articulation of theory by suggesting both a broader and more precise set of differentiated definitions of ‘theory’. Broadness provides a view beyond a strong emphasis on explanations, whereas precision introduces additional distinguishing elements. An important qualifier in our pursuit is that we do not regard ‘theory’ as a ‘thing out there for the word “theory” to really correspond to’ (Abend, 2008, p. 182), but as a construct, created by humans with a specific purpose in mind. Theory, at its most generic level, can therefore be seen as a social construction, an artefact created by humans ‘to achieve some purpose’ (Weber, 2012, p. 4). In other words, meanings of theory are ultimately determined by social conventions and not by something inherent in nature.

A general definition of theory

A good question to ask is what it is reasonable to expect from a knowledge claim for it to qualify generally as ‘theory’. Based on a broad reading and interpretation of relevant social and organizational research outlined below, we propose that the following structural elements need to be present for knowledge to be called ‘theory’ in a scientific context. First, it needs to have a *purpose*, indicating what it is for (e.g. explaining, understanding or rethinking a phenomenon) (Jacoby and Jaccard, 2010; Weber, 2012). Second, it should be directed to a *phenomenon*, such as organizational structure, learning, power or motivation. Third, it must offer some form of *conceptual order* that makes productive distinctions and discriminations concerning this phenomenon, illuminating central features, such as its specific composition, structure, key characteristics and sequence or flow. Fourth, it must provide some *intellectual insights* about the phenomenon: that is, it must move beyond common sense and offer something that also resignifies (Reed, 2011) or breaks with (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991) established truth and/or expectations (Suppe, 1979). A qualified reader should experience the theory as making her or him able to think ‘better’ or ‘differently’ about something, such as seeing how things hang together or highlighting previously hidden aspects (cf. Corley and Gioia, 2011). Fifth, a theory needs to include *relevance criteria* that can be used to evaluate how effectively it performs its overall purpose, including its scientific or practical usefulness (see Corley and Gioia, 2011; Jacoby and Jaccard, 2010, pp. 31–2). What is the distinct value of a theory? Sixth, it typically needs to have some form of *empirical support*. Finally, a theory is always constrained by

boundary conditions, such as what aspects of a phenomenon it includes and excludes and its range of application across specific situations and populations.

Although these structural elements of our general definition of theory underlie the specific theory types we outline below, they vary in significance within each specific theory type and, thus, give rise to substantially different meanings of theory. For example, the significance of empirical support may vary among the theory types, such as regarding whether it is generalizable or inspirational in nature. Our view is that the seven elements in most cases need to be addressed before one can meaningfully talk about a specific theory type. But the theory types are different – and this is our key point – which means that each of the elements may be more or less salient in each specific theory type.

A typology of five major theory types

Using the general definition of theory as a basis, in this section we propose and elaborate a typology consisting of five main theory types: explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting and provoking theories. In elaborating the typology, we first describe what criteria we use for distinguishing the different theory types and their specific meanings. Then we discuss the main bodies of literature we draw upon for elaborating and formulating the typology. Finally, we elaborate each theory type in detail and what kind of scientific knowledge it acknowledges as ‘theory’.

Criteria used

Many possible criteria could be used for distinguishing and formulating different theory types within the literature, such as their ontology, semantic usage or purpose (Abend, 2008; Gregor, 2006; Liedman, 2013; Thomas, 1997). We utilized the seven structural elements of the general definition of theory as a basis for distinguishing and formulating the different theory types proposed. Specifically, we used ‘purpose’ as the primary criterion and ‘phenomenon’ as the secondary criterion. We thereafter used the remaining structural elements (conceptual order, intellectual insights, etc.) as additional criteria to distinguish and formulate further the main features and distinct meaning of each theory type.

Purpose highlights what the particular theory is *for*, such as explaining, understanding or reconstructing. Importantly, using purpose as the main criterion for distinguishing different theory types means we pay less attention to ontological questions, such as what constitutes theory as an ‘entity’; epistemological questions, such as how scientific knowledge can be acquired; semantic

questions, such as what the word ‘theory’ means in different contexts and situations, as well as socio-political questions, such as the context in which research is carried out, and who in that context ‘decides’ what the meaning of theory should be (Abend, 2008; Gregor, 2006). Instead, by using purpose as the main criterion we are asking a more practical question to differentiate meanings of theory – namely, what is the function or objective of the specific theory in question. Put simply, we ask: what is it for?

Using purpose as the main criterion for distinguishing and developing different theory types aligns broadly with Habermas’s (1972) argument that knowledge development is strongly driven by human interest. He distinguished between a technical, hermeneutical and emancipatory knowledge interest. Habermas saw the technical interest as characterizing STEM, the hermeneutical the humanities, and emancipation as the knowledge goal of the social sciences. In comparison to Habermas’s anthropological ambition to illuminate how knowledge development is connected to human interest, our approach is more modest and precise, but similar to Habermas’s in emphasizing human interest and purpose as key drivers for knowledge development over ontological considerations.

Using purpose as the main criterion also has the potential to overcome (or at least reduce) the many controversies about theory that follow from using different onto-epistemological standpoints for distinguishing different theory types. As Abend (2008) notes, given that proponents of different paradigms make different onto-epistemological assumptions about what constitutes the entity ‘theory’, they are constantly relating to theory in different ways and therefore ending up in endless controversies about its meaning.

We are in no way denying the importance of paradigms, and see contributions like Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) sociological paradigms as ground breaking and highly relevant in many ways. However, paradigm maps like theirs and others (e.g. Astley and Van de Ven, 1983; Hassard and Cox, 2013) may liberate but also after some time constrain our thinking. Things have also changed over 40 years. Well-read scholars without too strict attachments to a specific mode of thinking may even to a degree play with different paradigm positions (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Hassard, 1991; Wray-Bliss, 2003). We should therefore be open to other ways of understanding theory than just locating them in a structured paradigm-model or even in more general paradigm thinking.

Moreover, using purpose as the primary criterion for distinguishing and formulating different theory types is likely to provide a more versatile typology and allow openness to novel

thinking, as the proposed theory types are not in themselves tied to a particular paradigm or meta-theoretical school. While proponents of different paradigms may have a preference for one theory type over another, this does not mean that paradigms define the theory types as such (Gregor, 2006). Instead, the theory types first become tied to a specific paradigm (e.g. related to worldview, exemplar, social tribe – to use Kuhn's 1970 paradigm elements) when a researcher starts developing a particular theory of some organizational phenomenon. As such, the proposed typology of theory types can in principle be used across and within different paradigms and theoretical traditions, although there are of course various connections in practice.

We used the *phenomenon* to which the theory relates as a secondary criterion for distinguishing different theory types within the literature. Theories typically differ in how they regard the phenomena to which they refer: for example, as something given ‘out there’, or as more or less humanly constructed. It is important to note that phenomena like ‘corporate culture’ or ‘authentic leadership’, even in cases when they are approached for measurement and explanation in an objectivistic way, have largely been constructed by researchers (Bourdieu et al., 1991). The phenomenon of ‘authentic leadership’, for example, is not only, or mainly, a direct mirroring of reality, but has in significant ways also been determined through researchers’ choice and specification of constructs, such as self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing and internalized moral perspective (Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Nyberg and Sveningsson, 2014). Our point is that the phenomena to which theories refer are always, irrespective of theory type, defined by a combination of something happening ‘out there’ and some research-driven construction of a phenomenon being available for study.

Judging from the literature reviewed, the way theories commonly relate to phenomena indicate a continuum: from regarding phenomena as more or less given to regarding them as largely humanly constructed. In this regard, Weick’s (1989) description of theorizing as disciplined imagination is of relevance. Theories that refer to phenomena as more or less given emphasize discipline, while theories that refer to them as more or less humanly constructed – and directly work with reconstructions – stress imagination. Theories of the latter kind try to question ‘conservative’ understandings of ‘given’ phenomena and to open up alternative ways of thinking about them. Such theories therefore call for a stronger element of reflexivity in which we self-critically ask ourselves how we construct and frame the social world we claim to say something about (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018).

Main literature sources

Given the large and varied literature on ‘theory’, it is unproductive if not virtually impossible to try to find a specific route or technique for moving from wide-ranging scholarship to a specific set of theory ideas. Nevertheless, using purpose and phenomenon as the main criteria for elaborating the theory types and their specific meanings, we carried out a broad and iterative-abductive reading and interpretation of relevant social and organizational research. We reviewed the theory literature, the philosophy of science, the social sciences literature (e.g. Jarvie and Zamora-Bonilla, 2011; Mir, Willmott and Greenwood, 2016; Suppe, 1979; Tsoukas and Chia, 2011; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2004), and the paradigm and multi-paradigm literature (e.g. Gioia and Pitre, 1990; Hassard and Cox, 2013; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and Kelemen, 2002). Here, we were to some extent inspired by efforts to find general descriptions and frameworks for capturing variation in paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 1996), meta-theoretical orientations (Corman and Poole, 2000; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2004), metaphors (Morgan, 1997) and knowledge interests (Habermas, 1972). These point to variations within limits, but do not focus on theory per se. We also examined more focused studies on different aspects of theory, including degree of abstraction (e.g. Scherer, 2003), scope (e.g. Bourgeois, 1979), style (e.g. Czarniawska, 2004; Van Maanen, 1995) and use (Gregor, 2006).

Besides the more specific theory literature, we engaged with a range of other related literature sources, such as qualitative research, which often zooms in on interpretations to emphasize a more actor-sensitive understanding (e.g. Holt and Sandberg, 2011; Putnam and Banghart, 2017). Yet some qualitative approaches find the focus on actors’ interpretations limiting and suggest a focus on social interaction, such as ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010) and the associated conversational analysis approach (e.g. Atkinson, 1988; Silverman, 2011). Other researchers try to go beyond the views of the actors who are ‘inhabiting’ the phenomenon or the detailed analysis of conversations and engage in clearer theoretical reasoning about organizational phenomena (Geertz, 1973; Reed, 2011). There are also researchers who point at classifications or offer typologies (e.g. Layder, 1998; Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Weber, 1978) that un- or re-settle frameworks for how to structure phenomena. Still others emphasize the importance of studying how phenomena are enacted or performed (Buch and Schatzki, 2019; Gond et al., 2016; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Thrift, 2008). Other bodies of literature, such as critical theory (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006; Calhoun, 1995) and feminist and postcolonial theories (Allen, 2018; Williams and Chrisman, 2015), stress theory’s role in

liberating humans from naturalized and taken-for-granted oppressive forces, such as power structures and ideologies. In addition to, but also overlapping all this there is a clear set of dialectical or opposition-oriented work, where the key point is to offer a radically different and challenging viewpoint – not mirroring reality as much as stretching the ways we think about reality (Gergen, 1982), such as Morgan's (1997) metaphor ideas, Foucauldian ideas (Knights and Morgan, 1991), poststructuralism (Linstead, 2016) or specific theories like the garbage can (March and Olsen, 1976) and the stupidity-based theory of organizations (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012). Here efforts to mirror phenomena 'out there' take a modest role as theory aims to engage in a provocative dialogue with established thinking. This sometimes resembles a critical theory type of thinking, but is not limited to it. Further, a large portion of critical theory is more interested in illuminating more or less well-established social problems – targeting the usual suspects of capitalism, managerialism, patriarchy, racism and resistance – than offering something novel with a provocative intent and possible effect.

Some additional qualifications

Given the messy, ambiguous and often implicit meanings of theory expressed in myriads of academic texts, we do not claim that the proposed typology covers all possibilities or is the only way of conceptualizing theory. As Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) emphasized, dividing up the world – including research texts – is always a construction and thus to some extent arbitrary. Nevertheless, we have tried to be deliberately constructive, in both senses of the word: (a) constructing something out of a highly diverse, ambiguous and inspirational terrain, and (b) suggesting fruitful ways of working with typologies. Being respectful to established work and lines of thinking is then balanced against our wish to add and inspire, rather than primarily to order 'conservatively' and bring out what may already exist. We recognize that such ambitions are always to some extent idiosyncratic, reflecting authors' interests and commitments.

We, the authors, have somewhat different backgrounds and orientations, such as leanings towards qualitative and interpretive-performance oriented work, as well as critical or challenging types of study. However, we find it less productive to push consistently for a specific approach than to try be reflexive and self-critical about our own inclinations and ideologies when seeing and doing research, and through this, to open up ways for more pluralistic thinking. Rorty's (1989) advice is that one should always think and write with the awareness that there may be another and better way of addressing the subject matter at hand (or even imagine another way of constructing

the phenomenon) than the one currently being pursued. The typology should therefore not be seen as an attempt to ‘objectively’ represent some facts about theories ‘out there’. Rather, it should be seen as a framework and intellectual inspiration that may encourage researchers to think in more varied and reflective ways about theory. The value of the typology lies in its intellectual utility (i.e. its usefulness for other researchers in their knowledge pursuits) rather than in its descriptive accuracy, even though the latter cannot be neglected.

The typology of theory types

The typology consists of five major theory types: explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting and provoking theory. These are summarized in Table I, and further elaborated below. Importantly, although purpose defines their distinctiveness, the theory types are not entirely discrete, as each type in various ways contains aspects of the purpose defining other theory types. For example, while the overall and defining purpose of explaining theory is to explain phenomena, it often contains aspects of the overall purposes of comprehending and ordering theory types, and occasionally provocation. Similarly, while the overall purpose of the comprehending theory type is to comprehend the meaning of phenomena, it often to a lesser degree also explains and orders phenomena. However, it is the *dominance* of one of these purposes – that is, the overall and defining purpose of each type – that constitutes each type’s distinctiveness. Specifically, as we further elaborate below, the overall purpose takes the lead role in defining each type, as it influences the meanings of the other structural elements (e.g. intellectual insights, relevance criteria) in distinct ways, and through that, generates the distinct meaning and uniqueness of each theory type.

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Explaining theory

Explaining theory is by far the most developed and common theory type within MOS and social science more broadly. It is used mainly in positivistic approaches to the social sciences (Lakomski and Evers, 2011; Roth, 2011), but also frequently within various social-constructionist paradigms (Herrnstein-Smith, 2005; Reed, 2011). The overall *purpose* of explaining theory is to generate knowledge about the inner workings of organizational phenomena – that is, their causal relations –

albeit in different ways depending on which paradigms or theoretical traditions it is used and developed within.

The dominant (positivist) explaining theory typically regards organizational *phenomena* (e.g. entrepreneurship, diversity, decision making) as something more or less determined and given, which can be *conceptually represented* by a set of variables causally related to each other. According to Whetten (1989), a complete explaining theory includes four basic components (importantly, Whetten assumes he is defining *theory* rather than a specific theory *type*). First, it should postulate *what* variables are ‘part of the explanation of the social or individual phenomena of interest’ (Whetten, 1989, p. 490). Second, it needs to show *how* these variables are causally related to each other, making up the organizational phenomenon in question. Third, and most critical, the theory should explain *why* the relationships exist among the variables: that is, it should state the rationale for the causal relationships among the variables making up the phenomenon. Finally, the theory should express its *boundary conditions* in the sense of *whom* the theory applies to, *when* it applies, and *where* it applies (Busse, Kach and Wagner, 2017; Weber, 2012). Issues around domain and generalizability are typically also important.

There are fairly clear *relevance criteria* for explaining theory (e.g. Bacharach, 1989; Whetten, 1989). It needs to demonstrate what variables make up the phenomenon, and how and why they are related. Most critically, explaining theory should, as far as possible, reflect and explain reality, preferably with causal relations clearly stated. Lastly, it needs to be empirically testable, typically in the form of rigorously developed and verifiable hypotheses. In terms of *empirics* this theory calls for a strong fit with data. In order to offer an *intellectual insight* within the realms of explaining theory, it is typically not enough to add or subtract variables from an existing theory; the underlying logic of the theory must be altered, and, thus, the explanation of the phenomenon (Whetten, 1989). In other words, to count as an intellectual insight, a theory needs to demonstrate how the altered set of variables change the causal relations among the variables making up the phenomenon in question, and thus modify the core logic of the existing theory. For example, what was assumed to be an independent variable in a causal relation may be shown to be in reality a dependent variable (cf. Davis, 1971).

The popular leader–member exchange (LMX) theory of leadership is a typical example of an explaining theory. Following the extensive review by Dulebohn et al. (2016), the *phenomenon* of the LMX theory is the (dyadic) working relationships between leaders and followers and the outcomes of those relationships (e.g. increased or decreased job satisfaction). The LMX

phenomenon is *conceptualized* as being made up by a set of (a) independent variables such as leaders' characteristics (e.g. supervisors' expectations of followers, agreeableness) and followers' characteristics (e.g. competence, openness); (b) moderators such as contextual factors shaping the nature of the leader–follower relationship (e.g. work setting, culture); and (c) dependent variables such as specific outcomes of the leader–follower relationship (e.g. increased or decreased job performance, organizational commitment and empowerment). The *purpose* of the theory is to explain: *how* the independent, dependent and moderator variables are causally related to each other, and *why* particular causal relationships exist. The phenomenon is taken for granted as more or less ‘out there’: there are leaders and members and they have an exchange relation, which the LMX theory tries to mirror.

Although explaining theory dominates the deductive-nomothetic research orientations, it is also frequently used in more inductive-ideographic research orientations (Locke, 2007). For example, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, p. 25) state that the goal of inductive theorizing is to produce explaining theories: ‘The central notion is to use cases as the basis from which to develop theory inductively. The theory is emergent in the sense that it is situated in and developed by recognizing patterns of relationships among constructs within and across cases and their underlying logical arguments.’ A concrete example is Pratt’s (2000) ethnographic study of managing identification among Amway distributors, in which he develops an explaining theory of organizational identification consisting of boxes and arrows showing causal relations among constructs. Similarly, in their review of the sociological literature, Abend, Petre and Sauder (2013, p.610) show that explaining theory is frequently used in ethnographic studies of social phenomena. This is particularly apparent in the case of the ethnographies published in U.S contemporary generalist journals, which ‘are most likely to advance strong and central causal claims and to use logical and rhetorical devices comparable to those used in quantitative articles.’

Comprehending theory

Comprehending theories are typically, but not necessarily, interpretative (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Holt and Sandberg, 2011; Putnam and Banghart, 2017) and qualitative in character (Johnson et al. 2006), as they are commonly used by hermeneutical and phenomenological researchers (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979; Shapiro and Sica, 1988). However, as Johnson et al. (2006, p. 133) show, although many qualitative approaches have a commitment to *verstehen* (understanding) they often articulate competing philosophical commitments. Nevertheless, instead, of regarding causal

regularities among variables, comprehending theory commonly regards *meaning* as constitutive of organizational phenomena. This is because humans cannot act without understanding the meaning of phenomena. For example, without understanding the meaning of trust, we cannot act trustworthy nor can we recognize trustful behaviour. Similarly, without understanding the meaning of leadership we would be unable to lead or to follow (or to avoid and find alternatives to leader–follower relations). More common, though, is that we struggle to act and respond adequately because the meanings of organizational phenomena are ambiguous, situation specific, multi-layered and constantly evolving.

The main *purpose* of comprehending theory, then, is to offer a qualified understanding of organizational phenomena by determining their meaning: that is, what phenomena such as ‘decision’, ‘diversity’ and ‘identity’ are about. As Blumer (1954, p. 3) puts it, the purpose of comprehending theory is: ‘to develop a meaningful interpretation of the social world, or some significant part of it ... so that people may have a clearer understanding of their world, its possibilities of development, and the directions along which it may move’. Many researchers locate themselves very close to the subjects being studied to produce descriptive accounts of subjects’ direct experiences of their world. However, developing comprehending theories typically involves identifying and articulating a ‘hidden’ meaning, or a deeper meaning than is directly experienced. It can, for example, involve exploring underlying forces behind people’s actions, or how various meanings interact and lead to unanticipated consequences in terms of organizational actions or non-actions (Reed, 2011). What we refer to as ‘comprehending theory’ is therefore somewhat different from what many interpretive approaches are aiming for: namely, to be faithful to organizational *phenomena* as defined by people’s understanding of them – that is, what they mean to people in organizations. Still, comprehending theory commonly regards organizational phenomena as more or less given (albeit socially defined), being there before the researcher’s effort to theorize them.

However, simply trying to understand meanings from the ‘natives’ point of view’ rarely leads to comprehending theory, as defined in this paper (although other qualities, such as in-depth understanding and rich descriptions may be accomplished). Instead, as we see it, an *intellectual insight* of a comprehending theory should move behind and beyond the meanings of subjects in a way that ‘breaks’ with or extends the ‘local’ meanings and action-logics of those studied, such as Geertz’s (1973) comprehending theory of the Balinese cockfight (Reed, 2011). Specifically, comprehending theory commonly involves two types of intellectual insight. First, it can offer a

more comprehensive and coherent articulation of the meaning of a phenomenon already articulated by an existing comprehending theory. Second, it can articulate a new meaning that changes the ‘nature’ or ‘character’ of the specific organizational phenomenon in question and, thus, challenge existing comprehending theories. A significant reconceptualization could then mean that a new phenomenon is being created.

Comprehending theories *conceptually order* the proposed theoretical meaning of organizational phenomena through thick descriptions, such as narratives, discourses, metaphors or other powerful rhetorical devices that explicate the meaning of the phenomena as comprehensively and clearly as possible (Geertz, 1973; Putnam and Banghart, 2017). The overall *relevance criterion* for comprehending theories is that they should provide an informed and original comprehension of the meanings (in the sense of character, nature or key aspects) of organizational phenomena. Another important relevance criterion is that comprehending theories should articulate a depth of meaning, in the sense of illuminating several layers of meaning of the phenomenon. This typically incorporates both the specific meanings of people involved and a line of reasoning that goes beyond these, such as structures, practices and taken-for-granted assumptions that are less immediately evident in people’s direct experiences. The overall *boundary condition* for comprehending theory is the group or groups that share an articulated meaning of the phenomenon to which it refers. Although comprehending theory needs *empirical* backup, the key theoretical point is to have sufficient support to make the articulated ‘meaning’ character of the phenomenon credible.

Feldman and March’s (1981) account of information use in decision making can be seen as a common example of a comprehending theory. In conventional decision-making literature, information use is seen as purely or mainly instrumental. Managers collect necessary information and, based on that information, make rational decisions. Other research, however, suggests that managers usually collect more information than they need and, at the same time, ask for even more information. Does this mean, as Feldman and March (1981, p. 178) rhetorically ask, ‘organizations are systematically stupid?’ They placed the phenomenon of information use in decision making in the broader context of modern western civilization and its ideal that intelligent human behaviour is rational. It then becomes apparent that managers see information use not only as an instrumental resource, but also as a *symbol* for intelligent and competent behaviour. Collecting an abundance of information therefore provides ‘a ritualistic assurance that appropriate attitudes about decision making exist’ (p. 178) and, thus, legitimizes the decision makers as

seemingly trustworthy and competent people making intelligent decisions that are good for the organization and society.

Feldman and March's comprehending theory provides a more multi-layered and complex meaning of information use in decision making than existing comprehending theories. First, their theory clearly transcends 'local meaning' approaches that are predominantly focused on people's more or less conscious meanings of information use in decision making. Second, it reconceptualizes the meaning of information use in decision making from 'structured sets of more or less action-relevant data' to a symbolic device for signalling rationality, intelligence and knowledge. The exploration of the meaning (nature or character) of information use in decision making thus involves the construction of a (partly) new phenomenon.

Other examples of the comprehending theory are Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) theoretical account of identity construction; Barker's (1993) notion of concertive control; Morgan and Smircich's (1982) portrayal of leadership as the management of meaning; Meindl's (1995) attribution theory of leadership; Fleming and Spicer's (2003) idea of cynical consciousness at work; and Courpasson, Dany and Clegg's (2012) concept of productive resistance.

Ordering theory

According to Suddaby (2014, p. 407), 'theory is simply a way of imposing conceptual order on the empirical complexity of the phenomenal world'. Suddaby seems to have theory *in general* in mind, but we see ordering theory as a specific theory *type*. The 'conceptual ordering mechanism' of phenomena is certainly present in all five theory types. However, in contrast to the other theory types, the ordering and differentiation element forms the overall purpose of ordering theory, thereby defining its unique meaning and distinctiveness.

Ordering theory can be both positivistic (Doty and Glick, 1994) and interpretive (Weber, 1978), and therefore linked to different social science traditions. Albeit considerably less common than explaining and comprehending theory, ordering theories such as 'typologies are a very popular, but often misunderstood form of theory' (Doty and Glick, 1994, p. 230). Delbridge and Fiss (2013, p. 329) note there has been a 'marked decline of typological theories in AMR', which they attribute to the increased dominance of explaining theories within management research, something also supported by Snow and Ketchen (2014) in their response to Delbridge and Fiss's article.

The main *purpose* of ordering theory is not to represent and explain the inner workings of phenomena (as in explaining theory), or to articulate the meaning of them (as in comprehending theory), but to categorize phenomena in theoretically useful ways. Organizational phenomena are often complex and messy, and therefore hard to get a grip on. Ordering theory addresses this problem by sorting the phenomena into well-distinguished and manageable types or categories (Biggart and Delbridge, 2004). However, in order to qualify as an ordering theory, typologies need to do more than just mapping or mirroring phenomena. An ordering theory identifies, explores and sorts out distinctions that allow us to reason in more differentiated and nuanced ways about the nature of phenomena. In particular, an ordering theory, such as a particular typology (e.g. Porter's (1980) strategy typology) 'can clarify thinking, suggest lines of explanation and give direction to the theoretical imagination' (Layder, 1998, p. 74).

Ordering theory therefore regards organizational *phenomena* not as fully determinate and given, but as ambiguous and needing to be actively classified and meaningfully structured. Hence, in contrast to explaining and comprehending theory, which try to stay faithful to phenomena, ordering theory is more normative in that it deliberately tries to organize phenomena in a theoretically fruitful way. There is an element of opening up new avenues for thinking rather than 'conservatively' being constrained by existing definitions of phenomena. Specifically, this type of theory *conceptually* orders and structures phenomena by categorizing, grouping, sorting and shaping them into specific classificatory systems, such as typologies and taxonomies that can be used productively for intellectual purposes, including pattern seeking and comparative analyses.

The *boundary conditions* for ordering theory are the specific classificatory dimensions used for categorizing a phenomenon. Mintzberg's (1979) ordering theory of organizational structure is, for example, based on three classificatory dimensions: namely, degree of formalization, specialization and centralization, which subsequently form the boundary conditions for his typology. (Other themes – politics, decision making, cultures, etc. – are 'outside' the theory.) The overall *relevance criterion* for ordering theory is to provide a theoretically helpful categorization of complex organizational phenomena. Rather than precisely mirroring the workings of given phenomena, it should offer a clear and concise description of the phenomenon in the sense of a specific set of types and dimensions 'on which the types are based' (Bailey, 1994, p. 12); reduce the ambiguity and complexity of the phenomenon without losing its core features; and make possible novel forms of comparative analysis such as comparing similarities and differences between its types. Primarily, other researchers should be able to use it productively for

designing their research, as well as for theorizing about the phenomenon in question (for further relevance criteria, see Bailey, 1994). In terms of *empirics*, ordering theory commonly needs some empirical substantiation, but also some distance from the messiness and variation of the empirical world (Weber, 1978).

An *intellectual insight* of an ordering theory consists of some useful (re)categorizations of organizational phenomena, such as through a specific typology, taxonomy or classification schema. As Davis (1971) writes, sometimes a theoretical contribution is made through finding out that seemingly diverse phenomena are actually more or less the same, or what appears to be one and the same phenomenon is in fact separate phenomena. This is crucial for understanding how things may hang together: tightly, loosely or not at all. Hence, for an ordering theory to function as a complete theory, and not only as an input to, or rudiments of theory, it needs to show how its way of structuring a phenomenon leads to productive distinctions and sensitivity to similarities and nuances of the phenomenon in question. It calls for reflection and reasoning about the nature of the phenomenon to understand how, when and why the clues of certain categories appear, as well as to see in a productive and imaginative way the configurations of the phenomenon (Layder, 1998, p. 77).

There are several examples of ordering theories that have had a significant impact on MOS studies, such as Ouchi's (1980) typology of economic organization (markets, bureaucracies and clans), and Adler and Borys's (1996) distinction between coercive and enabling bureaucracies. Other examples are Spender's (1996) typology of organizational knowledge (conscious, automatic, objectified and collective) and Porter's (1980) generic strategy typology (cost leadership, differentiation, cost focus and differentiation focus). Much of Mintzberg's research also exemplifies influential ordering theories, such as his typologies of managerial roles (1973) and strategies (e.g. Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Similarly, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identify different types of institutional work and link them to the construction, reproduction and change of institutions.

Enacting theory

The theory types discussed so far predominantly aim to articulate the specific content characteristics and composition of organizational phenomena, such as a set of variables (explaining theory), particular meaning (comprehending theory) or structural dimensions (ordering theory). In contrast, the overall *purpose* of enacting theory is to articulate how phenomena are

continuously produced and reproduced: that is, the processes through which they emerge, evolve, reoccur, change and decline over time. In other words, it is concerned with how organizational phenomena, such as ‘leadership’, ‘strategy’, ‘innovation’, ‘equality’ and ‘power’, come into being, their ongoing-ness and transformations. Similar to the other types, enacting theory is linked not to one, but to several different philosophical traditions within social science (Emirbayer, 1997; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017; Schatzki, 2019).

Given its overall purpose of articulating how phenomena are (re)produced, enacting theory does not typically refer to *phenomena* as mostly given, but rather as processually constructed: that is, as something more or less constantly in the making and in progress, largely open-ended, and unfolding over time. Latour (1986, p. 273) aptly remarks regarding his enacting theory of society that “‘society’ is not a thing discovered and defined by social scientists, despite the ignorance of their informants. Rather it is performed through everyone’s efforts to define it.’ Similarly, in his dialectical enacting theory of organizations, Benson (1977, p. 3) notes that ‘the social world is in a continuous state of becoming – social arrangements which seem fixed and permanent are temporary, arbitrary patterns and any observed social pattern are regarded as one among many possibilities. Theoretical attention is focused upon the transformation through which one set of arrangements gives way to another.’

Enacting theory *conceptually orders* the (re)productive processes of phenomena in many varied ways, such as dialectically (Smith, 1993), dialogically (Tsoukas, 2009), narratively (Boje, 1991), interactively (Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010), transactionally (Emirbayer, 1997), or in terms of dynamic ‘assemblages’, such as actor-networks (Latour, 2005) and action-nets (Czarniawska, 2004). Although the *empirics* vary greatly depending on the nature of the phenomenon being theorized, enacting theory commonly emphasizes the dynamics of the empirics, particularly how they illuminate the (re)productive processes of organizational phenomena. The main *relevance criterion* for enacting theory is the extent to which the theory is able to illuminate clearly the key processes through which phenomena are (re)produced, such as how they emerge, evolve, reoccur, change and decline over time. However, it is typically not enough merely to describe those key (re)productive processes of phenomena. In order to be a fully fledged enacting theory, it also needs to illuminate the logic underlying the way these processes are configured and interact with each other in continually (re)producing the phenomenon in question (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011).

The *intellectual insight* from enacting theory falls into two main sorts. It can consist in articulating some new processes involved in (re)producing a phenomenon. More radically, it can consist in highlighting a different processual logic of the (re)production of a phenomenon by showing that the (re)productive processes are configured and interacting differently than previously thought. For example, an intellectual insight could be that the processual logic underlying a phenomenon is not cyclical, as has been assumed, but dialectical. The *boundary conditions* of enacting theory are largely open-ended, as the phenomena to which it refers are not fixed but evolve and change over time. The boundary conditions also vary depending on the conceptual ordering mechanism (e.g. evolutionary, dialectic, cyclical), as well as on the directionality and irreversibility of the processes through which phenomena are (re)produced (Lorino, 2018, p. 259; Schatzki, 2019).

Perhaps the best-known example of an enacting theory within MOS is Weick's theory of organizing. First expressed in his magnum opus *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (Weick, 1979), his enacting theory draws attention to 'organizing', showing how 'organizations' are continuously produced and reproduced. He defines organizing as 'a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviours. To organize is to assemble ongoing inter-dependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes' (1979, p. 3).

Another classic example is West and Zimmerman's (1987) enacting theory, 'doing gender'. The dominant gender theories at the time largely tried to explain or determine gender in terms of its 'content', such as a set of traits or a role. In contrast, West and Zimmerman's enacting theory illuminates how gender is continually accomplished through ongoing social interactions, as 'a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment' (1987, p. 126). Similarly, Feldman (2000) offers an enacting theory of organizational routines, which, instead of describing what elements make up routines, illuminates how these elements are accomplished and thereby also how the routine occurs.

Other examples of enacting theory are Samra-Fredericks' (2003) interactionist theory of strategizing, which illuminates how strategizing unfolds through strategists' deployment of specific linguistic methods, which gradually generate an agreed 'sense of the future', and Boje's storytelling organization theory, 'in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense-making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory' (Boje, 1991, p. 10). Enacting theory is also exemplified by Hindmarsh and Pilnick's

(2007) theory of skilled anaesthetic work, Cabantous and Gond's (2011) theory of rational decision making as a performative praxis, Gehman, Trevino and Garud's (2013) theory of values work in organizations, and Orlikowski's (2007) theory of technology at work.

Provoking theory

Provoking theory does not aim primarily to provide explanation, comprehend meaning, order or articulate the dynamics of phenomena. Instead, its main *purpose* is to show alternative, often eye-opening and disruptive ways of seeing phenomena. Its focal concern is to challenge established mind-sets and open up other modes of thinking through dialectics between existing theory and a counterpoint. Provoking theory thereby suggests not only 'that things [phenomena] could be otherwise than they are, but that things are already otherwise than the ways in which they are represented' (Linstead, 2016, p. 171). This means that what appears to be a 'given' phenomenon is challenged by reconstructing it through theorizing.

Although there is a critical element involved in developing provoking theory, many critical theories within Critical Management Studies take the phenomenon targeted (e.g. racism, gender inequality, managerialism) as something more or less given, and add to critique less through provoking than through adding to explanations or through comprehending theory (Alvesson, Willmott and Bridgman, 2009). Only some critical theory thus works as provoking theory, and there is also 'non-critical' provoking theory, although the idea of provoking always involves some critique and deviation from normal(ized) understandings.

Nevertheless, the fact that provoking theory aims to (re)construct phenomena does, of course, not mean that anything goes. All theory needs to have some empirical backup and be seen as credible and valuable for illuminating empirical phenomena. But in terms of disciplinary imagination (Weick, 1989), there is more emphasis on imagination than discipline, more interest in saying something novel than in precisely explaining or comprehending phenomena. Provoking theory does not, therefore, regard *phenomena* as known or as merely indeterminate. Instead, it refers to phenomena as constructed and reconstructed through perspectives and vocabularies, particularly through the creative work of the researcher. In one sense, provoking theory largely creates the phenomenon being studied more than it passively responds to it. It is not necessarily the case that reality is made up of 'managers', 'subordinates', 'strategies', 'decisions', 'corporate culture', 'brands' and 'quality control', as these pre-established phenomena may be challenged. Instead of studying 'managers', we can reframe them as 'meeting workers' or 'gold-plated

administrators': that is, well-paid people who spend much of their working day in meetings and doing administration. Of course, gold-plated administrators are (partly) a different phenomenon from managers, so it is not just a matter of labelling; the entire theorizing process turns out differently because different aspects are highlighted. Similarly, the *conceptual ordering* mechanism of provoking theory is not primarily about refining our understanding of some given (and taken-for-granted) phenomenon, but challenging existing knowledge with a clearly different and mind-stretching way of conceptually ordering a phenomenon.

A central *relevance criterion* for provoking theory is its capacity to unsettle and disrupt existing knowledge about an organizational phenomenon by reframing the phenomenon in question in a novel, unexpected and often counterintuitive way (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b; Cornelissen and Durand, 2014; Davis, 1971; Gergen, 1982). The value of simply adding to existing theories – often what is meant by ‘contribution to theory’ as a criterion – is therefore rejected or downplayed. Instead, a preferred intellectual insight for a provoking theory consists in constructing a new phenomenon or suggesting a reconstruction of an existing phenomenon assumed to exist in a particular form. The development of a provoking theory is therefore to a large extent ‘an endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently about a phenomenon, instead of legitimizing what is already known about it’ (Foucault, 1985, p. 9). Another relevance criterion for provoking theory is its capacity to emancipate people from constraints in thinking about and understanding specific phenomena. It sometimes corresponds to Habermas’s (1972) knowledge interest in emancipation, but there is no strong overlap.

Boundary conditions are less significant for provoking theory. The question is not exactly within which specific empirical domain a provoking theory holds water. A provoking theory has some general relevance and validity, but as it emphasizes a specific provocation, rather than offering an explanation or ordering of phenomena, issues around generalizability in an empirical sense become less significant. Boundary issues are instead more a matter of users’ ability to see how a provoking theory that is clearly novel in its current culture and context can be relevant and helpful in their knowledge pursuits. It requires careful consideration of its audience(s), thinking not only in terms of academic knowledge, but also in terms of broader cultural insights and modes of thinking at a particular time. Of course, time is always a boundary condition for research, as reality is constantly on the move, but this calls for some extra consideration in the context of provoking theory.

In terms of *empirics*, provoking theory calls for some backup but also some distancing from the messiness and variation of the empirical world. Rather than ‘being subordinated’ to actuality, provoking theory considers potentiality: how reality can be rethought through new insights and definitions. In provoking theory empirical material is therefore seen more ‘as a source of inspiration and as a partner for critical dialogue, than as a guide and ultimate arbitrator’ (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013a, p. 145). Still, some empirical support and credibility is called for.

Provoking theory should offer an *intellectual insight* which provides a generative capacity that fosters ‘reconsideration of that which is “taken for granted”, and thereby [generates] fresh alternatives for social action’ (Gergen, 1982, p. 109). This can take the form of an identification, articulation and challenge of implicit, dominant assumptions within a field (Davis, 1971), perhaps by using a counter-metaphor which summarizes a different line of theorizing that may lead to a new construction of the phenomenon.

An example of a good provoking theory – or at least some ideas for provoking theory – is Morgan’s (1997, p.4) metaphor idea of organizations, which suggests that theories ‘are based on implicit images or metaphors that lead us to see, understand and manage organizations in distinct, yet partial ways’. For example, the (still) prevalent system theory in organization studies is based on the organism metaphor, which conceptualizes organizations in terms of specific needs and environmental relations. However, this organism conceptualization of organizations can be reframed by applying other metaphors, such as seeing organizations as culture, brain or psychic prison. Another example is Alvesson and Sveningsson’s (2003) theory of ‘leadership’, which claims that leadership is best understood not as a coherent framework that provides direction for managers in interacting with subordinates, but rather as a discourse that offers identity and legitimization support for managers. Other provoking theories are Paulsen’s (2014) theory of empty labour (i.e. that people spend considerable time at work without doing anything work related); Calás and Smircich’s (1991) deconstruction of leadership as seduction; Willmott’s (2005) poststructuralist account of organizational control; Brunsson’s (2003) idea of organized hypocrisy; and March and Olsen’s (1976) idea of ‘garbage can decision making’.

The typology in action

As a way to illuminate the intellectual utility of the typology, here we exemplify its usefulness as a sensitizing framework for theorizing by applying it to Perrow’s (1978) study of ‘the role of objectives in human service organizations’ (hereafter HSOs). Our intention is not to engage in developing new theories of HSOs (or see HSOs as a starting point to develop theories from), but

only to provide some indicators of how our different theory types may work in practice.

According to Perrow (1978), in a brilliant but largely overlooked text, a common characteristic of HSOs in the public sector (e.g. health care, prisons, social work, schools) is the limited significance that objectives have for organizational practice. It is commonly assumed that the official objectives of HSOs are crucial and that most organizational activities are designed to achieve them. Countless attempts (e.g. reforms, new methods of control) have been made to improve organizational performance through objectives. But they have seldom succeeded because, according to Perrow, official objectives have relatively little steering impact. The main reason is that it is hard to define, realize and measure such objectives adequately, and to determine whether or not they have been achieved.

According to Perrow, other factors appear to play a more important role in the management of HSOs, such as their external functions and internal motives. The former includes regulating the labour market and establishing a sense of social order by dealing with potentially problematic elements in the population, such as keeping young people occupied in schools and off the streets. Internal motives include maximizing resources, preserving peace and harmony within the organization, and giving an impression of modernity and rationality to external audiences. This is achieved by adopting new ideas, organizational models and ways of working that are seen by the predominant elite groups as ‘correct’, and which look good in the media.

Using the proposed typology as a sensitizing and generative framework, Perrow’s account may be considered and theorized in five different ways. (1) In offering an *explaining* theory about HSOs and what is driving them, the phenomenon to be explained is consistent poor performance. Why is there a low level of goal accomplishment? The explanation is goal ambiguity and the centrality of other factors as steering forces. There are a variety of elements that are presumably of varying significance and interact in complicated ways that may be investigated and explained more precisely.

(2) *Comprehending* theory seeks to determine the meanings of HSOs and the people who occupy them. This includes exploring the nature of professionals who want to avoid what they may see as rigid or constraining performance measurements, as well as people who are uncertain about how to reach objectives and therefore drift towards other priorities or logics of action. Here the HSO may appear not as an instrument for obtaining an objective, but as groups of professionals and others without a specific aim and, thus, an arena for the playing out of various understandings and interests.

Perrow's account may also be viewed as (3) *ordering* organizational complexities, where the category of HSO is identified and differentiated from other organizations and various elements in HSO are clarified. Here, the nature of objectives (e.g. ambiguous, hard to achieve) – or their absence – and the role of external functions and motives are identified. There is an unpacking of conventional ideas of objectives and technology. It is possible to move further and develop a typology of HSOs with varying degrees of goal-directedness versus drifting, and characterized by a variety of driving forces. It may also be possible to order organizations more generally in quite different ways: for example, making a distinction between drifting, loosely goal-directed and strongly goal-directed organizations. One could then see HSOs or different subunits within HSOs in this larger organizational context. Perrow's HSO study could be a key reference point in how to consider variation in terms of basic organizational functioning (or lack thereof).

From (4) an *enacting* theory point of view, the becoming and unbecoming of practices such as initiatives, arrangements or cultural ideas would show how objectives may emerge and fade away as driving forces. The organization could then be seen as an arena for multitudes of organizational doing and undoing, creating and undermining direction, and enacting goal-directed and other types of organizational practices.

When Perrow's findings are interpreted within (5) the *provoking* theory, the question is less about measuring them against data than about the extent to which they challenge our assumptions, stretch our minds, and allow us to see objectives and drivers of HSOs in alternative and thought-provoking ways. For example, instead of regarding objectives as a way of influencing organizational performance, the organization could be seen as a multitude of non-recognized functions often on a collision course with the official purpose. The organization could be reframed as an anti-organization; loosely held together, fragmented by interests and considerations pulling in competing directions, possibly symbolically and socially integrated through organizational rituals that camouflage fragmentation. The hidden 'nature' of organizational work is then brought to the fore.

DISCUSSION: THEORIZING THEORY

As we have shown in this paper, the existing 'theory' literatures, ranging from specific books on the topic (e.g. Dubin, 1976; Kaplan, 1964; Merton, 1967; Jacoby & Jaccard, 2010); special issues (e.g. *AMR*, 1989, 1999, 2011; *ASQ*, 1995; *JOB*, 2016; *JMS*, 2013, 2017; *OPR*, 2012), to the paradigm and multi-paradigm literatures (e.g. Hassard, 1991; Lewis and Grimes, 1999; Lewis and

Kelemen, 2002) define theory in the singular, namely as explanatory knowledge. This prevalent and singular definition of theory not only hampers more pluralistic and varied knowledge development, but also creates an uneven playing field within academia. Against this background, this study makes two interrelated contributions to existing literatures on ‘theory’ within MOS and social sciences more broadly.

First, in contrast to existing literature it proposes a more comprehensive and detailed *general definition* of theory that more clearly suggests what structural elements of knowledge seem reasonable to include (as a minimum) for such knowledge to qualify as ‘theory’. The general definition suggests that for any scientific knowledge to qualify as ‘theory’ it needs to include the following seven structural elements: (1) purpose, (2) phenomenon, (3) conceptual ordering mechanism, (4) relevance criteria, (5) intellectual insight, (6) some empirical support and (7) boundary conditions.

Second, and most importantly, in contrast the existing literatures’ singular and exclusive meaning of theory as explanatory knowledge, this study offers a *typology* that clarifies, broadens and differentiates several additional meanings of ‘theory’. The proposed typology consists of the following five main theory types within MOS (and probably social sciences more broadly): (1) explaining theory, (2) comprehending theory, (3) ordering theory, (4) enacting theory and (5) provoking theory. Crucially, although each theory type includes all seven structural elements from the general definition of theory, the overall purpose of each theory type takes the ‘lead role’, as it influences the meanings of the other elements in distinct ways and, through this, gives rise to distinctly different theory types. However, as stressed earlier, although the theory types differ significantly, they are not mutually exclusive, but overlap somewhat in their knowledge orientations. So, for example, while the meaning and distinctiveness of explanatory theory is defined by its overall purpose of explaining phenomena, it can also to a lesser degree contain aspects of the purposes defining the other theory types, such as provoking or ordering phenomena in specific ways.

Hence, in comparison to the dominant explanatory view of theory in MOS and social sciences more generally, the proposed typology provides a considerably broader, more pluralistic and, at the same time, more precise definition of the meaning(s) of theory. Specifically, it counteracts ambiguities surrounding the notion of theory within both MOS and social science more broadly (e.g. Abend, 2008; Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Ferris et al., 2012; Hambrick, 2007; Nicklin and Spector, 2016; Shapira, 2011; Sutton and Staw, 1995) by identifying and

articulating multiple theory types and their structural elements. Although many scholars may be intuitively aware of some of the elaborated theory types, the originality of the proposed typology lies in its offering a spectrum of major theory types and how they differ in terms of their structural elements (e.g. purpose, phenomenon, ordering mechanism, relevance criteria).

By making variations in views and criteria of theory more explicit, we not only challenge (a) the dominant stance of the explaining theory type, but also (b) efforts to go ‘under the radar’ through ambiguous, loose and implicit references to ‘theory’, as well as (c) raising the bar for alternative views to claim a theoretical contribution. Admittedly, as with all other typologies, ours is not only enabling but also constraining. Taking the five theory types too seriously may lead to other options being missed – either alternative types or important distinctions within a type. It is worth noting that we do not suggest that our five theory types are the best or final way to think about alternative views of theory. Still, our hope is that we are contributing much more by pointing at options than by imposing a straitjacket on readers.

So, what do we gain from the proposed typology in comparison to the dominant explanatory definition of theory so prevalent within MOS and social science more broadly? The typology offers a number of epistemological and political-practical advantages. First, it encourages and facilitates the development of *several* different kinds of knowledge. This means that researchers no longer need to ‘force-fit’ their knowledge pursuit into the explanatory mould (e.g. Abend, 2013; Gephart, 2004) for it to be regarded as theory. But at the same time the typology also increases the requirement for researchers to develop knowledge that demonstrates the structural elements of the particular type of theory they are aiming for. In other words, merely providing a ‘theoretical account’, an ‘interpretation’ or a ‘discussion’ (Wacquant, 2002) is insufficient to count as a theoretical contribution. This ‘theory pluralism without anything goes’ could support researchers from ‘alternative’ approaches in contributing to theory, or claiming other types of contribution that may be equal to or even better than a theoretical one.

Second, the typology opens up more varied ways of *theorizing* within MOS and social science through working with multiple types of theory, where each theory type offers a specific way of theorizing about organizational phenomena. It thereby responds to calls for other styles of theorizing than only in terms explanation theorizing (e.g. Delbridge and Fiss, 2013) by providing a new and broader range of options for theorizing, with the potential development of more novel ideas and theories, as well as contributing to the development of more multi-dimensional knowledge of organizational phenomena among both researchers and practitioners.

Third, the proposed theory typology contributes to *levelling the playing field* within academia (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984; Harley, 2019). It does so by offering five different meanings of theory, of equal value regarding their capacity to generate more informed knowledge of social reality. The study of something as complex as organizations calls for a variety of research, aiming for different types of ideas, findings and ways of reasoning (e.g. Corbett et al., 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) – and here a spectrum of conceptualizations of theory is helpful. This means that not only the researchers who pursue explanatory knowledge, but also those who develop knowledge with the purpose to comprehend, order, enact or provoke can have their knowledge recognized as ‘theory’. The typology (if accepted) is therefore likely to impact the skewed status and resource and publication opportunities within academia, currently generated by the prevalent singular meaning of theory as explanatory. Hence, through the typology, ‘theory’ becomes less narrowly a political-practical control device within academia.

Finally, our typology will facilitate increased awareness and further discussions about alternative views of theory. In this regard, the typology offers support to authors to articulate more explicitly what type or combination of theory types they are trying to develop in their research. In a similar vein, the typology will enable reviewers and editors to consider more carefully what theory type an author proposes and, based on this, better identify, evaluate and appreciate the specific theory being proposed in research texts. In this regard, the typology will also help authors to more clearly communicate and convey their theoretical contributions, as well as helping reviewers and editors to better recognize and evaluate the strength and novelty of a theoretical contribution (Patriotta, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have proposed a typology that provides a broader and, at the same time, more precise definition of theory. It identifies and specifies five main theory types within MOS: explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting and provoking theory, which vary in terms of purpose, phenomenon, relevance criteria, boundary conditions, conceptual order, empirics and intellectual insight. We have emphasized purpose as the central element in defining the meaning and distinctiveness of each specific theory type: what it is for? Another important element in defining each theory type is the phenomenon to which the theory refers. They commonly vary in their ways of relating to phenomena: from theory relating to phenomena as more or less given, to phenomena being at least partly creatively framed and produced by theory. While explaining

theory and to some extent comprehending theory tend to be ‘faithful’ to what appears to be a given phenomenon, ordering, enacting and particularly provoking theory stand instead for a more open view of phenomena, aiming to challenge what is taken as given by others.

The proposed theory typology is, by its nature, close to ordering theory (perhaps with an element of provoking theory). In comparison to the dominant explanatory view, our proposed ordering theory of theory (the theory typology) offers researchers a sensitizing and generative framework that enables pluralism, as well as supporting them in developing, testing and evaluating theories more effectively, and claiming a theoretical contribution. The typology also enables researchers to consider how different theory types stand in ‘conversation’ with each other, opening up several possible combinations for developing perhaps more novel ideas and theories. It may thereby help reduce the ‘lack of reflexivity with theory within our profession’ (Suddaby, 2014, p. 409), as well as opening up ‘other styles of theorizing’ than the dominant explaining-prediction style (Delbridge and Fiss, 2013, p. 329). However, as with any ordering theory, a problem is to what extent the theory typology helps versus constrains, or shows versus hides, aspects of what theory means and stands for. Any framework or model can act as a mental straitjacket, preventing thinking in other ways. But given the current dominance of theory as explanation, we do not think this risk is too severe regarding the proposed theory typology.

The typology may make theory development more complicated, as it challenges the prevalent singular view of theory, but may facilitate the production of ‘genuine’ rather than pseudo-contributions (Cucina and McDaniel, 2016), that is, those that do not express the structural elements required for achieving the epithet ‘theory’. Moreover, sharpening the process of theory development through demanding more specificity in what is meant by theory and what are relevant criteria for evaluating the intended theoretical contribution may offer a boost to organization studies, currently plagued by criticisms of the shortage of anything other than piecemeal, footnote-adding contributions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b; Clark and Wright, 2009; Courpasson, 2013; Daft and Lewin, 1990; Davis, 2015; George, 2014; Starbuck, 2006).

In the interest of pluralism and reflexivity, we should add that theory is not the only, or necessarily the most significant, way to generate valuable knowledge (e.g. Barley, 2016; Davis, 2015). Even the acceptance of a broader set of theory types does not necessarily mean the development of theory should always be our key concern in research. There is sometimes a tendency to equate theory with something that is good or impressive. According to some critics, there is an increasing theory obsession that may sacrifice rich and insightful empirical studies in

favour of projects that are driven by more theoretical concerns and that aim to ‘improve’ theory (Corley and Gioia, 2011; Hambrick, 2007; Pfeffer, 2014; Tourish, 2019). Many journals increasingly regard theory as an end in itself, rather than as a means to understand organizational phenomena better, leading to warnings that ‘the publication of new and novel theory, for theory’s sake, is not a desirable goal’ (Campbell and Wilmot, 2017, p. 17). Adding to theory may not lead to better understanding of specific phenomena, or generate new ideas and insights. The demand for theoretical contributions – particularly for only one kind of theory – can lead to sterile work and marginal additions to the literature. While we are aware that this paper may reinforce theory mania in our field, we would still argue that theories that explain, comprehend, order, enact and challenge organizational phenomena are crucial for the advancement of organization studies. We need a spectrum of theories that in different ways contribute to knowledge about something as complex as contemporary organizations. To understand alternative views of what theory is and what theory stands for is therefore vital for supporting this enterprise.

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Table I. A typology of theory types

Structural elements of theory	Theory type				
	Explaining	Comprehending	Ordering	Enacting	Provoking
<i>Purpose</i>	Explain phenomena	Comprehend phenomena	Categorize phenomena	(Re)produce phenomena	Challenge phenomena
<i>Phenomenon referred to</i>	As more or less given ‘out there’	As socially defined but more or less given	As indeterminate and ambiguous	As processually constructed	As constructed and reconstructed through perspectives and vocabularies

<i>Conceptual ordering mechanism</i>	Logically related variables	Systems of meaning, in-depth interpretation	Typification	Dynamic (evolutionary, dialectic, etc.) ordering of the (re)productive processes of phenomena	Provocative and eye-opening framing of phenomena
<i>Relevance criteria</i>	What, how, why, who, when, where. Empirical accuracy and testable	Comprehensive accounts of how people make sense of their reality and themselves. Moving beyond these and pointing to some unrecognized key aspect or quality	Theoretically helpful typification of phenomena	Clearly illuminate the logic of key processes through which phenomena are (re)produced	Reframing phenomena to provoke, open up new questions and ways of thinking
<i>Boundary conditions</i>	Who, when, where? Aim to specify domain and generalizability	The articulated meaning of the phenomenon to which the theory refers, focus on specific group setting, caution in generalizability	Typology confined to its underlying structural dimensions, but aims fairly broadly	The processes through which phenomena are continually (re)produced	Radical transcendence of a specific way of thinking within a research community
<i>Empirics</i>	Theory should fit data	Data should provide plausible support for theory	Typologies transcend empirical reality, but broad support for ordering and differentiation is called for	Data should be supportive of the theory's articulation of the (re)productive processes of phenomena	Data are viewed as partially helpful, and a degree of credibility is needed, but theory expands ways of thinking and perspectives

					more than mirrors reality
<i>Intellectual insight</i>	Causally related variables	The meaning(s) of phenomena	Typology of how phenomena hang together	The processual logic of the (re)production of phenomena	Challenging perspective