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Citation: Bridoux, F., Bundy, J., Gond, J-P., Haack, P., Petriglieri, J. L., Stephens, J. P. & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2024). The New Normal: Prescriptive Theorizing for Positive Organizational Impact in an Age of Disruption. *Academy of Management Review*, 49(4), pp. 705-717. doi: 10.5465/amr.2024.0360

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Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/33913/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2024.0360>

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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

THE NEW NORMAL: PRESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING FOR POSITIVE ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT IN AN AGE OF DISRUPTION¹

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Accepted for publication: 26/08/2024

Published online: 20/09/2024

Published in an issue: October 2024 – Full reference: Bridoux, F., Bundy, J., Gond, J.-P., Haak, P., Petriglieri, J. L., Stephens, J.-P., Sutcliffe, K. 2024. The new normal : Prescriptive theorizing for positive organizational impact in an age of disruption. *Academy of Management Review*, 49(4): 705–717.

¹ We sincerely thank all those who helped make this Special Topic Forum possible. First, we thank our authors and reviewers, who brought innovative ideas to the Forum and provided developmental feedback throughout the process. A Special Topic Forum is made special by the submitted work, and we appreciate the dedication and effort from those who took part in this project. We thank former editor Sherry Thatcher, who inspired us to think outside the box with this STF, and we are forever grateful to Irina Burns, our managing editor, who expertly assisted with all the administrative tasks. We also thank Oliver Laasch and Emilio Marti for feedback on this introduction. Finally, it was truly wonderful to come together as a guest editor team comprised of individuals from various traditions and backgrounds to collaborate on this important work. Our names are presented in alphabetical order.

The new normal. This catchphrase of our times is on the cover of magazines and newspapers, and on the lips of newscasters and pundits across the world. Whether in response to disruptions related to unexpected pandemics, racial injustice, social and economic inequality, rising nationalism and threats to globalization, evolutions and revolutions in technology, enduring problems of climate change, or dislocations, unrest, and unimaginable aftereffects of continuing social and political conflicts, the new normal reflects a modified state. Through processes of adaptation and acceptance, the unconventional becomes the everyday.

The extremeness and urgency of current environments, filled with multiple significant disruptions, suggests the need for fundamentally new approaches for understanding the role of organizations and the tasks of managing. Indeed, the very nature of the new normal implies that new realities require the adoption of new theories, assumptions, norms, practices, and methods to understand both the relentless stream of disruptions facing humanity and ways to cope with them.

Organizations and their members, as powerful social actors, will play a critical role in shaping the new normal. As social, health, economic, and environmental disruptions mount, the role of organizations is both more vital and more in question than ever. Even though organizations and their members are capable of positive impact, their actual impact is increasingly questioned as reflected by a dramatic decline in the social approval of business organizations and institutions more generally (Bhattacharjee & Dana, 2017; Gioia, 2003; King, Felin & Whetten, 2010). Doubt about the positive impact and role of organizations has led many to emphasize the challenges inherent in our current age of disruption, but others have highlighted possible

opportunities, namely: that our new normal can be better than our old normal (Brammer, Branicki, & Linnenluecke, 2023).

In calling for papers for this *Academy of Management Review* Special Topic Forum (STF), we were particularly interested in scholarship that can help organizations and their members create and nurture such a new normal. As Simon (1981: ix) notes, theorizing in management is fundamentally concerned “not with how things are but how they might be.” Because our theories can become self-fulfilling (Gergen, 1973; Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Marti & Gond, 2018; Merton, 1948), organizational and management scholars have the opportunity—through our theorizing—to envision a new normal that emphasizes the ways in which organizations can have a positive impact on society and the broader environment. Rather than being constrained by existing assumptions and current realities about people, work, organizations, and social systems, we can theorize about what they might be or might become, as well as the conditions under which they might emerge (Bartunek, 2020). Such theory can help to reveal new possibilities, not only in terms of how to deal with disruptions, but also in terms of how to create new positive and broadly desirable realities (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2024).

As such, the goal of this STF was to foster ideas and scholarship on the task of developing a positive new normal out of an age of disruption. In keeping with this vision, we sought to be intentionally inclusive of diverse perspectives and approaches. We decided not to offer our own interpretation of what the new normal is or should be, but rather to broadly invite submissions that envisioned their own *positive* new normal by considering the relevant potential outcomes and explaining the organizational phenomena and processes that would make such realities possible. In addition, to address the features of our new normal—such as the extremity, urgency, and simultaneous multiplicity of disruptions—we welcomed theories on a range of topics and research questions that we considered as particularly relevant, including discussion of

underlying assumptions that would be critical to establishing a positive new normal and allow us to revise theories to better reflect new and broadly desirable organizational realities.

Our excitement for the topic was matched by an equally enthusiastic response from researchers around the world. We received numerous submissions and evaluated each one for quality and fit with the STF. The seven papers selected for inclusion in this STF cover a range of topics, including entrepreneurship, gender and racial diversity, workplace inequality, stigma, social movements, allyship, humanistic organizing, and mindfulness. Before introducing the articles, we briefly consider how they collectively prompt reflection on the broader purpose and goals of theory building. We start by examining the role of theory in stabilizing and perpetuating a status quo that is potentially detrimental to society and the environment at large. We then argue that theory can have a transformative and emancipatory potential to create a better new normal and discuss important commonalities among the STF articles and their central contributions. Finally, we offer several suggestions for future research, emphasizing the need to transform theory building so that it is forward-looking and able to anticipate important upcoming disruptions and challenges.

WHAT THEORY IS... AND WHAT REALITY COULD BE

Theory as a Representation of Reality

Theory is commonly defined as “a statement of relations between concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints” (Bacharach 1989: 496). In this view, the ultimate goal of theory is the accumulation of knowledge and the explanation or prediction of empirical phenomena. This understanding of theory assumes that reality is a concrete structure composed of causal relations and contingencies that are amenable to empirical observation and measurement. The goal of theory is to identify the fundamental factors, processes, and mechanisms underlying phenomena in order to explain or predict the outcome of interest.

Importantly, reality is assumed to be fully external to the researcher, and to be directly and objectively accessible (Cunliffe, 2011; Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

Following Cornelissen, Höllerer, and Seidl (2021), we refer to this style of theorizing as “explanatory,” and this type is arguably the most common and perhaps dominant style of theorizing in organization and management studies. Explanatory styles of theorizing are grounded in the epistemology of representationalism, the belief that our theories reflect the world as it is (Tsoukas, 2007). We find, however, that the STF articles collectively engage with two important trends that stretch the boundaries of explanatory theorizing and encourage scholars to consider the normative values implicit in theorizing, and the ways in which theory can co-construct organizational reality. These trends include emancipatory and performative approaches to theorizing.

Emancipatory and Performative Approaches to Theory

On the one hand, we see the increasing application and legitimation of emancipatory styles of theorizing that challenge existing taken-for-granted assumptions and infuse theory development with normative ideals and values (Cornelissen et al., 2021). Emancipation refers to “the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions (...) and necessarily involves an active process (or struggle) for individual and collective self-determination” (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992: 432-433). Emancipatory approaches critically examine existing power relations and institutionalized structures of marginalization and domination and prepare the ground for advancing theoretical lenses that allow us to see the world as it could be. The goal of emancipatory styles of theorizing is hence not necessarily to explain or predict, nor to develop a precise roadmap for social reform, but to develop a theoretical provocation that advances reflexivity and draws attention to matters of public concern.

On the other hand, performative styles of theorizing have also begun to challenge representationalist understandings of theory according to which “the defining characteristic of science is its production of nature, facts and theories” (Pickering, 1994: 413). Performative theorizing recognizes that theory involves intervening in the world (Hacking, 1983) and should be approached as “an engine, not a camera” (Friedman, 1953; MacKenzie, 2006). Accordingly, theories co-construct reality and must therefore be understood as a tool for shaping the world (an engine) rather than a mirror reflecting the world (a camera) (Ferraro, Pfeffer, & Sutton, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005; Marti & Gond, 2018). The strategic use of performativity can contribute to the implementation of theories that ameliorate rather than exacerbate (or even cause) social and environmental disruptions and resulting policy challenges (Hernandez & Haack, 2023). Performative styles of theorizing thus question the belief that the utility of a theory is determined solely by how well it corresponds to current reality or can predict future realities. Instead, performativity allows for the potential to develop and promote theories that correspond to alternative realities, including those that do not yet exist (Marti & Gond, 2018).

As we discuss below, most of the STF articles share both an emancipatory interest and a “performative intent” to advance the case for a better future, with a division of labor between the two styles of theorizing. Overall, the STF’s theoretical orientation resonates with the existing notion of “prescience,” which is defined in an influential *AMR* paper as “the process of discerning or anticipating what we need to know and, equally important, of influencing the intellectual framing and dialogue about what we need to know” (Corley & Gioia, 2011: 13). Theory centered on prescience seeks to develop prescriptions for structuring and organizing around disruptions, attempting to anticipate, conceptualize, and influence problems that require theorizing to envision potential solutions. The concept of prescience has recently been reinvigorated by closely related discussions of “prescriptive” (concerned with how things should be and how to accomplish them; Hanisch, 2024) and “prospective” theorizing

(concerned with imagining diverse and desirable futures; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2024). While the labels in these works differ, they share the assumption that theory should incorporate imaginative foresight and long-term thinking to have a positive impact on society and the broader environment (Hernandez & Haack, 2023; Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, & Prencipe, 2021). To avoid an unnecessary proliferation of concepts, we use the term “prescriptive theorizing” to characterize the articles in this STF as focused on explaining what we need to know and do to change the world for the better.

The Role of Values in Theory

Shifting the focus from “how things are” and “how things can be explained” to “how things could be” or “should be” raises the question of the role of values in our theorizing. Max Weber’s value-free thesis has often been misinterpreted, and discussions of the postulate of “Wertfreiheit”—best translated as “value freedom”—frequently neglect the historical context in which Weber was embedded (Hennis, Brisson, & Brisson, 1994). While Weber urged social scientists not to promote or condemn subjective values, beliefs, or judgments in their research, he acknowledged that value judgments inevitably influence what social scientists choose to study. While a value-free science can identify the means to achieve a particular end, social science cannot choose ends—choosing ends is inevitably grounded in an individual value judgment (Blum, 1944). Moreover, the social scientist does not stand “outside” the object of study but is necessarily part of it as a member of society, embedded in a network of relationships with others who share a common language and lifeworld.

Indeed, any description and explanation of facts is judgmental in that researchers take some value-based statements as objective truths and values lead them to select particular questions from an almost infinite number of conceivable research topics to address (Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim, & Tetlock, 2015). Values form a lens through which researchers view the world, which translates into taken-for-granted, implicit assumptions in their theorizing. Because

of this, researchers are likely to focus on research questions that align with and confirm their worldview and tend to avoid those that would challenge it. For example, management researchers who embrace liberal progressive values may take it for granted that diversity is good and therefore focus on how to promote diversity rather than on whether and when diversity has positive outcomes for individuals, organizations, and societies. Conversely, those embracing conservative values may take it for granted that regulatory intervention in markets is bad, and therefore focus on solutions to social and environmental problems that do not involve such intervention. The choice of questions or the ways in which they are framed thus represents a value judgment that the social scientist must necessarily make, challenging the value-free thesis in the *context of discovery* (Schnell, Hill, & Esser, 2013: 89).

In this view, most, if not all, scholarship is imbued with values, although they are often left implicit in explanatory styles of theorizing grounded in the epistemology of representationalism. In supposedly “objective” and “scientific” scholarship, values are not easily discerned and remain invisible because they relate to the dominant and largely taken-for-granted assumptions of researchers, scholarly communities, and research fields. The hidden role of values in theory can become particularly problematic when explanatory theorizing is used (and misused) to develop prescriptions for practice and policy, such as maximizing profit and output, neglecting alternative and potentially preferable states yet to be realized (Hanisch, 2024).

It is thus critical for scholars to be mindful of both the value-laden nature of our theorizing and of the responsibility it brings. At the individual level, researchers will find it extremely difficult to avoid confirmation bias when choosing topics, formulating research questions, and developing arguments, as this bias is stronger when individuals are confronted with issues and choices that evoke moral emotions and concerns about group identity (Duarte et al., 2015). However, researchers who wish to consider a greater variety of perspectives can adopt strategies

such as (1) asking “What do I want to be true and why?”, (2) exploring the “other side” by developing arguments for competing ideas and propositions, and (3) seeking to collaborate with others who do not share their values (Washburn, Morgan, & Skitka, 2015). Researchers who wish to see a diversity of viewpoints flourish in management should also be mindful that this value-based confirmation bias is likely to affect their work as reviewers: we are likely to look harder for flaws in manuscripts that disconfirm our view of what is right and wrong, rather than those that confirm it. Moreover, as privileged scholars, we may have a responsibility to help policymakers and practitioners use our knowledge and research for the benefit of society at large. While we do not believe that every scholar should become an activist, we do believe that management scholars should be allowed to responsibly and transparently craft and present ideas that are consistent with their goals and values as people who think and act politically, challenging the value-free thesis in the *context of use* (Schnell et al., 2013: 89).

Finally, in advocating for a “better new normal” and a “more desirable future,” we recognize an important ambiguity such that it is not clear whose interests should be considered, in other words, “better” or “more desirable” *for whom*? There are important tradeoffs in topics related to sustainability and social responsibility and claims about the business case and the notion of “doing well by doing good” have been shown to be empirically inconclusive and intellectually naive (Crane, Palazzo, Spence, & Matten, 2014; see also Kaufmann & Derry, 2024, in this STF). For example, responding to institutional pressures to reduce discrimination or pollution comes at a cost and therefore does not automatically benefit everyone (Durand, Hawn, & Ioannou, 2019). Stakeholders may have very different, and potentially conflicting, understandings of what “better” or “desirable” means. Powerful incumbents are likely to have an interest in maintaining the status quo and lobby vigorously against transformative change and shifts in public policy (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). Different and potentially conflicting understandings of what is desirable may arise not only from stakeholders perceiving their

interests at stake in tradeoffs but also from holding different values. For example, research has found that political liberals are likely to prioritize care and fairness, whereas political conservatives rely also on loyalty, respect, and sanctity to assess what is desirable (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009).

In the context of this STF, we propose that “desirable” management theory has the goal of developing knowledge sensitive to the pluralistic needs of society and the environment, rather than serving the select interests of a particular stakeholder group. In this sense, while a given theory likely cannot focus on or satisfy all stakeholders and their interests, “desirable” management theory might do more to acknowledge on whose needs it focuses and propose linkages to theories with complementary or even conflicting foci. We also argue that desirable management theory has an inherently long-term orientation, considering the needs and interests of future (including unborn) generations. This approach emphasizes sustainability, responsibility, and sufficiency, ensuring that today’s actions do not compromise tomorrow’s well-being and opportunities. We believe that by integrating these principles, management theory can contribute to creating a more equitable and resilient global society in an age of disruption, which we see as a desirable future. Of course, we acknowledge that these views are informed by our collectively-held values as an editorial team.

ARTICLES IN THE SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

Against the backdrop of our discussion of different styles of theorizing and the role of values in theory, we now turn to the seven articles included in this STF. Each of the articles has important implications for our understanding of disruption and provides key insights into how to transition to and implement a better new normal.

Prescriptive Theorizing as a Two-stage Process

A common theme that emerges in the STF articles is that theory serves not only an explanatory but also a prescriptive purpose. Thus, rather than developing a theoretical model of “how things are” and explaining or predicting a phenomenon of interest, the manuscripts featured in the STF first develop and justify a normative goal of “how things should be” and, in a second step, provide guidance on how this normative goal can be achieved, under what conditions, and by what means. Indeed, most of the articles converged on an integrative “two-stage process” of prescriptive theorizing (Hanisch, 2024), with the first step informed primarily by an emancipatory purpose or claim, and the second step characterized by a performative intent, that is, an initial attempt to develop an understanding of the processes and mechanisms necessary to reform and change a largely undesirable status quo (Wallo, Martin, Sparrhoff, & Kock, 2022). Interestingly, reviewers were often intrigued by the problematization in the first stage, but not fully sure how to adequately assess the prescriptive theory building in the second stage. Some reviewers even noted that the second stage was too policy-oriented (rather than theory-focused). In line with the recommendations of Corley and Gioia (2011), it is important to emphasize that, as *AMR* guest editors, we complemented the standards for judging a submission’s theoretical contribution to focus on the manuscript’s potential to challenge existing assumptions and envision a better new normal out of the disruption, even if the explanatory theorizing remained at a more exploratory level.

Table 1 provides a summary of each article, describing its theoretical underpinnings, focus of problematization (emancipatory claim), and the mechanism(s) proposed to challenge status quo (performative intent). Collectively, these articles advance the agenda of prescriptive theorizing in management research.

Insert Table 1 about here

Stage 1: Problematizing the Status Quo and Setting a Normative Goal

The first stage of the prescriptive theory building approach found in the STF articles follows the tradition of emancipatory perspectives in that it exposes and delegitimizes existing power structures and the taken-for-granted assumptions, ideologies, and practices that stabilize them and are unconsciously and tacitly endorsed by key social actors. For example, Zankl and Grimes (2024) criticize the global emphasis on “unicorn startups” and contemporary understandings of entrepreneurship that view destructive social and environmental externalities as necessary but unmanageable byproducts. McMullen (2024), who seeks to explain the conditions under which entrepreneurs can realize real growth without it coming at the expense of someone or something else, including one’s future self, echoes this critique. As he notes throughout, sustainability scholars take tradeoffs for granted as necessary evils—that is most scholars assume that economic progress requires sacrifice of what is best for the planet (ecology) and people (ethics), and that profit implies improvements for some (but rarely for everyone). Finally, recognizing that stigma research tends to be critical of the status quo by default, Wang and Tracey (2024: 1) challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions of stigmatization processes, arguing that the disruptive rise of social media introduces new opportunities and “cultural potential” for relationship building and social inclusion that must be recognized and further understood.

Importantly, many of the STF articles suggest—somewhat provocatively—that existing policies and initiatives implemented by organizations, while well-intentioned, are often counterproductive and backfire. For example, Creary (2024) suggests that allyship initiatives created to combat racism in the workplace may create fear and resistance among organizational leaders, thereby contributing to rather than reducing inequality and discrimination in organizations. This is because current approaches that focus on advocating for individualized solutions, such as skills development, prevent leaders from challenging meritocratic beliefs about career success and therefore from recognizing and addressing structural inequalities.

Similarly, Mobasseri, Kahn, and Ely (2024) develop a framework to explain why racial inequality persists despite public commitments against racism and significant investments in initiatives to eradicate it. They suggest that the idea of ‘merit’, so central to American capitalism, is a cover for an idealized image of White masculinity. This ideal generates anxiety among White men who feel pressured to live up to unattainable standards. In response, these men (as a group even more than as specific individuals) defend against threats to their masculine identity by unconsciously projecting feelings of inadequacy and shame onto Black people. The systems psychodynamic approach the authors deploy offers a novel perspective on why diversity and inclusion policies fail, and how majority groups could be supported to work through the anxiety that keeps them, and everyone else stuck in their places.

All of the STF articles either implicitly or explicitly take a multilevel perspective, conceptualizing contemporary disruptions and challenges as structured at the individual, organizational, and system levels, with particular emphasis on the institutional and system levels. While the critique of capitalism and dominant models of economic coordination is mostly implicit in the work of Mobasseri and colleagues (2024), two STF articles are very clear and critical of the “business case”—the notion that organizational integration of social and environmental initiatives must lead to favorable economic outcomes. Kaufmann and Derry (2024) point to the lack of evidence for the performance-enhancing effects of gender diversity initiatives and theorize that the assumptions underlying the business case for gender diversity have entrenched bias, rather than mitigated it, thus perpetuating the very power structures that have historically contributed to the oppression of women. Conversely, Town and colleagues (2024: 2) criticize the commercialization of mindfulness in business and the lack of reflection and transformation required to address the root cause of employee suffering, i.e., “a reductionist, economistic paradigm in which organizations prioritize profit above employee well-being and instrumentalize that well-being for organizational aims.”

Taken together, the theoretical frameworks developed in the STF articles suggest or at least imply a shift in the purpose of theory itself, moving from a supposedly “neutral” representationalist goal of establishing “truth” to setting explicitly normative goals including, but not limited to solidarity with marginalized and stigmatized communities (Creary, 2024; Wang & Tracey, 2024), dignity, humanism, and well-being (Kaufmann & Derry, 2024; Mobasser et al., 2024; Town et al., 2024), ethical responsibility (Zankl & Grimes, 2024), and harmony between humans and their environment (McMullen, 2024, Town et al., 2024).

Stage 2: Developing a Road Map for Implementation

While the first stage focuses on *why* organizational practices should change or be reconsidered, the second stage of the STF articles’ prescriptive theory building seeks to offer a roadmap to develop specific and actionable recommendations on *how* to implement transformational change to establish a positive new normal. For example, Kaufmann and Derry (2024: 8) advance an “intersectional structural approach” to gender diversity with the goal to “scrutinize the operating systems, longstanding assumptions, behavioral patterns, and deeply embedded beliefs to recognize structural barriers to gender equality.” To provide another example, Town and colleagues (2024) propose a humanistic approach to organizing based on Buddhist philosophy and the “communication as constitutive of organization” perspective to offer practical advice on how to institutionalize this form of organizing through mindful communication. The article on stigma reduction by Wang and Tracey (2024) is perhaps the manuscript most focused on the second stage of all the STF articles. The authors develop a theory of how social movement organizations can use social media to create new collective action frames to activate those who agree with the new frames to take action, but also to challenge prevailing frames of stigma by, for example, strategically targeting stigmatizers and breaking their social bonds and reducing group solidarity so that they are less likely to stigmatize others. Finally, as McMullen’s (2024) theorizing suggests, sustainable growth and

development require minimizing the use of biotic resources. Consequently, he suggests that sustainable entrepreneurship may be sensitized and transformed initially through small changes such as “requiring ecosystem accounts on financial statements (p. 20)” to improve firm decision-making and national policy making.

Consistent with the problematization part of Stage 1, many of the STF articles emphasize that addressing disruption and the inequitable status quo cannot be restricted to individualized solutions but requires system-level interventions to overcome structural interdependencies that resist change (McMullen, 2024; Zankl & Grimes, 2024). Or, at least, the role of those with relatively greater influence on organizational systems – leaders – is foregrounded (Creary, 2024; Mobasseri, Kahn & Ely, 2024). Some of the STF articles theorize the multi-level feedback loops and self-reinforcing mechanisms that stabilize a reality that is detrimental to many. In return, and this is where the “performative intent” of the STF articles appears, these mechanisms can be “strategically” reconfigured and reversed in their direction to advance a better new normal. For example, Creary (2024) conceptualizes a feedback loop between allyship initiatives, leaders’ anxiety, and power dynamics that collectively contributes to workplace inequality. Her framework can potentially be used to ideate and implement interventions that reverse the feedback cycle towards greater justice and equality. Similarly, in theorizing a shift from “neoliberal” to “responsible” forms of entrepreneurship, Zankl and Grimes (2024: 8) discuss intervention points to change feedback flows to produce desired effects and suggest that to “overcome homeostatic interdependencies actors must look for points of leverage within the system, whereby the interconnections between elements in a given system can be used to instigate rather than prevent change.” Finally, Mobasseri and colleagues (2024) envision a better new normal by replacing defensive organizational processes in response to identity threats with developmental processes that rehumanize organizational members, thus paving the way for greater justice and equality.

In the second stage of their theory building, the STF articles offer an inspiring and thought-provoking discussion of the various performative mechanisms that social actors may have at their disposal to forge alternatives to the status quo. At a higher level, we can identify and distinguish between cognitive, communicative, and behavioral mechanisms.

Mechanisms that engage actors' *cognition* are central, and perhaps the most significant way to begin to question the largely unconscious and taken-for-granted ideological underpinnings of structural inequalities, power imbalances, and systemic oppression. For example, Kaufmann and Derry (2024) suggest that transformative change requires acknowledging that intersecting forms of discrimination create different experiences of marginalization as well as actively recognizing the structural barriers that perpetuate practices of exclusion. Town and colleagues (2024) propose that revising institutionalized practices is facilitated by "acts of *sensebreaking*" as it "opens up new possibilities for redefining meaning *in situ*" (Town et al., 2024: 16, emphasis in the original), while Creary (2024) emphasizes the significance of critical reflexivity, which involves examining one's own biases and underlying assumptions that contribute to discrimination, as well as "asking probing questions," i.e., collaboratively challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. We apply a broad understanding of cognition to also include emotional dynamics, such as the activation of solidarity and compassion in the context of anti-stigmatization frames (Wang & Tracey, 2024) and the emergence of leader anxiety in response to allyship initiatives (Creary, 2024).

Communication is another important mechanism for overcoming resistance to change, as seen in the work of Wang and Tracey (2024) on framing and Town and colleagues (2024) on the communicative constitution of organizations. Wang and Tracey (2024), in particular, highlight the rise of social media as a critical digital disruption that has fundamentally changed the communication landscape, which, as they note, provides new opportunities for social inclusion. Town and colleagues (2024) focus more on internal processes of change, proposing a three-part

framework of mindful organizational communication to promote more humanistic organizing. Also focusing on internal processes of change related to racial inequality, Mobasser and colleagues (2024) develop a systems psychodynamic theory featuring various “holding environments” that incorporate cognitive, behavioral, and expressly communicative mechanisms to reconstruct organizational realities from defensive to developmental.

In terms of *behavioral* mechanisms, several STF articles provide evidence that change requires active and visible support from leaders, reflecting that authorization is an important source of compliance and behavioral conformity. Examples of leadership also contribute to the cognitive and communicative mechanisms underlying transformation change, as they have a strong influence on the diffusion and acceptance of authoritative texts that convey an understanding of how things are and should be done in organizational contexts (Town et al., 2024). Changes in behavior also often require changes to the contextual systems that embed such behavior. Many of the STF articles consider such systemic changes. Zankl and Grimes (2024), for example, propose a model of the emergence and governance of entrepreneurial disruption to facilitate ideological transition from a neoliberal ideology to a responsible ideology. Their model includes a system of “guardrail” behavioral mechanisms to both monitor and incentivize such a transition. Finally, as McMullen (2024) proposes, the innovative transformation of resources requires persistent and resilient behaviors that must be sustained over time and across disruptions, and he uses the story of *The Martian* to exemplify the challenges of such behavior.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND THEORY BUILDING

The articles featured in this STF envision bold new realities in which gender and racial diversity is increased, workplace inequality is reduced, social inclusion and solidarity are encouraged, organizations work to empower people, and entrepreneurship sustainably promotes resource generation. The articles craft these realities by first calling attention to the flawed assumptions, inherent biases, and incoherent justifications of the status quo before detailing theoretically

grounded and prescriptively guided roadmaps for implementation. In doing so, the articles collectively provide a template for a prescriptive style of theorizing that focuses on solving the world's problems and easing the pace and nature of disruption. We end our introduction with a few final lessons gleaned from these exemplary contributions.

Foregrounding—not Hiding—Values and Epistemological Assumptions

We have argued above that all scholarship is imbued with values and normative goals, although these are often implicit in dominant and taken-for-granted theories. We suggest that management scholars need to make their normative goals and epistemological assumptions explicit in their theory building. As long as scholars acknowledge their goals and recognize their assumptions, these goals and assumptions can be critically examined and publicly challenged or justified. The result will be a more diverse and richer set of theories that scholars can use to study and conceptualize an equally diverse and rich set of phenomena.

Of course, the STF authors are cautious about revealing their assumptions and values, probably because there is not yet clear guidance from *AMR* and other leading journals in the field on how to do so. Kaufmann and Derry (2024: 6) are perhaps the clearest when they state, “In keeping with recent contributions to feminist approaches to organizational theorizing, we resist ‘objective,’ generalized abstractions that characterize masculinized knowledge, and instead embrace context and subjective and intersubjective experience as the basis for theorizing.” We would encourage future authors and editorial teams to consider similar declarations to aid readers in a more complete understanding of their theories.

We also believe that the quest for objectivity and value-neutral descriptions of reality is not consistent with the agenda of prescriptive theorizing. Rather than seeing a researcher's values and subjective choices in the research process as a problem, it seems important to embrace reflexivity and critical reflection on underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions

(Luoma & Hietanen, 2024). As long as such subjectivity is declared and made explicit, along with the underlying value positions, the ideas that come from subjectivity can be scrutinized just as easily as the ostensibly “objective” arguments we have become accustomed to. Indeed, a declaration of the subjective intent of a theory arguably makes it more objective in the sense the more information is known about the genesis and purpose of the ideas. In this case, transparency of thought provides a premium to the generation of new knowledge and understanding.

Prescriptive Theorizing: Towards a Pragmatic “Division of Labor”

A common caveat against emancipatory styles of theorizing is that they focus too much on critique and are typically unwilling or unable to develop an understanding of how to change an unjust or unsustainable status quo, for example, in terms of the mechanisms and points of intervention needed to overcome prevailing power relations. Conversely, while work on performativity has begun to discuss mechanisms constitutive of reality, these works rarely reflect critically on how theories *should* shape social reality and mostly avoid the thorny issue of normative value judgments (Marti & Scherer, 2016).

In the context of this STF, emancipatory perspectives have helped authors to problematize the status quo and unjust power relations in the first step of their theory building, while performative styles of theorizing have been instrumental in developing ideas about how to create a more desirable alternative in the second step. In a sense, this STF advocates a “division of labor” between the critical stance characteristic of Stage 1 and the performative style and its interest in constitutive mechanisms and feedback loops in Stage 2. Of course, critical-emancipatory and performative perspectives may be built on distinct, and not necessarily compatible, ontological and epistemological assumptions. Such divisions raise questions of paradigmatic incommensurability (Okhuysen & Bonardi, 2011) and have fueled debates about “critical performativity,” which explores whether and how critical-emancipatory work can be

performative. On the one hand, critical management studies (CMS) scholars have traditionally seen critical-emancipatory work as characterized by its non-performative nature (Fournier & Grey, 2000)—performativity being defined here, following Lyotard (1984 [1979]), as a continuous search for efficiency. Indeed, being performative in this sense forces scholars to accept managers and corporations and their goals as legitimate, which limits the potential to be critical. On the other hand, other CMS scholars have approached performativity through a discursive lens to argue that critical-emancipatory work can and should be performative to influence managerial discourses and practices (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). More recently, authors have called for critical-emancipatory work that is performative but does not privilege managers as agents of change (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016) and that is not limited to changing discourses but also aims at material change (Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016; Fleming & Banerjee, 2016). The articles in this STF illustrates that the tension between critical-emancipatory and performative orientations can be cross-fertilized and addressed pragmatically by focusing on mechanisms for change that target the individual, organizational, and systems levels. The overarching approach emerging from this STF could help to orient management scholarship towards “positive performativity” (Laasch et al., 2024) and provide CMS scholars with insights to move beyond a still dominant “one-dimensional critique [...] focused on negation” (Spicer & Alvesson, 2024: 1).

Theorizing as Disciplined Imagination for a Positive Future: “That’s hopeful!”

Finally, these STF articles present an updated approach to theorizing as a form of disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989). We find that all of the STF authors advocate theorizing that is useful and imaginative; yet, their theorizing evokes affective responses beyond “that’s interesting!” or “that’s connected!” or “that’s real!” (Weick, 1989). They also elicit a response of plausible hopefulness: “that’s hopeful!” Overall, these authors envision transformed mechanisms, processes, and dynamics of how leaders and followers in formal organizations see

themselves and each other, how entrepreneurs distill value from resources in sustainable ways, and how systems inside and outside of formal organizations are designed to promote individual and collective worth. Where Weick (1989: 521) suggests that there is value in theorizing about “practitioner problems not yet identified”, our STF articles instead theorize about some seemingly intractable and emotionally charged aspects of social and organizational life that are urgent now because they will impact our future. Given the extremeness and novelty of the new normal, organizations and societies need theorizing that provides hope or “a present-future field of desire and promise” that is “a source of generativity and transcendence” (Carlsen, 2006: 146). It is the hope embodied in the prescriptive theorizing of the STF that can help answer the questions of “Who do we want to be? What do we want to do?” faced by scholars and practitioners alike.

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TABLE 1. Summary of STF Articles

Article	Theoretical underpinnings	Stage 1 of Prescriptive Theorizing: Focus of Problematization (Emancipatory claim)	Stage 2 of Prescriptive Theorizing: Mechanisms proposed to challenge status quo (Performative intent)
Creary: Taking a “Leap”: How Workplace Allyship Initiatives Shape Leader Anxiety, Allyship, and Power Dynamics that Contribute to Workplace Inequality	Critical, feminist, psychological and systems psychodynamic perspectives on allyship motivation and inequality.	Allyship initiatives created to combat racism in the workplace may create fear and resistance among organizational leaders, ultimately maintaining the status quo.	<i>Cognitive:</i> Locating oneself to the situation and others; critically reflecting on one’s own biases and assumptions. <i>Communicative:</i> Engaging in discussions with marginalized professionals and learning from them; Asking probing questions to deconstruct taken-for-granted practices. <i>Behavioral:</i> Providing Support by advocating structural and institutional remedies to systemic inequities.
Kaufmann & Derry: On Valuing Women: Advancing an Intersectional Theory of Gender Diversity in Organizations	Gender diversity, capitalization, intersectionality, and feminist emancipatory theory on valuing women in organizations.	Gender lens investing based on the business case for hiring more women is based on pernicious gender stereotypes that ultimately limit women’s advancement.	<i>Cognitive:</i> Critical reflection on existing practices that create structural barriers. <i>Communicative:</i> Facilitate open discussions of difference to give voice to marginalized women. <i>Behavioral:</i> Deploy structural intersectionality (recognize, deconstruct and dismantle structural barriers).
McMullen: Real Growth through Entrepreneurial Resourcefulness:	Ecological economics, firm growth, and entrepreneurial resourcefulness views on how to give resources	Theory on firm growth erroneously assumes that value is developed by exchanging goods in a socially open,	<i>Cognitive:</i> Leverage knowledge to identify alternative uses for extant resources.

Insights on the Entropy Problem from Andy Weir's <i>The Martian</i>	higher functional value than they had before.	high-demand environment, leading to a focus on feeding consumption.	<i>Behavioral:</i> Leverage natural resources (within their regenerative capacity).
Mobasseri, Kahn & Ely: Racial Inequality in Organizations: A Systems Psychodynamic Perspective	Systems psychodynamic and gendered perspectives on persistent racial inequality in organizations.	Organizations can conflate merit with idealized images of White masculinity and elicit unconscious distress in White men who aspire to these ideals.	<i>Cognitive:</i> White men's recognition of their contribution to inequality. <i>Communicative:</i> Leaders articulate compelling reasons to dismantle inequality; White and minority members share their experiences <i>Behavioral:</i> Enact holding environments for dealing with distress
Town, Reina, Brummans & Pirson: Humanistic Organizing: The Transformative Force of Mindful Organizational Communication	Mindfulness, Buddhist, and communicative constitution of organizations perspectives on organizing for dignity.	Commercializing mindfulness in organizations may limit individual dignity and collective well-being.	<i>Cognitive:</i> Invoking wise figures in terms of the authoritative text to make sense of situations. <i>Communicative:</i> Leaders develop a wise authoritative text that prioritizes dignity in everyday organizational conversations. <i>Behavioral:</i> Ethically acting and deciding based on the authoritative text.
Wang & Tracey: Anti-Stigma Organizing in the Age of Social Media: How Social Movement Organizations Leverage Affordances to Build Solidarity	Stigma management, social movements, and social media affordances perspectives on stigma reduction.	Social media has been ignored by stigma researchers, limiting our understanding of the tools available for stigma reduction.	<i>Cognitive:</i> Mutually recognizing relationships between stigmatized groups and key audiences. <i>Communicative:</i> Engage social media affordances for crafting and sharing communications; Employ

			audience-focused framing strategies.
Zankl & Grimes: Taming Unicorns: Toward a New Normal of Responsible Entrepreneurship	Neoliberal and responsible entrepreneurship ideological perspectives on entrepreneurial disruption or “unicorn startups.”	Without critiquing the application of neoliberal ideology to contemporary entrepreneurship, the primacy of financial motives and unmanaged negative externalities have become norms of entrepreneurial disruption.	<i>Cognitive:</i> Shift in goals paradigm to focus on navigating paradoxes between short-term and long-term value; global and local value; and private and collective value. <i>Behavioral:</i> Provide incentives and monitoring; systemically coordinate guardrails.