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# Practicing Impact and Impacting Practice? Creating Impact Through Practice-Based Scholarship

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## Abstract

This curated debate provides a discussion on impact and its relation to practice-based scholarship, i.e., scholarship grounded in the social theories of practice. Five experienced senior scholars reflect on conceptualizations of impact, how it can be created and disseminated, and on the role of practice-based scholarship in this process. The authors discuss the role of researchers as members of the academic system, their activities related to generating, developing, and challenging new theory, and their reflexive relation to the research context when explaining their research to stakeholders to create knowledge and thus, for impacting practice. To suggest ways of practicing impact, their contributions also conceptualize impactful theory and reflect on the relationship between the production and usage of knowledge. These insights are an important contribution to the debate on scholarly impact and provide critical guidance for impactful scholarly work beyond conventional concepts.

## Keywords

practice theory, impact, practice

## Introduction

### Yanis Hamdali & Lorenzo Skade

#### What Is Impact?

How can scholars create societal impact with their practice-based scholarship while delivering the required results in a competitive academic world? What does it mean to be an “engaged scholar” (Hoffman, 2021; van de Ven, 2007), who produces “scholarly impact” (Aguinis, Shapiro et al., 2014; Aguinis, Suárez-González et al., 2012; Friesike et al., 2022; Ramani et al., 2022), before or after reaching tenure (Podsakoff et al., 2018), and how “radical” (Ergene et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski et al., 2021) or “surprising” (Paterson et al., 2023) should this process be? How can we help co-create a more desirable future by theorizing what does not (yet) exist (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022)? These questions feed into long-standing debates in academia that urge us to critically reflect upon the role of management and organization research, while keeping the balance between rigorous and relevant research (Gulati, 2007; Sharma & Bansal, 2020).

The debate on scholarly impact has evolved from conceptualizing impact as a measure based on citations to a more pluralistic one. Earlier work often conceptualized impact

solely through the number of citations or scholarly publications (e.g., Bergh et al., 2006; Tahai & Meyer, 1999). More recently, scholars faced measurements of impact based on prominent indices such as the Journal Impact Factor (JIF). However, these were found to be a similarly weak proxy to assess individual researchers’ contributions. Whereas the JIF assesses impact on a higher level (i.e., the journal), for the lower level (i.e., the article or scholar), different measures are needed (Ramani et al., 2022).

In this vein, impactful research needs to go beyond the academic boundary to impact management practice. A conceptualization of impact that is not solely based on other

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academics' judgments and a pluralistic perspective to advance the development of actionable knowledge are required (Aguinis et al., 2014). What the scholarly community may consider surprising and impactful is oftentimes dismissed by practitioners (Paterson et al., 2023), highlighting the importance of translating research outputs for practice and teaching, too (Anderson et al., 2017; Spencer et al., 2022). Yet, these advancements in the discussion on scholarly impact are far from uncontested, as the contributions in this curated debate show.

### *Impact Through Practice-Based Scholarship*

To address questions related to impact, extant research has built on work that engages with practice theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2002). Practice-based scholarship, i.e., scholarship grounded in social theories of practice, is characterized by in-depth engagement with social contexts to understand "nothing less than the very notion of the social itself" (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 12). It highlights "activity, performance, and work in the creation and perpetuation of all aspects of social life" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 3). In focusing on what people do and "how they go about that doing, incorporating their situated and person-specific knowledge" (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 13), practice-based studies build theory through exposing the mundane (Chambliss, 1989). Thus, this theoretical lens allows scholars to view what is visible and what is invisible.

Practice-based research has made important contributions to management and organization studies by viewing managerial work as "an ongoing social accomplishment informed by actors' practical knowledge within the specific context in which it is embedded" (Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022, p. 730). Taking these social practices seriously, as suggested by Vaara and Whittington (2012), implies that such theorizing opens the possibility to engage with and unpack "organizational phenomena [which] transpire through, and are effects of, a texture of interconnected practices" (Nicolini, 2009, p. 1392). In doing so, practice-based approaches have provided novel insights into topics such as time and temporality (e.g., Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), sociomateriality (e.g., Orlikowski, 2007), knowledge (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 2001), entrepreneurship (e.g., Thompson et al., 2020), or strategy (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), among many others.

Yet, the onto-epistemological foundations of practice-based scholarship also pose challenges for creating scholarly impact (Jarzabkowski, Seidl et al., 2022). First, the strong focus on understanding empirical details may risk losing sight of general theoretical implications. A seemingly missing answer to the question of "so what?" has often been a main point of critique of studies, which are often claimed to be too "micro" (Seidl & Whittington, 2014).

Second, being too micro-focused may lead to contributions that are, in turn, more difficult to generalize to wider contexts (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Such studies may face criticism related to their transferability and, thus, the impact of their findings.

Hence, the purpose of this curated debate is to highlight the role that practice-based scholarship can play in creating impact and, thereby, contributing to the critical debate of how we theorize, produce, and engage with our research. We hope to provide insights into the powerful way of how practice theory unfolds its potential to create recognizable impact. To do so, this debate brings together five distinguished and highly experienced scholars who reflect on the concept of impact from different perspectives. We hope that these contributions allow the readers to critically engage in a discussion about our assumptions about impactful research. In doing so, we aim to provide a starting point for further research and cast light on new ways of creating impact through practice theory-inspired research.

### *Overview of the Contributions*

Davide Nicolini and Juliane Reinecke commence with two contributions that critically investigate the concept of impact. They advance our understanding of how such impact can be translated into scholarly practice. Both contributions urge us to reflect on the central role researchers play in (re-)defining it. First, Nicolini's contribution provides a critical account of the quantification of impact. He challenges the linear relationship between knowledge production and its utilization to urge us to rethink how we define, measure, and create impact. His contribution helps us to challenge our assumptions about impact and the role of researchers in the academic system. Next, Reinecke shifts the focus to the important role of theory in generating impact. Through exploring the notion of impactful theory, she challenges the dichotomy between theory and impact, focusing on the role of theory as a path to impact. Furthermore, she critically assesses our role as researchers and our agency in defining impact.

Following these two contributions, Paula Jarzabkowski and Eero Vaara deepen the debate on disseminating impact by elaborating on (1) the role of practice-based methodology and (2) the role of discourse, which is often underestimated in debates on impact. Jarzabkowski's contribution outlines how practice-based scholarship has the potential to change these practices instead of normatively providing practitioners with advice on what they ought to do. She outlines the benefits of researchers being deeply immersed in their research fields. Based on her experiences and focusing on policymaking, Jarzabkowski's contribution puts forward how practice-based scholarship creates real-world impact. Vaara then provides a complementary perspective, arguing that our discussions on impact do not sufficiently emphasize the importance

of concepts and vocabularies in research *and* teaching. He expands an understanding of creating impact through disseminating new concepts and vocabularies to influence discourses and even ideologies. As a result, he adds to the debate on reconceptualizing impact beyond research papers through actively engaging with knowledge in management education (Anderson et al., 2017).

Finally, Zietsma's contribution warns us to take a reflexive and critical stand as scholars in this ongoing discourse. She emphasizes the generative account of interactions with our research settings, especially when studying practices. Zietsma focuses on knowledge as a base for impactful theorizing and foregrounds the importance of researchers and practitioners co-creating research to create impact. In doing so, she reflects on the role of context and hegemony in creating impactful practice-based research and highlights the positionality of scholars and their contributions to the debate.

The contributors highlight different foci and diverse ways of impactful scholarly engagement—policymaking, public, teaching, or academic—which all aim to evoke impactful results along two dimensions of practicing impact and impacting practice, as shown in Figure 1.

Adopting this dialogic perspective is a promising means to explore the relationship between impact and practice theory. It allows us to unfold the co-constitutive process of practicing impact and impacting practice (see also MacIntosh et al., 2012). These two impact dimensions are thereby distinct yet interrelated, as the contributions show. While practicing impact emphasizes how scholars can be impactful through engaging in different elements of scholarly work, impacting practice accentuates the immediate impact that scholars can have on management practice. Both dimensions are, thus, interrelated and mutually stimulating parts of impactful

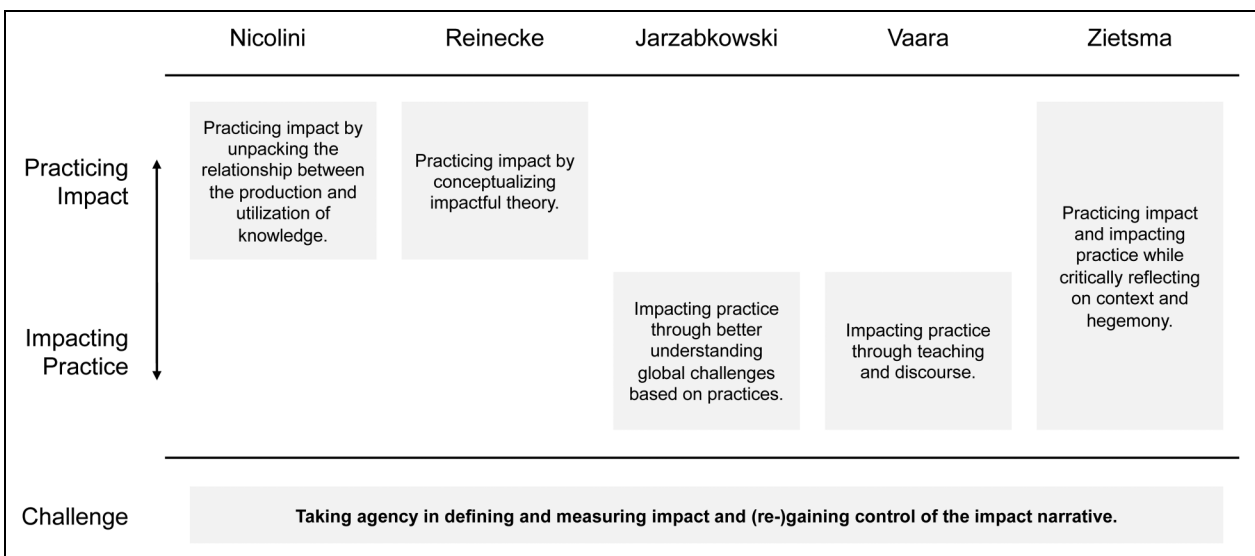
scholarship. Importantly, common to all contributors' pieces is the urgent call for us as scholars to reclaim agency in the debate on how we define and measure impact before it will be solely defined by external stakeholders outside of academia, similar to the external rankings of our academic journals by influential publishers.

We hope that this debate inspires many management scholars, including early career scholars like us, to critically reflect on their assumptions of impact and also on the way that their institutions define and demand the exercise of "impactful scholarship" from them. As the contributors show through various practical examples, diverse opportunities to practice impact emerge through the eyes of practice theory. With this debate, we aim to contribute to this central discussion on impact in academia by bridging the often-claimed gap between the academic world and the "real" world. Accordingly, as a growing number of panel discussions and symposia at the Academy of Management (e.g., 41 sessions in 2022, 34 sessions in 2023, and 166 submitted papers in 2023 focused on "impact" in their titles) and other academic conferences, along with a mounting number of publications addressing this topic (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2014; Baudoin et al., 2023; Friesike et al., 2022; Howard-Grenville et al., 2022; Paterson et al., 2023) show, this debate is an important contribution to advance the ongoing debate on scholarly impact.

## Impact From a Practice-Based Sensitivity Davide Nicolini

### *What Is in a Name: Impact Reconsidered*

The UK Economic and Social Research Council defines "research impact as the demonstrable contribution that



**Figure 1.** Overview of contributions.

excellent research makes to society and the economy. Research impact can derive from instrumental and conceptual use of research, as from research-based capacity building.” All this sounds very reasonable. But “What is in a name?” as Shakespeare once asked.

According to MacIntosh et al. (2017, p. 3), in everyday usage, “impact is defined as the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another.” In short, “impact” implies the idea of direct linear causality: a stimulus generates a response. This common-sense linear view originates in the instrumental view of research and knowledge (Beyer, 1997; see Nicolini et al., 2023). Because the relationship is linear, impact can be measured in terms of the breadth of adoption over time.

Practice-based scholarship problematizes this view in at least three ways. First, it questions the traditional linear view of the relations between knowledge/action (and theory/practice) that goes back to Aristotle. It invites us to rethink theory as a set of cognitive, perceptual, discursive (see Vaara’s contribution below) and affective resources that help us to read situations widely across subfields and “to link substantive problems across analytic levels and across substantive domains” (Lizardo, 2014). This way, theorized knowledge and scientific evidence nurture practical understanding in multiple ways by structuring the “anticipation-arousing ‘movement’” (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2011) that those involved in the activity come to share at least in part by virtue of their socialization and joint practice. The very ideas of knowledge utilization and impact are based on a flawed theory of action.

Second, and strictly related, practice-based scholarship questions the idea that research-based knowledge is a quasi-substance with no history, constituency, or disciplinary origins and constitutes an unquestioned form of objective evidence awaiting use by managers. This substantialist view is replaced by the idea that knowledge is always knowing, expertise situated in specific sociocultural, material, and historical contexts. Accordingly, knowing is not transferred, so much as re-constituted within these social formations, with the help of a multiplicity of mediatory resources that make the results of previous work present in the scene of action. The same stimulus can produce profoundly different responses. If such a thing as impact exists, it certainly cannot be captured by simplified linear stories or captured by rudimentary metrics, as Reinecke explains below.

Third, knowledge and research-based evidence are never only of the individual. They are sustained by and perpetuated through communities of practice, occupational cultures, epistemic cultures, and formalized and informal professional groups, all with their own sets of interests and often in competition, both facilitating and preventing the circulation of knowledge. To move research knowledge across the boundaries between these social formations requires substantial

(political) work produced by knowledge brokers, boundary spanners, and boundary objects (see Langley et al., 2019; Nicolini et al., 2022 for a review). In the process, research knowledge is translated, adapted, and often betrayed.

Taken together, the idea of a linear relationship between production and utilization is a crass simplification because the circulation of academic knowledge is a many-to-many relationship characterized by a complex and evolving web of stakeholders linked by different forms of interdependence and interconnections. We can usefully characterize this complex causal texture (Emery & Trist, 1965) as a dynamic political system with quasi-ecological properties. As a result, simplification – and actions based on simplified representations, can lead to catastrophic mistakes. This is the crux of the matter.

Practice-based scholarships also alerts us that applying a linear view of impact as a policy guide can produce long-term negative consequences, such as privileging instrumental and easy-to-consume forms of knowledge over other less immediate “impactful ones.” In the UK, Universities have closed scores of low-impact arts, languages, humanities, and social sciences courses, while the government is considering limiting the number of students studying in “low-earning” degrees (PA Media, 2022; Weale, 2021). Similar trends have been noted in the USA, Australia, and elsewhere (Newfield, 2022). While research shows that the establishment of a college alone increases a region’s innovativeness (Andrews, 2023), we have no idea what might happen if we select certain types of research and academic activities in an effort to produce “impact,” as narrowly defined above. The question is what will happen when we consume the intellectual capital accumulated in the past when less narrow views of academic work prevail. In an ecology, you destroy variety at your peril, as when the effect of eliminating certain species becomes clear, it might be too late. Jarzabkowski expresses the same sentiment below when she indicates that eliminating or altering seemingly “mundane practices” without regards for its consequences, risks to disrupt the delicate relational whole to which they belong.

### *Is It Just a Word?*

“Impact” is much more than a simple word. Rather, it is a dispositive, a nexus of discursive and material practices. This nexus of practice produces two related outcomes. It systematically forms the objects of which it speaks; that is, it concretizes impact through specific practices that measure and substantiate it (Foucault, 1972, p. 54). It then enables the discursive formation of “impact” to produce distinctive material effects in the real world. Among other things, the discourse of impact performs and emphasizes a productive and instrumental view of academia in general and business school in particular. Of course, the debate on the nature of the business school, whether they should be conceived as professional

training institutions or sites of scientific development – and what kind of scientific development is appropriate (the rigor vs. relevance debate) – is longstanding and complex. The issue here is that the discourse of impact resolves this debate in a specific way, stealthily imposing a particular view on the nature of academic work on academics. Other professional communities have been here already. Waring (2007) shows how the discourse of safety was used in early 2000 to survey and scrutinize medical activity and performance. Key to the managerial disciplinary use of safety was that it is difficult to argue against it: who can disagree with the general idea that healthcare should be safe? A practice-based scholarship helps to recognize “impact” as a similar project, a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1991 in Waring, 2007) that builds on active consent and willingness of individuals to participate in their own governance.

### *Reclaiming the Impact Narrative*

In summary, in this dialogue, I focused on what practice-based scholarship tells us about the nature of the debate. What is at stake is the pluralism of forms of scholarships and the autonomy of academic work. I think both are under threat should we accept the common-sense view of “impact” currently in use, as well as the version that retains the underlying linear and instrumental understanding. The message to JMI readers is clear: academics should not ignore the debate or leave it to the managers and administrators. We should regain control of the impact narrative and promote a research-based, forward-looking view of the idea of academic relevance that accommodates different types of scholarship, different temporalities, different interests, and different relationships between academic communities of practice and the many communities of practices that are hidden behind the simplistic idea of “practitioners.” It is often observed that Albert Einstein’s 1915 masterpiece “The Foundation of the General Theory of Relativity” would likely be rejected in modern journals (Wilczek, 2020). If it is true, as the newspapers of the time said, that only 12 men understood the theory of relativity, we can add that Einstein’s work would also have no impact. We start to accept that we have responsibilities and obligations to future generations regarding the biophysical environment. It is time to extend this sense of responsibility for the intellectual (and cultural) environment too.

### **Impactful Theory** *Juliane Reinecke*

How can we transcend a simplistic linear relationship between knowledge production and its utilization in practice, as Nicolini urges scholars to do? Here, I will argue that such a linear view of the relationship between knowledge

production and utilization is underpinned by another problematic dichotomy: the assumption that theory is separate from impact. This dichotomy between theory and impact is reflected in the argument that scholars must “get out of the theory cave” (Biggart, 2016) in order to produce more societally relevant management research. Implicit in this view is the assumption that theorizing comes “at the expense of producing socially valuable knowledge contributions” (Alvesson et al., 2017, p. 27). Indeed, scholars have lamented that too often management research focuses too much on trivial theory contributions that are only meaningful to “tiny research micro-tribes” rather than illuminating social phenomena in an original and insightful way (Alvesson et al., 2017).

However, this dichotomy only holds when one subscribes to a simplified version of what impact or ignores that theorizing is in itself a practice that intervenes in the world it seeks to theorize. Thus, we need to interrogate the entanglements of the practice of theorizing and the way it impacts society. This can lead us to embrace the twin notions of “impactful theory” and “theory-driven impact” (Reinecke et al., 2022).

### *Beyond a Simplified Notion of Impact*

An increasing chorus of management scholars have called for more societally relevant management research (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2014; Baudoin et al., 2023; Friesike et al., 2022; Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022; Howard-Grenville et al., 2022; Williams & Whiteman, 2021). However, a simplified notion of impact, broadly defined as a societal benefit beyond academia, is highly problematic. As a policy-driven quest for “impact,” it has largely been underpinned by a neoliberal agenda and market-driven investment logic. Publicly funded research needs to produce a tangible ROI, a return on (taxpayers’) investment into research. However, this is likely to lend itself towards the production of certain kinds of knowledge and certain types of researchers. Encouraged to play the relevance game, the danger is that theory production targets forms of knowledge that Aristotle calls “*techne*,” applied technical knowledge that plays into the instrumental or means-ends rationality of end users. In contrast, critical or emancipatory theories that profoundly challenge the perpetuation of economic growth or the comforts of consumer culture may attract fewer “users” who can testify to a tangible “effect on, change or benefit” to their practice – as impact is defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), 2022) already, leading the way toward funding decisions for research being made on direct applicability for its outcome for end users,

Relatedly, capturing the value of theoretical knowledge in terms of how much of it diffused to so-called “end users” or to the public at large is also likely to capture false positives – research that spreads not because of its intrinsic knowledge

value, but because it plays into the agenda of particular “beneficiaries” or attracts more attention. A simplified understanding of impact is likely to generate false positives by overlooking research that has real and substantial impact, but which is difficult to trace or measure because of a less tangible knowledge product, a more complex pathway to impact, and/or a longer timeframe for impact to manifest. Even in the natural sciences, research is hard to attribute to a singular study or research time, as the development of Covid-19 vaccines has shown (Cross et al., 2021). Seeking to attribute impact to a single source ignores how research is a collective endeavor that creates impact as members of a community of practice interact over time in often non-linear ways.

### *Theory Production as a Practice*

A more sophisticated notion of “impact” hence needs to do away with the problematic assumption of a linear relationship between knowledge production and utilization, as Nicolini points out, as well as challenge the separation of impact from theory. Theory has been defined as “a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints” (Bacharach, 1989, p. 496). But theorizing is also a practical accomplishment in its own right, produced by interactions within a community of practice. Theorizing practices—the scholarly work researchers do when forming informed knowledge theoretical claims—entails a wide variety of activities and associated forms of theorizing (Cornelissen et al., 2021). Thus, the social context in which knowledge production is practiced, will produce different types of theoretical knowledge. Rather than assuming that theory aims at “telling people in organizations what they should do,” a view that Jarzabkowski questions below, we need to understand the different ways in which theorizing may come to impact the world.

### *Three Pathways to Impactful Theory*

Thinking about theory production as both a practice in itself and part of the world that is being theorized about opens up the relationship between theory and impact. At the least, we can identify three main possibilities of the way in which practices of theorizing impact society (see also Reinecke et al., 2022).

The *first* and more traditional conceptualization of the theory-impact relationship directs our attention to what happens when theoretical knowledge travels to non-academic “end users” - specific target audiences or the public-at-large - who can utilize these theories for their purposes. Here, practice scholarship alerts us to the translation and editing processes that occur when practices travel from one domain or context to another (Ansari et al., 2014; Nicolini, 2012). Thus, theories are unlikely to transfer as is. Instead, “the

nature and use of knowledge changes dramatically as it is adopted and appropriated” (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 804). To return to Nicolini’s metaphor, the “impact” generated through the encounter of theories and their users likely involves friction, conflict and repurposing. As a result, the type of impact that could be traced is unlikely to be a faithful reflection of theoretical knowledge, but the product of myriad translation and editing processes at the intersection of different worlds of practice.

A *second* way of conceptualizing the theory-impact relationship involves a focus on the performativity of theorizing, which refers to “the constitution of new worlds through their articulation” (Garud & Gehman, 2019, p. 680). In its attempt to describe and explain, management theory ends up performing the world of management of organizations “rather than observing how it functions” (Callon, 1998, p. 2). The more successful and popular management theories become, the more they develop self-fulfilling tendencies (Ferraro et al., 2005). The scholarly introduction of new discourses and conceptual innovations, which Vaara highlights below, can significantly impact the way in which people in organizations view and enact the organizational worlds around them. Performativity thereby blurs the distinction between theory and impact, as theory is now inadvertently co-produced by end users.

Finally, the notion of theory “co-production” through collaborative forms of research such as engaged scholarship provides a *third*, increasingly advocated view (Bansal & Sharma, 2022; Hoffman, 2021; Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006), which also animates Zietsma’s contribution below. It promises to suspend the distinction between theory and practice altogether by merging the processes of knowledge production and use. Taking as starting point not academic paradigms but so-called “real-world” problems, it not only tolerates but embraces the fact that academics intervene and shape the social world that they study. In my own work as a problem-driven scholar using mainly inductive forms of inquiry, both the formation of research questions as well as theorizing typically begins in the field in dialogue with (so-called) practitioners. For instance, the neglected role of factory workers in theories of political CSR emerged from prior fieldwork on garment supply chains and then also animated our research collaboration with the Ethical Trading Initiative (e.g., Reinecke & Donaghey, 2021). In turn, any impact my work may have is most likely to originate in these reflective conversations along the research journey. Co-production of impact and theory is facilitated by specific methodologies, ranging from convening collaborative research that works directly with target populations themselves (Sharma & Bansal, 2020; see Zietsma, below) to scientific activism (Williams & Whiteman, 2021). At the most extreme of the interventionist spectrum are “scientivists” who often occupy hybrid position at the interface of academia and advocacy, and conduct scholarship with the explicit aim to create social change.



In sum, the notion of impactful theory challenges the implicit dichotomy between theory and impact and, instead, calls for “impactful theory” and “theory-driven impact.” This recognizes that pathways to impact are rarely linear as both theorizing and impact generation take place in intertwined communities of practice.

## Scholarship to Impact Practice

### *Paula Jarzabkowski*

Despite the terminology, practice-based scholarship is not scholarship aimed at influencing practice. Rather, it is scholarship grounded in social theories of practice (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984; Schatzki, 2002), that aims to explain how taken-for-granted social order is constructed within people’s everyday practices (Nicolini, 2009). To construct such explanations, scholars engage closely with everyday practice, using immersive methods, such as ethnography and in-depth interviewing, to examine those sayings and doings that people may be unaware of, or that they are not necessarily able to articulate (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2005). Practice-based theories are, to draw from Lewin’s Maxim, highly practical theories (Lewin, 1951).

The impact derived from practice-based scholarship is not focused on telling people in organizations what they should do. Rather, it is from doing what I term “exposing the mundane” (Chambliss, 1989), meaning explaining to research participants how they do their work and why they do it that way (the meanings they attribute to doing their work that way), which may be so familiar that it is invisible to them. Practice scholars can render their often ethnographic experience of a context visible to their participants, confronting them with practices that are so familiar that they are mundane - no longer remarkable or evident - and making those practices sufficiently “strange” that they can observe it through the researcher’s eyes (Tett, 2021).

While any context will have localized practices, the key principle of practice research is that the researcher becomes familiar with the corpus of such practices, which often span contexts (Schatzki, 2006). I and the teams I have worked with have had deep, immersive research in a range of contexts, from universities (e.g., Jarzabkowski, 2008), to telecommunications companies (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2019), to reinsurance markets (e.g., Jarzabkowski et al., 2015) to disaster risk financing initiatives (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek et al., 2022). In this process, we became familiar with the mundane practices of practitioners in a wide variety of contexts; practices as mundane as the way they dressed (e.g., Lynch, 1982; Smets et al., 2015) or the jokes they made (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). Of course, these practices were not the same, or did not hold the same meaning across contexts. Rather, as Nicolini notes above, these mundane practices come together as a nexus of practices within which a particular way of working is constituted and

makes sense to these practitioners and this context. To eliminate or alter one seemingly mundane practice would be to disrupt the delicate relational whole, both enabling change but also, potentially, underpinning collapse, as MacKenzie (2011) convincingly argued of the seemingly mundane changes in trading practices that led to the 2008 global financial crisis. We realized that these mundane practices we studied were important, underpinning the entire delivery of telecommunications within a country (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019), or enabling the capital flows from a global market to support reconstruction in Florida after a hurricane or Japan after an earthquake (Jarzabkowski & Bednarek, 2018). We thus became focused on finding ways to use our practice scholarship to reveal these mundane and yet important practices to practitioner and policy audiences. Not to advise them on what to do, but to help them be aware and able to reflexively consider how those practices mattered.

Our approach to impact has been successful by the scholarly and practice-based indicators valued by universities (see Wickert et al., 2021), as it has been submitted for impact case studies, and also, with reference to Reinecke’s points above, been the basis of some of our most significant theorizing. Yet, our efforts to prompt recognition of, and reflexivity over, mundane practices, has also faced some challenges. First, when mundane practices are revealed to a practitioner audience, they tend to acknowledge the familiarity of the practices, confirming and even laughing that “yes. That’s us.” Yet, somehow, they are also disappointed because we are providing a basis for reflection rather than a prescription around what they should do. This necessitates some reflexivity by us as scholars seeking impact. We are not simply holding up a mirror, given our own hermeneutic cycle of interpreting our participants’ practice to ourselves and to them (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017; Robinson & Kerr, 2015). Hence, we need to take our participants on the journey of reflection with us. We do this by holding workshops, writing revelatory case material and reports in which they can “see” and revisit their practice through our eyes, and providing spaces for talking about and reflecting on those practices. In doing so, we generate a language and set of tools for our participants that, as Vaara notes below, enables them to discuss their practice beyond the specifics of their immediate job. Our aim is to re-assert their expertise in their contexts and their practices, and support them in reflecting on and reconfiguring those practices.

Second, just because we as researchers have a deep understanding of a problem, how it works, and why it presents challenges to practitioners or policymakers, that does not mean that either our invitations to reflect, or our theories will be adopted. While universities and higher education funding bodies seem to work on an assumption that if research is good, and develops good theory, it will be adopted - be impactful - that is not our experience.

Our knowledge is often deep and can and does point to looming problems. Yet, policymakers are not necessarily in want of a solution to these problems. Political cycles are typically short and election-focused. Research that contributes to policy needs to strike a moment in a political cycle in which the problem and the researchers' associated knowledge is salient to those policymakers. High quality practice-based research with enormous potential for impact may, therefore, meet a moment at which practitioners and policymakers do not wish to reflect upon or reconfigure their practices. This can be very frustrating, particularly when the problem is urgent (Williams & Whiteman, 2021). Again, reflexivity is needed by the research team to cope with this frustration. We have often needed to remind ourselves that our purpose as academics is to develop sound theory, grounded in practice (Reinecke et al., 2022; Wickert et al., 2021). As Reinecke notes, our theories are likely to have impact beyond the specific instances of the practices we sought to transform. Hence, an appreciation of the interplay between theory and practice and their respective places in impact is important.

Therefore, my closing point, built from my work and that of the gifted team members with whom I have conducted immersive practice studies, and our efforts to have practice-based impact, is to be persistent (Bednarek et al., 2023). The job of practice scholars is to make their findings available, to render them as "real" as possible to enable practitioners to reflect upon them, and to leave good traces of them, through reports, stories, and cases, so that they can be found and picked up in the future if answers are sought. Alongside this, we need to have the humility to which Zietsma refers, recognizing that we may not have answers, or that others may not look to us for answers. The value of our findings and our theories may accord no short-term value or acclaim by those who might benefit from them (Baudoin et al., 2023; Reinecke et al., 2022; Wickert et al., 2021), and they may be picked up and used in ways that were not our intention. We therefore need persistence, in the face of the fact that whatever impact we can have will likely be contained to specific instances of inspiring reflexivity in others in their practice (see Vaara and Zietsma), and in sharing our theories for other scholars to take forward (see Reinecke). And yet our persistence in the impactful practices of our scholarly field (see Nicolini) remains important because the large-scale challenges that we face as a world are not simply technical, but also profoundly social, necessitating continued practice-based studies of the social world.

## **Discourses, Concepts and Impact**

### **Eero Vaara**

We often associate impact with new research findings or their applications that help to better understand or deal with specific

organizational concerns or even bigger societal issues (Aguinis et al., 2014; Vaara & Durand, 2012). Alternatively, we can look at impact as something that takes places in and through our activities such as engagement with the organizations we study and work with (Hoffman, 2021; van de Ven, 2007). But how does this impact happen or take place, and what are the practices it involves? In my view, we have far too long focused on knowledge dissemination or co-creation without pausing to think what that means in terms of the communicative practices involved. In this short piece, I therefore want to focus our attention on an essential but often overlooked part of impact: discursive practices. More specifically I wish to argue that it is often through spreading and legitimation of existing frameworks or discourses that we as scholars have impact and that at times this also involves new conceptual innovations that are particularly interesting when seeking to implement change.

This argument is based on my long-term interest in discursive perspectives and the ways in which reality is socially constructed in communication. This is not to say that only discourse matters but to highlight the role of discursive practices – linked with other social practices – in how we create impact. This, I believe, complements the previous arguments about the need to rethink or problematize the very essence of impact by Davide Nicolini and Juliane Reinecke as well as the points about collaboration made by Paula Jarzabkowski and Charlene Zietsma.

To focus on concepts is not a new idea. In organization and management studies, people have already elaborated on the role of concepts in practical relevance (Kieser et al., 2015; Nicolai & Seidl, 2010). This view can be associated with different traditions, such as Luhmann's ideas about communication or Wittgensteinian language games. Others have then reflected on the role of discourses in knowledge production in the academia, drawing on Bourdieusian or Foucauldian traditions. This is also what I have tried to do to an extent in the context of management education (Vaara & Fay, 2011, 2012). What I want to highlight based on all this, is the simple idea that we make sense of the world through language, and that this language can either reproduce what we already know or create new understanding (Vaara & Whittle, 2022). In other words, when we as scholars engage with others, this involves discourses and more specifically concepts through which we reason, propose and share ideas, engage in conversations or even debates, and ultimately reinforce or change the way we or others think and act. In a word, these are the discursive practices we need to make sense of the world and act upon it.

What does this mean? Let me start by the obvious arena that nevertheless often tends to be backgrounded in our reflections on impact: teaching. In the bigger scheme of things, it is perhaps not the papers we write but what we do with the tens, hundreds or thousands of students we encounter. When we are teaching them, we more or less

automatically or sometimes more selectively draw on the theories and frameworks we see as most relevant. By so doing, we often reproduce and legitimate what is commonly accepted as relevant or important, by which I essentially mean the broader discourses we as teachers or students have got used to (Vaara & Faÿ, 2012). Making bigger changes in these discourses is notoriously difficult. For example, in our Bourdieusian analysis (Vaara & Faÿ, 2012), we tried to illuminate the overwhelming institutional forces of reproduction and thus explain how problematic it is to implement change in management education, not to speak of management practices. However, at times, not too often though, we can effect change and make people think differently; for example, through the problematization of their experiences or the introduction of new discourses (Vaara & Faÿ, 2012). More specifically, in our teaching and encounters with students, we can develop and share new conceptual frameworks that help them adopt new perspectives and start to use new concepts. Is this important? Yes, it is, if we think for example about how to help our MBA students tackle climate change, which requires systems change and accordingly new discourses and concepts. Sometimes it means that we as scholars can be part of making conceptual innovations that matter.

As to engagement with companies and other organizations, we may oftentimes think that it is the ultimate findings we produce and publish that have impact. Not so often in my view. Based on my own experiences and learning from others, it seems far more often that the impact we make happens when we are engaging with our partners – a view that resonates with Jarzabkowski's and Zietsma's perspectives as well as Reinecke's third view. In my thinking, this puts communication and discourses and concepts in the center stage. If we are reproducing what practitioners already know or if we use academic jargon that does not make sense to them, the impact tends to be very limited. However, if we have something new to say that resonates with the practitioners, there is an opportunity to achieve fundamental impact. This can at times mean introducing discourses or conceptual frameworks that we know, but the practitioners do not – implying that we as scholars are helping them to learn by acting as translators or the like. But sometimes we can also discover new phenomena and concepts together, which is probably rare, but can have a huge impact on the organization – and push our theoretical work forward.

In sum, I think the time has come for us to reflect on the role of discursive practices in our academic work. This is not to say that only discourses matter, but to emphasize the role of discursive practices alongside other social practices in creating impact. It is clear to me that the discourses and concepts we use are a fundamental part of the impact we can make. Oftentimes we reproduce things with limited impact, but sometimes we can play crucial roles in making

conceptual innovations that matter. I don't think we have come far in this reflection, but I do know that this involves a set of questions that especially we practice-oriented scholars should think about.

## **Collaborative Interventions to Impact Practice**

### **Charlene Zietsma**

As academics, we have resources available to us that practitioners typically lack. First, we have the time (and requirement) to read and study broadly. This exposes us to a large number of cases and studies featuring large sample sizes, usually presented with enough contextual detail to allow us to think about the factors that influence observed outcomes. When coupled with our training to think critically and in abstract terms, we are able to ask questions like: What is this a case of? What is affecting observed phenomena and under which conditions? And What are the mechanisms by which this process works? Thus, our broad exposure and critical training allow us to look beyond the exigencies of the immediate situation to identify new insights, and deeply consider the potential transferability of insights to new situations. Our broad exposure and critical thinking allow us to identify taken for granted assumptions that are embedded in local practices, and which thereby construct local social realities. These affordances of our role allow us to produce, co-produce, challenge and extend the impactful theory to which Juliane Reinecke called our attention.

Further, as academics, we have the resources and epistemic authority to affect social conditions. As Paula Jarzabkowski noted above, we can enable social groups to confront and question the way they reproduce their social reality by surfacing their assumptions (Tett, 2021). We can also try to make a direct impact on practice while doing impactful research at the same time by trying to influence people's assumptions and behavior. In effect, teaching is an example of how we do this all the time in our roles as academics, as Eero Vaara noted.

We must be very cautious about any such research intervention, however, and the teaching we do. Management research is highly skewed to western, large firm contexts, and white, male, straight, conventionally abled and cis-gendered subjects. We, too, can reproduce (and extend) inequalities and hegemonic power structures through our own behavior if we aren't critically reflecting ourselves, and working with others that can help us to confront our own assumptions and open them to questioning.

Coming from academe and theory, what we often lack is deep and tacit knowledge of local practices within different social contexts and their underpinning sets of norms and values. The concept of institutional voids provides an illustrative example. Researchers initially noted the relative

absence of western-style formal institutions such as capital markets in contexts in the global south and elsewhere (Khanna & Palepu, 1997). Yet, assuming that what would be needed to improve those contexts would simply be the development of western-style formal institutions would be inappropriate. Those “voids” are not void at all, but filled with informal institutions and practices that would not easily (or appropriately) be supplanted by externally imposed formal institutions (Bothello et al., 2019; Mair et al., 2012; Mair & Marti, 2009; Nason & Bothello, 2023). Using the term “void” can signal the discourse of western hegemony, and while Mair and colleagues have enriched and complicated the concept, Bothello and colleagues want to jettison it instead. As Eero Vaara noted above, our concepts and discourses matter.

This conceptual development by researchers draws attention to the need for any interventions by action researchers and practitioners to work with and be sensitive to the informal institutions that exist in a context. If knowledge from outside is to have impact, it must be contextually bridged, involving co-creation with local actors (McKague et al., 2015). Practice theory is well positioned to enable this, with its deep engagement with local sayings and doings and its attention to context, as Davide Nicolini noted above.

Yet, we also often lack key resources which would make such co-creation possible: trusting relationships and influence with those we seek to impact, the mandate (and budget) to intervene, and the on-the-ground insights that can guide real-time adaptation. Fortunately, we can both impact practice and practice impact by working together with interveners like local and international NGOs, that have those relationships and on the ground insights, and by working directly with target populations themselves. We can co-design, test and evaluate interventions that are more likely to work and that have a theoretical underpinning, allowing us to advance theory, develop best practices and impact real-world problems at the same time. Importantly, we need humility to be able to intervene in a way that creates positive and lasting social change because we have to let go of the idea that we know the answers and instead work hard to understand and collaborate with others.

For example, to try to understand precarious and necessity-based entrepreneurship in rural Sri Lanka, an area of considerable poverty, our research team interviewed local entrepreneurs and worked with local and international NGO facilitators of entrepreneurship in these locations (Slade Shantz et al., 2023). We noted that while rural Sri Lankan entrepreneurs’ businesses showed very little innovation, rural Sri Lankans were innovative in other domains, such as in cooking, dress and how they managed their daily lives. Working with our NGO partners, we developed an intervention, informed by theories about institutional norms, that reminded entrepreneurs that they were already innovative at home, and urged them to “port” these

innovative norms into their businesses. The entrepreneurs we worked with did become more innovative in their businesses, and they enjoyed doing so, knowing they were already innovative in other areas. The NGO partners we worked with then launched our successful training program with about 7000 other entrepreneurs and the local entrepreneurship trainers we used extended the program’s reach even further.

To accomplish social impact, we academics brought knowledge of theory and pedagogy and a willingness to learn about local norms and practices, as well as an understanding of what has worked and not worked in multiple other locations. Our partners brought knowledge of local norms and practices, networks of entrepreneurs and their supporters, and a willingness to experiment with us and learn from those experiments. We all brought financial resources to achieve our objectives. The entrepreneurs we worked with brought their life experiences and an openness to change.

We must remember, of course, that the social impact process is also fraught. Changing social norms can have dramatic impacts on a context, many of which are not positive. Because we often work with wicked problems, which feature interdependent issues and people, affecting the context in one way can create unintended consequences. Academics and NGOs have their own objectives and (typically) western biases. Interventions may be inappropriate, or may not last beyond the period of their support by external actors (van Wijk et al., 2020). West does not know best – co-creation, with humility, is necessary. We must constantly be reflexive and collaborative to ensure the social impact we make is positive from the perspective of those participating in and receiving it. Yet, the idea that we can practice impact, impact practice and impact theory at the same time is an objective worth pursuing.

## Concluding Remarks

### *Yanis Hamdali & Lorenzo Skade*

Impact is a controversial and manifold concept that is evolving from being measured through citations of research articles to a more pluralistic conceptualization of impact for different stakeholders. Practice theories serve as a theoretical medium that can explain these relationships and that help us understand how scholars can be impactful in many different ways.

This curated debate supports such a pluralistic view (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2014) of impact. Applying a practice lens, the contributors reflected upon the positional role of researchers in contributing and framing the impact discourse and suggested different ways of practicing impact and impacting practice. On the one hand, Reinecke and Nicolini pointed out how impact can be conceptualized and how scholars can practice impact when engaging in different aspects of

scholarly work. On the other hand, Jarzabkowski and Vaara elaborated on how scholars can impact practice by influencing management practice through working closely with practitioners in the field and in the classroom. These two dimensions of practicing impact and impacting practice are thereby interrelated and mutually stimulating parts of impactful scholarship, as these contributions showed. Knowledge, as Zietsma indicated, is a backbone of all impact, and as scholars, all of us are urged to reflect our individual positions critically in framing the impact debate.

Understanding impact as a duality of practicing impact and impacting practice can enable academic scholars to navigate the ongoing discourse, reflect upon their own position as scholars, and explore opportunities within their research, teaching, and service. We, as early career scholars, are intrigued by these important discussions and the resulting exciting opportunities for engaging in critical reflections on what impactful research can be and why it is much needed. At the same time, we often experience in talks and panels at academic conferences or workshops how senior academics urge us to think beyond journal publications and the determined expectations of our communities, arguing that it is “not enough to just publish academic articles.” While we understand and share this call for impact beyond academic boundaries, we also feel the tension of needing to accomplish even more, having not even managed the craft of publishing academic papers successfully yet. We think that this is an essential point to keep in mind when talking to junior scholars about impactful work. In turn, we claim that it is even more critical to invite junior scholars to commit to such practicing of impact. We hope that the further engagement of early career scholars facilitates a reconfiguration of management and organization research practice. One example of such practicing by early career researchers could be the imagining of an alternative future of scholarship and the sharing of ambitions to serve the public through such scholarship (Baudoin et al., 2023).

As a result, we understand that the important contributions of this curated debate can only be a starting point for future discussions that researchers—both senior and junior scholars—need to have with each other and with practitioners. As some critical voices have often lamented that the impact discourse only contributes to producing more academic publications where we speak *about each other*, we sincerely hope to see more discussions such as this debate in which we speak *with each other*. As such, practicing impact has to be understood as a process that unfolds dialogically to learn and change the practice of management research. This process entails a reflection on the inherent dynamics of scholarship as a practice itself (Antonacopoulou, 2009). Practicing impact is, then, not only a replication of practices but also constitutes the co-creating of scholarship (Sharma et al., 2022; Sharma & Bansal, 2020) together with other researchers, practitioners, and students as a practice. This

dialogue is an illustration of practicing impact through the commitment to talking to each other, learning, endorsing, and acknowledging difference by asking challenging questions and by asking them differently to showcase multiple *impacts*. By embracing the process of practicing impact, we thereby invite scholars from all career stages to join the conversation and contribute to the advancement of impactful, practice-based scholarship.

Motivated to contribute to the growing debate on impact by infusing fresh thoughts that build on a practice-based approach, we hope that this dialog piece inspires scholars to embrace practicing impact, thereby impacting scholarly and management practice. We have curated contributions from seasoned scholars to provide much-needed depth and texture to the ongoing debate and tangible ideas for management and organization scholars.

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