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Pluralism not triangulation: A commentary on Joep Cornelissen's 'The problem with propositions'.

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Professor Cornelissen performs the important task of clarifying the form and shortcomings of ‘propositional grammar’ as the dominant style of theorizing within our field. This grammar prioritizes the refinement of the syntax of a favoured theory or logic - such as “Gioia Methodology” (e.g., Gioia et al, 2013; endnote 2) – by striving to improve the internal coherence of its assumptions and refine its ‘claims about how and why constructs or variables are related’<sup>1</sup>. Its chief limitation, Professor Cornelissen contends, is its prioritizing of making connections between ‘constructs or variables’ instead of developing explanations based upon attention to the ‘inner nature’ of phenomena. As a result, propositional grammar generates avoidable ‘fallacies’ and ‘false positives’ that ‘cannot be easily corrected within the grammar itself’. Adoption of a ‘phenomenon-based perspective’ combined with ‘triangulation’ of multiple theoretical grammars is commended to overcome the shortcomings of propositionalism.

It is possible to affirm Professor Cornelissen’s characterization and assessment of propositional grammar without assuming the possibility of attending directly to the ‘inner nature’ of phenomena, or accepting ‘theoretical triangulation’ as the replacement for propositionalism. In this commentary, a broader, more inclusive vision for ‘chang[ing] our overall approach to theory’ is commended.

Professor Cornelissen criticises propositional grammar for apprehending phenomena of interest from *within theory* so that they are (reductively) identified as self-referential instances of the researcher’s favoured theory. Instead of basing inquiry upon ‘contextually *accurate definitions* of phenomena’ (emphasis added) and developing the means of ‘maximally explaining’ phenomena of interest, propositional grammar is seen to rely upon

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<sup>1</sup> All single comma quotes are drawn from Cornelissen (2023). Their purpose is to enable readers to identify where, and evaluate how, this commentary is anchored in that text.

‘ideal-typical and simplified representations’. To its critics, the resulting explanations are unduly ‘susceptible to error’.

Professor Cornelissen proposes a ‘radical break’ with propositional grammar that (i) pays close attention to the specificities of phenomena of interest; and (ii) triangulates different grammars of theory (see ‘Table 1’) ‘besides the propositional one’. This alternative, it is claimed, provides the means of ‘prob[ing] the robustness of any explanation and infer[ing] the best or most likely’ explanation (Inference to the Best Explanation, IBE), as evaluated by applying criteria such as ‘consilience’, ‘importance’, etc.

Unaddressed is the question of how grammars with differing ontologies (e.g., ‘propositional theorizing’ and ‘process theorizing’, see ‘Table 1’) can be coherently combined in ‘theoretical triangulation’. It is assumed that grammars agree on the specific ‘virtues’, or criteria for IBE as well as the meaning of those virtues. Yet, how, for example, are the recursive and conjunctive styles of process theory (Cloutier and Langley, 2020) to be made compatible with propositional theorizing without privileging or violating one of these grammars? The recursive style embraces ‘a more processual ontology where phenomena are embedded in social interactions, continually changing and mutually constituting each other across levels and over time’ (Cloutier and Langley, 2020: 14); and the conjunctive style aspires to ‘describe the dynamic experiential interpenetration of phenomena that are very often taken to be separate and distinct in other styles of theorizing’ (Cloutier and Langley, 2020: 14). A response to this charge might be that the procedure of theoretical triangulation selects a congruent variant of process theory to ensure compatibility. But, if so, this stratagem diminishes the *differences* between the multiple grammars that provide the warrant for the claim that theoretical triangulation gives ‘more confidence’ regarding IBE. There is also the question of the plausibility of the ‘phenomenon-based perspective’ (P-B P) (Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019: 496) upon which theoretical triangulation depends. P-B P ‘starts

with a collection of *facts or observations* about a phenomenon' (emphasis added) such that 'the stock of knowledge...is characterized *independently of any theory*' (emphasis added). But are 'observed facts' independent of theory; or are those 'facts' unavoidably theory-dependent? The question is begged when, on reflection, it is determined that social reality is 'not located in objective facts' but, rather, is 'located in the sense made of facts...' (Gioia, 2003: 286) by different theoretical grammars.

When 'observations' and 'facts' are conceived to be theory-laden, phenomena are seen to be represented by constructs that characterize them as, for example, entities or as "temporary instantiations of ongoing processes, continually in a state of becoming" (Langley et al, 2013: 5). If, within the procedure of theoretical triangulation, phenomena are theorized as 'ongoing processes', there is an inconsistency with the reasoning strategy (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010) typical of the grammar of propositional theorizing. As incompatibilities between grammars, as contrasted to complementarities, disrupt and discredit the procedure of triangulation, it may be asked whether it is 'for reasons of theoretical parsimony and consistency', rather than expediency, that Professor Cornelissen omits 'interpretive and critical grammars' from his proposed replacement for propositionalism. In those grammars, phenomena are conceived to be in a process of becoming and/or contested. Their consideration places in doubt the self-evidence of 'observable facts' and 'observed regularities...separate from and prior to our theorizing', upon which Professor Cornelissen's proposal is founded. By default, if not by design, the procedure of theoretical triangulation contributes, performatively, to the naturalization of the status quo. Conversely, its rejection opens up space for the pursuit of alternative, less conservative grammars of inquiry.

The limitations of propositional grammar are compellingly exposed by Professor Cornelissen. But its proposed replacement, in common with propositionalism, is presented as *the* means of 'better explain[ing] phenomena in management research'. Other possibilities are excluded as

deficient, according to its conception of science. A pluralist alternative, as proposed here, recognizes propositionalism as one of several grammars that produce distinctive bodies of knowledge (Willmott, 2008). Propositionalism exemplifies a grammar whose *interest* is in increasing prediction and control of phenomena by identifying “integrative” or “generative” mechanisms’ (note 3). Other grammars aspire to improve mutual understanding or seek to facilitate more flourishing and ecologically sustainable ways of organizing and managing (Willmott, 2003), as Professor Cornelissen acknowledges elsewhere (Cornelissen, Höllerer & Seidl, 2021).

As conceived here, grammars are oriented by distinctive interests and warranted by members of different epistemic communities. Researchers working within, and sometimes between, those communities may share an aspiration ‘to create a more *complete* outline of a phenomenon’ (emphasis added). But what is considered to be ‘more complete’ is contingent upon the particular grammar, guided by distinctive interests, that addresses and conveys the reality of phenomena. In contrast, P-B P disregards the intent and effects of interest-guided theory in characterizing phenomena and/or presumes its capacity to transcend such interests.

Acceptance of Professor Cornelissen’s criticisms of propositional grammar, while rejecting its proposed replacement, potentially increases the space for other, non-propositional grammars. It is a prospect resonant with the espoused aim of the Academy of Management (AOM): to ‘build a vibrant and supportive community of scholars by markedly *expanding opportunities* to connect and explore ideas’(emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>. Establishing its Critical Management Studies (CMS) Division, for example, has contributed to legitimizing and expanding the space for exploring ideas that previously were marginalized or suppressed. When, moreover, the *grammar* of critical theorising is prioritized (Alvesson, Bridgman &

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<sup>2</sup> <https://aom.org/about-aom>

Willmott, 2009), rather than the *partitioning* of critical thinking within the AOM's divisional structure, it is evidently applicable to all areas of study. 'Critical leadership studies' (CLS), for example, frames practices widely described as leadership with their complicity in the endorsement and masking of relations of domination manifest as the subordinations and exclusions of sexism, racism, climate injustice, etc. CLS thereby contribute to the 'calling out' and elimination, rather than perpetuation, of oppressive relations.

Professor Cornelissen's proposal is intended to make a 'change to our overall approach to theory'. His advocacy of change is to be applauded but it is insufficient. Additionally, institutions and practices that foster, and potentially fulfil, the vision of change must be created or strengthened. Since Professor Cornelissen is silent on the question of institutional change, the impression is given that the force of his argument alone will achieve the 'radical break' from propositionalism. That, perhaps, is because 'theoretical triangulation' retains the *objective* of the dominant, propositional style of theorizing as well as its "one best way" logic. In contrast, the pluralist vision of management research advocated here incorporates the requirement of institutional change.

Within the province of AOM, one area of institutional change concerns the appointment of editorial review boards (ERBs) and associate editors (AEs) to its stable of journals. ERB composition and AE selection could be reformed to correct the under-representation of scholars working with marginalized and devalued grammars, such as those side-lined by Professor Cornelissen. Occasionally, there are flickering signs of such reform, notably at Academy of Management Learning and Education (AMLE). But much more could be done by elected and appointed officers of the AOM to facilitate and accelerate a transformative diversification of scholarly grammars in our field.

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