




Theory Article

Caring, Courage and Curiosity: Reflections on our roles as scholars in organizing for a sustainable future

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic made important societal issues even more pressing and poignant to organizations. I explore how the pandemic surfaced attention to the vulnerability and resilience of organizations and organizing, and reflect on our responsibility as organizational scholars to think and act differently about our work as a result. I consider how we might do this individually and collectively, arriving at suggestions for how to advance organization theory and its relevance to contemporary organizing through: (1) directing our care to multiple issues that need attention; (2) having the courage to step away from familiar modes of inquiry and styles of theorizing to explore these; and (3) using our curiosity to develop nuanced explanations that match the complex, systemic nature of the issues themselves.

Keywords

complexity, interdependence, organization theory, resilience, responsibility, sustainability, systems, vulnerability

Organization theory, like organizing itself, is at a critical juncture. The Covid-19 pandemic, through what it reveals about vulnerabilities at the heart of organizational life, and what it demands of organizing for a more resilient, inclusive and responsible future, has prompted many to reflect. To what extent does organization theory consider or contribute to important

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issues facing organizations and organizing today? If theory is taken as elegant models and reductionist predictions (Ghoshal, 2005) for phenomena that we know are far more complex, systemic and interdependent (Howard-Grenville, 2020), then our current modes of theorizing largely fall short. The problem is not so much *what* we do, which is to closely attend to organizational phenomena at multiple levels of analysis and seek rigorous explanations for these, but *how* we typically do this, through entering established theoretical conversations and extending these, often with limited attention to whether these adequately capture complexity or resonate with those who face daily the challenges of contemporary organizing.

If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that organizing is irreducibly interdependent with social, economic and natural systems, and that decisions made and actions taken by all manner of organizations have profound effects on human suffering or thriving. We as scholars *do* have something valuable to contribute but we must expand our modes of engaging with and theorizing organizational phenomena to match the nature of these in the 21st century. Further, we must accept theory for what it is – a guide that drives further inquiry and iteration (Ghoshal, 2005) and, ultimately, *action* on the urgent issues of our times – and not as an end in itself.

This essay is built from my keynote talk at the 36th EGOS Symposium, held virtually in July 2020 and on the theme of ‘Organizing for a sustainable future: responsibility, renewal and resistance’. Naturally, the talk reflected on the pandemic. I considered how it forced us all – as organizational scholars and as human beings living through this difficult time – to confront uncomfortable truths about sustainability, organizations and organizing. I argued for us to use our collective exposure to vulnerability and resilience to consider how we can orient our scholarship more fruitfully towards addressing critical societal issues of our day that relate to organizations and organizing. Many of us know, deep down, what we ought to do. Much has already been written on the need to make our

research relevant to practice (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Sharma & Bansal, 2020), to orient to societal issues and grand challenges (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016; Tihanyi, 2020) and to expand our modes of theorizing (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen & Höllerer, 2020; Hannah, 2020; Shaw, Bansal, & Gruber, 2017). I am certainly not the first to reflect on these vital matters. The challenge remains *how* to do it.

Indeed, the questions raised during the keynote centred on ‘how?’ How do we – as individuals and as a community bound by powerful institutional forces – foreground contemporary issues in our scholarly work? How can we do what we do best – conduct rigorous research that builds organizational theory – and contribute to critical issues and debates confronting organizations and society? Ultimately, how can our scholarship influence organizing that supports human thriving and sustains the planet?

I wished I had good answers to these questions. I was reminded that, over the years ‘our theories and ideas have done much to strengthen the management practices that we are all now so loudly condemning’ (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 75). More recent reflections put a more optimistic spin on organizational theory and ideas, and outline how organizational scholars can be problem- and phenomenon-oriented, engage pluralism in theorizing, and pursue questions that are consequential to society and generative of further inquiry (Cornelissen, 2017; Etzion & Gehman, 2019; Hannah, 2020; Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019; Tihanyi, 2020).

I agree, broadly, with these observations and calls to action. In many ways, I suppose, my own career reflects these themes and their tensions. I have been studying ‘sustainability’ (we called it ‘environmental management’ back then) since long before it was considered a legitimate issue in the field of organization studies. As a doctoral student in the late 1990s I was advised to highlight theoretical contributions for fear of being branded a ‘tree hugger’. As a result, my early papers (e.g. Howard-Grenville, 2005; Howard-Grenville, 2007; Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, &

Mao, 2011) on how people influence their companies to adopt more sustainable practices are not key worded in a way that would enable someone interested in this phenomenon to find them. I conformed to the felt need to contribute first and foremost to the theoretical conversations that animated our journals. Yet, as a qualitative researcher I also got excited about puzzles that arose from empirical settings, and as a result never dwelled in any single theoretical conversation for long. Fast forward to now, when I consider that, as an editor, I have an opportunity and obligation to help publish work that engages with important societal issues, including sustainability, while pushing forward rigorous theorizing (Howard-Grenville, Buckle, Hoskins, & George, 2014; George et al, 2016; Howard-Grenville et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, I still came up short in answering ‘how’ we can publish and theorize yet also contribute to issues that matter to ourselves and others, issues that have only become more pressing through the lens of the pandemic. Looking back on my own career only brought further feelings of discomfort that our scholarly work might ultimately add up to little that matters to the wider world. Watching my children – one high school and one university age – ready themselves to go out into the world, I cannot look them (and their peers, our students and soon-to-be students) in the eye and feel confident that my work over the years will make a difference to the problems the planet will face in their lifetimes. Stuck, I turned to Jane Dutton’s beautiful, personal and moving essay ‘Breathing life into organizational studies’ (2003). If you have not read it yet, you should. I have read it multiple times throughout my career and there are only two constants. Every time I read it, I cry. And, every time I read it, I feel emboldened to carry on. You see, Dutton’s essay reveals what many of us may feel: that we entered this field because we care deeply about how organizations shape not just employees’ work lives, but other aspects of their – and others’ – lives. On some level, many of us may want to influence – not simply understand – how organizations and organizing might (better) support human (and

planetary) thriving. Yet, as Dutton’s essay reflects, we can become weighed down by our many professional demands and obligations, perhaps short of ideas that excite us, critical of others’ ideas, and low on energy to pursue even the projects that once ignited our interest (Dutton, 2003). She describes her own coming ‘back to life’ by engaging organizational questions that were deeply meaningful to her, and finding in her research settings inspiring examples of vibrancy, energy and resilience. Indeed, Dutton’s published work on compassion and high-quality relationships (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006) is ground-breaking for its attention to these positive organizational processes and how they underpin organizational and human thriving. So, it can be done. We can figure out how to pursue questions of relevance to organizations, that we are passionate about, and publish great research that generates new ways of seeing and theorizing organizational phenomena.

But how do more of us do this, and feel emboldened in making a start when we know we may only scratch the surface initially in understanding and addressing the complex societal challenges we face? My reflections led me to three themes that I hope might help other organizational scholars reflect on our craft – research and theorizing – and how we can orient it to the urgent issues facing our organizations and societies. These themes are personal answers to the ‘how’ questions posed above – in part because so much has already been written about these questions from the point of view of the field and discipline, and in part because as I am learning more about systems I recognize that at the core of seemingly immovable system dynamics are the ideas that we each carry around in our heads.

These three themes are care, courage and curiosity. I develop each of these at the end of the essay, but here’s the short version. First, enacting individual and collective *caring* in scholarly work can be an authentic entry point to great research and useful theory development, not an aspect of ourselves that we must suppress to do good social science. Second, it takes *courage* to

‘drop our tools’ (Weick, 1993) of familiar methods and theories. But, when we recall that our theories were borne out of fundamentally different and increasingly distant economic and social conditions surrounding the rise of corporations in the 1950s and 1960s (Davis, 2010), we should be emboldened to stop incrementally reshaping their well-worn grooves and strike off on new paths opened up by the organizations and issues that comprise the landscape – and horizon – of today’s world. Finally, the desire and felt obligation to ‘have influence’ and ‘be relevant to practice’ can deflect us from the value of *curiosity* that is at the heart of any scholarly discipline. We are not only paid to, but particularly good at, thinking, integrating, questioning, explaining and reflecting. We must conceive of our curiosity as central to our value-added, and orient ourselves to contributing in a sustained way – neither ‘solving’ nor simply grabbing a glimmer of attention on Twitter – to important debates in organizations and society.

I now turn to the more specific topic of my EGOS keynote – what the Covid-19 pandemic revealed about organizing and sustainability, and what we might learn from it to apply to our scholarship.

Covid-19 and Seeing Anew

Covid-19 and its ensuing and ongoing economic and social repercussions only served to amplify the importance of the 2020 EGOS conference theme, ‘Organizing for a Sustainable Future: Responsibility, Renewal & Resistance’. This theme was already timely. Prior to the pandemic, the state of the planet and the well-being of the great majority of its human and other inhabitants was already imperilled. Consider, for example, that global CO_{2eq} emissions had been trending steadily up, increasing roughly 25% since the Kyoto agreement entered force in 2005 (Levin & Lebling, 2019). Despite immense progress, roughly 10% of the world’s population still lived in extreme poverty, defined as less than \$US1.90 per day. Gender and racial inequality were persistent, not least at the highest levels of business; among FTSE 100

companies, only 6% of CEOs are female (Fawcett Society, 2020) and there are no women of colour. And, the year 2020 had been declared a ‘Super Year’ for biodiversity by the United Nations, recognizing that 75% of the Earth’s land surface is already ‘significantly altered’ and we stand to lose a million species over the next three decades (IPBES, 2019).

As the conference theme recognized, organizations – businesses and others – are collectively responsible for where we are today. Yet organizations and organizing are also inescapably central to working towards and achieving a more sustainable future. The pandemic brutally exposed some uncomfortable truths about sustainability, organizations and organizing that make these discussions even more urgent. Revisiting briefly the topics just mentioned: climate change emissions dropped drastically – by 17% globally in the month of April 2020 (Le Quéré et al., 2020) – but that drop and subsequent rebound merely reveals their tight coupling with economic activity that is at the heart of our way of living. On poverty: at least a decade’s worth of gains are predicted to be reversed by the first wave of worldwide lockdowns (The Economist, 2020). On inequality: the virus itself has disproportionate impact on racial minorities and the impact of lockdowns on job losses and career progression is borne more by working women than by men (Banjo, 2020). And, the super year that biodiversity was meant to be enjoying has no doubt moved down the agenda, despite decades of study pointing to the relationship between habitat change and the risk of disease jumping from animals to humans (IPBES, 2019).

In other words, the pandemic not only laid bare the devastating effects that a single virus can unleash, but it also exposed the underbelly of the precarious relationships between our economic and business activity, our planet and ourselves. In so doing, however, it also opened the possibility and urgency that we may see things differently.

I vividly recalled a time almost 25 years ago when I saw the image in Figure 1. I was sitting in a PhD seminar in the basement of building E51



Figure 1. The Blue Marble (1972 Apollo 17: <https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/the-blue-marble-the-view-from-apollo-17>).

(MIT buildings go by their numbers and most are unnamed) in Professor Leo Marx's seminar, which explored the relationship between the natural environment, technology and people, as captured in American fiction. We read works by Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, great American classics – the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Moby Dick* – and Leo Marx's own influential book, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964),¹ which explored how literature portrayed tensions between a pastoral, benevolent nature and industrialization.

One afternoon, Leo Marx asked us what this image represented to us. Normally a responsive and engaged group, I recall that none of us students had much to say. It was that moment in teaching where the students know that the professor is expecting a certain answer, and they have no clue what it is.

The image was taken by Apollo 17 astronauts in December 1972. It was not the first image of the Earth taken from space, but it is the last taken by a human as no human has since been far enough away to capture a whole-Earth image. It also became one of the most widely distributed images in history and, because it captured the fragility and isolation of our planet

in the vast expanse of space, a powerful symbol of the environmental movement emerging at that time. This image also spoke to Leo Marx, who was roughly my age when he and the rest of the world saw our planet and home in its entirety for the very first time, as a result of this and other Apollo missions. But for those of us '20-something' seminar students, this image meant little. We'd been seeing it all our lives.

I recount this story because it helps me put into perspective what we went through as we navigated the early months of 2020. Sometimes something fundamentally changes the way we see. Karl Weick (1993) refers to these events as 'cosmology episodes' that trigger sensemaking. A cosmology episode reveals that the seemingly rational and orderly world we think we know suddenly no longer makes sense. We have to arrive at a new way of *making it* make sense. The 'blue marble' image was deeply jarring for those who had never seen their planet in its whole.

The pandemic and lockdowns precipitated for many a prolonged 'blue marble' moment. How we see ourselves, our planet, our relationships and the organizations that shape so much of our lives was fundamentally shaken. But as humans, and sensemakers, we normalize, over time, new circumstances. *How* we do so collectively has immense consequences, however. Furthermore, as it is not possible to experience a cosmology episode by proxy, each of us experiencing the pandemic has the opportunity to use this moment to rethink how *we* want to work and live.

While individual experiences of the pandemic are vastly different, there are some common themes that arose from having been forced to see anew. These themes of vulnerability, resilience and responsibility can energize and direct our scholarship and inspire new ways of doing our craft.

Vulnerability

The pandemic dramatically exposed vulnerability – of our organizations, our financial and industrial systems, our communities, healthcare systems, supply chains, educational settings, and of

our own lives and livelihoods. We knew it before but it is now undeniable that the operation of our economies relies on the work of all – those who can work from home and those who can't, those with job security and those without, those who face risks to their physical health and safety each day and those for whom the risks are cumulative and less visible, perhaps experienced through anxiety, stress and burnout. Also exposed was the reality that a huge amount of work – namely childcare and education – remains undervalued or indeed is delivered for 'free'. The vulnerabilities to which we and our organizations were subject were and remain unevenly distributed. Some businesses thrived – grocery delivery services, bicycle shops – while others barely hung on. The same is true for individuals.

Beyond the immediate economic and social vulnerabilities that the pandemic revealed, there is the vulnerability of the planet itself. We know that we rely on the Earth's planetary systems to provide clean water, clean air and raw materials. We also know that the relationships between the state of our planetary systems and our well-being are incredibly complex, but on all major metrics – climate change, biodiversity, land use, ocean health, etc. – we are heading in the wrong direction. The scale of impact, in terms of human and economic cost, of the current pandemic is expected by many to be small in comparison to the effects of human-induced environmental destruction. While the pandemic's influence has been felt in a few short months, the full effects of habitat destruction, mass extinctions and climate change will bring – over the coming decades – much deeper suffering (Balmford, Fisher, Mace, Wilcove, & Balmford, 2020). For example, 'delaying action on climate change such that the world experiences +2.0°C rather than +1.5°C warming will expose an estimated 62–457 million more of the world's poorest people' to climate risks (Balmford et al., 2020, p. R969).

The issues that arise as a result of these now inescapable vulnerabilities offer opportunities for us to renew our scholarship and direct our attention and energy toward urgent problems. At the more micro level, questions about what it means to be human in the contemporary work

environment have been thrust to the foreground. We are exposed daily to news about the challenges of leading, managing teams and culture remotely, motivating a stressed workforce, or pivoting businesses on the brink of collapse. And, these topics only scratch the surface of white-collar work in Western settings. The world of work had already been changing dramatically, yet perhaps less perceptibly, signalled by a two-decade trend of declining job satisfaction (McGregor, 2017).

At a more macro level, we can build on early research into the role of organizations in addressing grand challenges (George et al., 2016) and continue to scrutinize how organizations contribute to the problems and solutions that pervade any given work setting or region – environmental damage, social inequality, decent work, poverty and healthcare – to name a few. Writing with former Unilever CEO Paul Polman, marketing professor C. B. Bhattacharya asserted that companies leading on sustainability issues have shifted from taking an 'inside out' perspective on their businesses – offering the world their products or services – to an 'outside in' perspective – asking where the world is going and what it needs from their business (Bhattacharya & Polman, 2017). What if our organizational scholarship and theorizing were to do the same? We would likely be driven to connect with disciplines, literatures and theories that have not so far been central to organization studies, but to which an organizational lens could be brought to contribute to important societal conversations (Tihyani, 2020). We would be forced to confront the limits of our modes of inquiry and theorizing and learn how to use our training in exploring complex, multilevel phenomena in new ways, as I expand upon later. In other words, by orienting to vulnerabilities surrounding organizing, we might ourselves become vulnerable and open to new scholarly opportunities.

Resilience

The pandemic also brought resilience to the fore – organizational, individual, economic, community and system resilience – and the list could go

on. We have existing organizational scholarship on resilience but the importance of understanding how it relates to organizing and organizations has never been more pressing and prevalent. Resilience is in many ways the opposite of vulnerability. Whereas vulnerability exposes weaknesses and can lead to failure, resilience is the capacity to absorb shocks and cope positively with unexpected situations (Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016). Resilience begets adaptation.

Inspiring examples of adaptation came to light during the period of intense lockdowns in early 2020. For example, Vancouver-based outdoor apparel company, Arcteryx, – known mostly for its raingear – began producing washable, reusable hospital gowns with excess fabric, labour and machinery. What began as a production run of 500 gowns to meet the needs of the local medical community led to planned production of 90,000 gowns in partnership with two other companies (Arcteryx, 2020). Many other examples of adaptation allowed businesses to survive when, in some cases, their markets dropped out from under them: farms began home delivery of vegetable boxes because their high-end restaurant clients were closed; fashion houses employed seamstresses to sew facemasks. But we would be mistaken to hold these up as shining examples of adaptation that signals resilience. Why?

Resilience is a property not of individual entities but of entire systems of activity. Individuals and organizations – though they do differ in their ability to be resilient – are never so in isolation from surrounding interactions and processes. The ecological definition of resilience gets us closest to understanding it as a system property. Here, resilience is defined as ‘the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks’ (Walker, Holling, Carpenter, & Kinzig, 2004). In other words, resilient systems are ones that, like a forest habitat recovering after a wildfire, are able to do essentially the same things – grow trees, replenish soil, provide cover for animals, and filter water – but through a period of reorganization and change.

Importantly, not everything wins in a resilient system. The system as a whole will retain its functioning, but individual entities or even entire species (as in a forest fire) might meet their demise. As organizational scholars we risk drawing on and perpetuating outdated ideas of resilience and adaptation if we continue to see the world as made up of entities – organizations and their environments, or everything ‘out there’ – as opposed to systems of interdependent activity.

An example circulating in the mainstream media highlights our tendency to think about resilience as a characteristic of individual entities and not systems. Among VCs, and anyone who follows the rise and fall of start-ups, the animal analogy of choice has shifted in recent months. The ‘unicorn’ – a term coined in 2013 to describe the rare start-up beasts that would scale and grow rapidly and net their investors huge returns – is now being supplemented by the ‘camel’. Camel start-ups are purported to be resilient (Lynn, 2020). After all, the real animals can survive in harsh conditions and, while slow-moving, manage long journeys self-sufficiently, by carrying a key resource – water – along with them.

A quick Google Scholar search on the research literature on camels – the animals, not the start-ups – and resilience reveals a more complex picture. Ecologists, agricultural scientists, geographers and anthropologists have written quite a bit about this topic (Volpato & King, 2019; Watson, Kochore, & Dabasso, 2016). Pastoral households in Kenya have shifted – as a result of increased drought due to climate change – to owning camels as well as cattle. Indeed, camels prove more robust in periods of drought exacerbated by climate change, and their milk provides an important component of household nutrition and can be traded in the market. But these studies – and others conducted in Asia – paint a nuanced picture of system resilience and how it is achieved.

Because camels and cattle graze in different ecological zones – cattle thriving in the cooler moister conditions found in the mountains and camels thriving in hot dry lowlands – camels

are forced to adapt to unfamiliar foods and conditions as they become part of a mixed herd in the mountains of Northern Kenya (Watson et al., 2016). But it is not just the camels that adapt. It turns out that market dynamics change as the value of camels increases; gender relations shift as camel tending takes less work by women than does cattle tending; cultural, religious and political accommodations are made as ethnic groups who previously considered it taboo to drink camel milk or even say the word ‘camel’ are now raising them on literally the same turf as historically rival ethnic groups. Indeed, the adoption of camels by pastoralists has been described as ‘profound on various fronts’ by authors who document the entanglement of this shift with every other aspect of the system in which camels, humans and ecosystems interact (Watson et al., 2016, p. 703). These authors conclude: ‘while at first glance the question “do camels deliver . . . resilience” appears straightforward and primarily ecological, on closer inspection it is complex and related to multiple fundamental dimensions of life’ (Watson et al., 2016, p. 704).

In sum, adaptation occurs when interlinked changes ripple across multiple facets of economic and social life, revealing that resilience is a property of systems. And, like the fate of real camels – business organizations thriving in these systems rely not only on their own ingenuity and self-sufficiency but also on ecological processes, cultural processes, and social demographics and dynamics as well as what we more typically think of as firms’ external environments – markets, competitors and so on.

The way that we as scholars understand and theorize the subjects of our study – organizations and organizing – shifts when we begin to think in terms of interdependent systems. Understanding resilience – of organizations and of all that supports and relies on organizing – demands that we unpack and appreciate *what is producing the effects that we see*. Again, the coronavirus pandemic exposed some critically important principles that help us see how things work as systems and hence how we might expand our approaches to better capture these dynamics.

First, we often see the effects, not the full causes. Systems tend to surprise us, even when we know full well what possibilities they may produce. *That* a pandemic was possible was never disputed and warned about for years by scientists; *when* it would arise and what its early signals would be were of course impossible to predict. Only as we saw cases and deaths mounting were we able to discern some of the patterns and practices that helped us begin to understand the nature and spread of the virus.

Second, by the time we see effects, it is frequently too late to effectively mitigate them because of inherent time lags and positive feedback loops in systems; these get compounded by poor information and lack of comprehension about root causes. Reaction, then, seems almost inevitable as a primary, but ultimately suboptimal, response to complex systems like pandemics or climate change. As such systems tend to gain significant momentum, the cost in economic and human terms of ‘fixing’ bad outcomes is far greater than that of preventing or averting them (Balmford et al., 2020).

Third – and this is the good news about systems – when things are happening simultaneously on multiple scales, there is an incredible amount of information that – if collated and carefully analysed to discern patterns – can, like many small but simultaneous experiments, yield a lot of learning. To accomplish this, however, demands cooperation as much as competition, a recognition and appreciation of the power of different types of inputs, perspectives and knowledge, and the humility to admit what we do not yet know.

Just as today’s world presents critical opportunities for organizational scholars to attend to the vulnerabilities that have been revealed, so too can we enrich our understanding of resilience – of individuals, organizations, economies and societies – by taking cues from what we have seen unfold in the past few months. These cues alert us to the need to develop methods and theories that tune to systems, processes and interdependence (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013; Schad & Bansal, 2018), leaving behind any assumptions that organizations act as disembedded entities. Such

theorizing would capture dynamics beyond a focal organization and its immediate issues, trace interdependencies and their repercussions over time, and orient to how learning processes and anticipatory action might enable individual and organizational responsiveness to weak signals and emergent patterns.

Enacting Responsibility After Seeing Anew: How?

Just as astronauts who have seen the Earth from space return with a renewed sense of urgency to make a difference after being exposed to the enormity, yet also fragility, of our planet (Drake, 2018), so too might many organizational scholars exposed to the pandemic's lessons in vulnerability and resilience be newly motivated to address urgent issues surrounding responsible and sustainable organizing. As I asserted in the opening of this essay, calls to make our research more relevant and have a voice in the urgent debates about the consequences of organizations and organizing in the 21st century long predated the pandemic. But the pandemic and profound upheaval it brought on all fronts make these goals even more urgent, yet perhaps also more daunting. Keeping in mind that none of us can 'boil the ocean' in terms of *what* we tackle, I elaborate now on *how* we might tackle issues we choose to turn our attention to, and simultaneously advance organizational theory so it is fit for purpose in contemporary society.

Care

Pressure to publish in certain journals and to do this under time pressure to meet expectations for career progression is real in our field. So too is the lingering sense that the work we do must conform with certain norms of detachment or even dispassion in order to count as good, rigorous social science. Together, these forces can make it hard to feel and sustain confidence in doing work we truly care about.

Care, like most words in the English language, can take on different meanings. One meaning of care is 'to think that something is

important and to feel interested in it or upset about it' (Cambridge Dictionary). This is perhaps closest to the meaning of care that is conveyed when organizational scholars urge others to follow their passions and pursue work they are committed to (Dutton, 2003; Rynes, 2007). I have often encouraged doctoral students to pursue caring in this way – following their interests. Why? Because the enterprise of research and publishing is so grinding and long that, in the absence of a genuine interest in something, it is nearly impossible or simply soul-destroying to sustain the effort needed.

Notice, however, that the definition of care above includes 'upset about', not simply 'interested in' something. This hints at another way of defining care, which is to 'feel worry and anxiety' about something. A further meaning captures caring as 'providing what a person or thing needs'. And yet a final meaning of care is to give 'serious attention, especially to the details of a situation or thing' (all definitions Cambridge Dictionary²). I would suggest that we hold all of these meanings as we consider what it is to care as organizational scholars, and how we might do so within the constraints of our field.

Pursuing what we are interested in, with a view to addressing what it is that upsets us (and, likely, others), to give these issues attention, and to provide in some way towards them, strikes me as capturing a *cycle of activity around caring* and a rather more holistic way of expressing what it is to care as an organizational scholar. We can't hope to 'solve' every problem we care about, but we can, by giving it our serious and sustained attention, perhaps bring it to life in a way that also generates further activity and caring. Dutton, drawing on her work in a hospital billing department, observed that caring in that setting is a set of practices that 'signif[y] that a system is vibrant and alive' (2003, p. 13). Caring is *doing* and *connecting* (Dutton, 2003) as well as being interested in something. Caring occurs within a system of other people and processes. If we work from a place of being attuned to what needs attention and repair, and use our expertise and impulses to move toward these matters, our caring can

manifest in directing others' attention and care. Caring then is not just the pursuit of personally meaningful research, but a way of engaging with a community that also wishes to give serious attention to matters that need providing for, and that – like many issues surrounding sustainability and responsibility – have historically lacked attention.

Some might feel that caring is an inappropriate way to conduct scholarship. But we should not feel apologetic about working from a place of care. The idea that organization science is dispassionate science free of normative commitments has been roundly critiqued (Ghoshal, 2005; Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009; Suddaby, 2019). To care about certain topics, issues or people may only feel subversive because our field has historically valued certain explanations, styles of theorizing and methodological approaches over others (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017; Delbridge & Fiss, 2013). The assumptions underpinning much of management and organization theory express specific normative expectations about individual behaviour, the operation of markets and the nature of organizations which are endemic to what we teach, research and often 'see' play out in the world (Ghoshal, 2005). We should be self-reflective on these, work to address their blind spots and damaging prescriptions, and embrace complex explanations in a world where organizing practices never conform to reductionist principles (Cornelissen, 2017; Davis, 2010; Delbridge & Fiss, 2013; Etzion & Gehman, 2019; Ghoshal, 2005).

Caring manifests differently for scholars at different stages of their careers, and it may feel particularly risky for junior scholars to conduct research driven by care because 'our research enterprise is embedded in a much larger system of universities, business schools, and media rankings that tend to focus attention squarely on improving short-term measures of status and legitimacy' (Rynes, 2007, p. 1382). But is caring about issues and using them to animate our research incompatible with short-term measures, status or legitimacy? Thankfully, since Rynes wrote her editorial as outgoing editor of

AMJ in 2007, increasingly less so. There are a number of communities that encourage and support scholars at all stages in doing research on, for example, business sustainability and responsibility (ARCS, GRONEN, RRBM); best paper and book awards recognize work on these topics; and journals now routinely publish papers in these areas in both regular and special issues.³ Senior scholars can enable and encourage caring about issues as a legitimate route to meaningful and impactful scholarship by 'be[ing] comfortable enough in [their] skins' to value and enact it (Rynes, 2007, p. 1382).

Courage

Beyond caring, it takes courage for scholars at any career stage to attend to issues that are at the forefront of business and societal conversations, but not well represented in our academic literature and perhaps not a fit with our normal tools of scholarly inquiry nor styles of theorizing. Like any occupation of experts, we are most comfortable using tools we were trained to use and that are broadly legitimated within the field. But, as I describe above, the pandemic has exposed much about organizations and organizing that has been present, yet insufficiently questioned, until now. It is a hugely opportune moment for us as organizational scholars to 'think about how we think' and alter what we do.

Jerry Davis, in his 2010 article exploring the state of organization theory, asserted that the 'Cambrian explosion of creativity' among organizational scholars occurred during the 1950s and 1960s and birthed the half dozen theories we all still recognize and use today. I would argue that relatively little has changed in the last decade, despite the efforts and calls of many to increase the relevance of our scholarship and explore new theoretical lines of sight (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Shaw et al., 2017; Tihyani, 2020). Ghoshal more fundamentally critiqued our mode of theorizing – based on a desire for elegant models, testable propositions and reductionist predictions – and called for a different approach that:

yields theory that does not pretend to be scientific laws but merely serves as temporary ‘walking sticks’ – in Fritz Roethlisberger’s (1977) terms – to aid sense making as we go along, to be used only until a better walking stick can be found. (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 81)

To generate theory that serves as temporary walking sticks involves an ‘inductive and iterative’ mode of engagement with phenomena and Ghoshal holds up Darwin’s example of research akin to ‘the work of a detective, not an experimenter . . . driven by the passions of an adventurer, not a mathematician’ (2005, p. 81). Can we as organizational scholars be more Darwinian in our approach (though, I note, his theory has proven far more tenacious than a temporary walking stick, so the analogy may be more apt to his style of engagement rather than its outcomes)? Can we be less tied to perpetuating or contributing to dominant, enduring theories and more driven by matters that present themselves as needing attention and care?

Others have presented a somewhat different reading of our field, one that is not – or need not be – shackled by dominant theories and constrained by reductionist modes of inquiry, by reminding us of the origins of organization studies (Ployhart & Bartunek, 2019). For example, Ployhart and Bartunek explain that Taylor’s (1911) studies at Western Electric, which yielded the Hawthorne effect, were phenomenon-driven and motivated by practical questions around productivity. However, as our journals have emphasized the importance of theoretical contribution, much of what gets published has been critiqued as increasingly technically sophisticated yet incremental – elaborating rather than building new theory – and somewhat homogenous (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017; Delbridge & Fiss, 2013). Relatively less attention to phenomena is unfortunate, as ‘there is comparatively little value in developing rich organizational theory for phenomena and problems that are not part of the practitioner’s experience’ (Ployhart & Bartunek 2019, p. 495). In other words, there are plenty of topics – especially those that have been thrust to the foreground through the pandemic – that are

worthy of our attention because they matter both to better understanding contemporary organizations and organizing, and because managers and employees are grappling with them and looking for guidance. If topics – like the mental health of employees, racial inequality, marginalized work, poverty, healthcare access and provision, climate change, ecosystem health and crisis response – are now the business of business, they should be our business as organizational scholars. The theories we build, however, need to be informed by findings, assumptions and modes of explanation from fields that have long taken these issues as central.

So why does it take courage to conduct research on such vital problems and where does one find it? What prevents us from moving from the relative safety of accepted modes of scholarship, to being driven by phenomena, and opening ourselves up to conversations across differences (Etzion & Gehman, 2019)? First, it is threatening to our individual and collective identities, which are forged within a set of institutional conditions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). We are, like the wildland firefighters in Karl Weick’s infamous account of the Mann Gulch fire, reticent to ‘drop our tools’ of familiar scholarly approaches even if they drag us down in our effort to outrun the blaze. As they did for the firefighters, our tools – theories, methods, styles of explanation and writing – reflect and bolster our identities. It takes courage to consider new approaches that engage differently with what we seek to explain, for we will be thrust into a place of limited expertise, but likely more learning.

Second, it takes extra time, energy and conviction to forge a path that diverts from the norm in a scholarly community, in part because it involves additional, counter-normative work to engage and communicate with other audiences (Empson, 2013; Etzion & Gehman, 2019). Those who have done this successfully call for expanding one’s sense of what constitutes their (and more broadly, *a* legitimate) academic identity, rather than separating aspects of one’s work and identity and bearing the associated strain. To do this, scholars can build supportive networks of like-minded peers and acknowledge the

affirmation they receive from more than one audience (i.e. practitioners as well as academic peers) (Empson, 2013, 2017). Academics who choose to be active in public debates need to work to speak the language of issues and not just theory and be ambidextrous in their genuine interest in and mastery of ‘both context and theory’ (Etzion & Gehman, 2019, p. 490).

Like caring, courage is a community and not solely individual effort. To enable individual academics to forge paths that tackle new issues in new ways, those of us who are also reviewers, editors, mentors of junior faculty, teachers of research students, tenure letter writers, members of tenure and promotion committees, deans and department heads, must support and enable a shift in how we assess and value what constitutes good scholarly work, which increasingly will extend beyond what we write for academic journals.

Curiosity

Finally, it is all too easy to forget that the very characteristics that may make many of us worry about our irrelevance to practice – that we seek nuanced explanations and are reticent to offer simplified frameworks or ‘soundbite’ solutions – are the same ones that are at the heart of the value we can add. Many who ponder the questions we do – but from the positions of working in organizations – simply don’t have the time, training or background to pull together a research project, marshal existing knowledge and rigorously explore well-scoped questions. We do. It is precisely because of our training and expertise that we are able to approach organizational phenomena – especially those that implicate societal and sustainability issues – with appropriate attention to their inherent complexity. The reason organization science is not paradigmatic and does not appear to ‘progress’ is because we frequently observe processes and outcomes that cannot be directly nor simplistically causally linked (Davis, 2010; Ghoshal, 2005) and because data about organizational phenomena are not objective truths so much as interpretations made by ourselves and those who inhabit organizations

(Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017). Indeed, while I joke with students that the simple answer to many organizational questions is ‘it depends’, the reality is that most questions we ask and answer have multiple – and frequently competing – answers. What will be the individual and organizational effects of extended periods of remote working – will it be good or bad? The only possible answer is that it depends on a whole host of factors related – at a minimum – to the individuals, their circumstances, the nature of the work, how it is managed, the nature of the organizations themselves, and what emerges next in our interdependent world of economies, cultures and ecosystems.

So, how do we engage with and own our curiosity in a way that can lead to effective engagement with organizational matters that need our care and attention?

Simply acknowledging our strengths as organizational scholars who are trained in a way that reflects a multidisciplinary heritage and an openness to pluralistic explanations is a start. Unlike other disciplines who focus on a given level of analysis or narrower theoretical scope, our comfort with multilevel explanations, complex causality and attention to how issues are constructed gives us an advantage when contributing to discussion about complex issues, like sustainability (Howard-Grenville et al., 2019). Enacting this means having confidence that the work we do will matter – even if it may not appear to do so immediately. Impact from organizational research accrues over time and across multiple studies. As Simsek and colleagues (2018) argue:

Taking a more encompassing frame of reference, rather than individual studies, scholars can often step back from the problem and see knowledge patterns across contexts and over time, making connections and discovering nexus that often elude practitioners who are embedded in a particular context. (p. 2022)

Further, there should be no presumption that we always contribute in an accumulative way to deeper understanding of organizational phenomena, for there may be ongoing debate and

disagreement – indeed, with most complex problems, there is. As Etzion and Gehman (2019) argue, however, that is precisely why we *should* show up in public debates, as we have something to contribute that might enable further discussion and inquiry. In embracing our curiosity, we need to equally resist the desire for instant affirmation that can be driven by social media, and the concomitant urge to oversimplify in an effort to sell ideas. In the long run, the world needs fewer viral soundbites about Silicon Valley camels and more lessons drawn from thorough and empathetic studies of Northern Kenyan camels.

Closing Thoughts

At the time of my keynote at the EGOS colloquium (July 2020), we seemed to have been starting to come to grips with the pandemic and its effects, as at least some European countries were easing lockdowns and many in Asia were getting back to work. In retrospect, it is increasingly clear that we were still in the early stages of a prolonged period of uncertainty and reorientation triggered by the pandemic, whose full effects will be largely unknowable for several more years. While we had many urgent and important issues around the themes of sustainability, responsibility, renewal and resistance to contend with prior to the pandemic, it is now abundantly clear that these issues and others are even more in the foreground and will be for the foreseeable future. This is an opportunity for organizational scholars to engage. Perhaps an unexpected lesson from the pandemic, however, is that it may no longer feel like we are stepping as far outside of our comfort zone, in terms of scholarly norms and expertise, to do the work the world is in a way demanding of us. Issues at all levels of organizations and organizing are presenting themselves daily – from how managers and employees deal with the impacts of remote work and the effects this has not only on productivity but also on mental health, to how we can collectively tackle the loss of species and habitats that in turn might bring the next pandemic within our lifetimes.

How we choose to engage with issues that demand our attention has as much to do with giving ourselves – individually and collectively – permission to care, being courageous with our identities, and embracing the value of our curiosity and skills when these are put to use, as it does with the nature and urgency of the issues. By doing so, we can also recraft our ways of theorizing so they meet the needs of organizations and organizing today. Reductionist theory that overly simplifies complex phenomena, or theory for theory's sake, must be replaced in our journals with criteria for good scholarship that value ways of theorizing that help us and others comprehend and guide the complex interdependent systems underpinning sustainable and responsible organizing. With this route, we probably won't reach definitive answers nor parsimonious theoretical prescriptions, but we will find and ideally iterate better walking sticks (Ghoshal, 2005) that help make sense of and enable action on the organizational challenges and opportunities of our time. If we commit to this as a scholarly community, we will not have wasted our own 'blue marble' moment and the obligation it presents to act differently, having seen differently.

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1. I thank Jane Dutton for pointing out that these authors are all male, raising the question of whether our understanding of these themes might have been more expansive with the inclusion of other voices.
2. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/care>
3. See, for example, comprehensive lists at <https://www.rrbm.network/taking-action/journals/journal-special-issues/> and <https://www.bam.ac.uk/news/ijmr-call-papers-grand-societal-challenges-contributions-business-management-and-organization>

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