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**Prescriptive Theorizing in Management Research:  
A New Impetus for Addressing Grand Challenges**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although management research has a rich tradition of both descriptive and prescriptive theorizing, the latter is often (and erroneously) viewed as unscientific, purely practice-oriented, or simply a corollary of descriptive analysis. Prescriptive theorizing concerns how things should be and how they can be achieved, as opposed to descriptive theorizing, which focuses on why or how things are (interrelated). Accordingly, prescriptive theorizing has strong normative and instrumental properties, which are especially relevant when addressing pressing societal, ecological, and ethical concerns, also referred to as grand challenges, that demand a reevaluation of established norms and behavioral patterns. However, this opportunity is currently underutilized in the management literature, and there is a lack of guidance on how to leverage the principles of prescriptive theorizing. Therefore, I clarify its main characteristics, outline how scholars can construct rigorous prescriptive arguments, and show how normative and instrumental reasoning can promote positive social change. Embracing prescriptive theorizing as a vital complement to descriptive theorizing in management research provides scholars with an intellectual toolkit to actively engage in the urgent discourse on grand challenges and develop compelling new and impactful theories.

**Keywords:** philosophy of science, prescriptive theorizing, descriptive theorizing, normative theorizing, instrumental theorizing, grand challenges

*“You can never solve problems with the same mindset that created them.”—Albert Einstein*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A distinctive feature of the social sciences is that they can equally describe and shape human behavior (Rosenberg, 2016). The intricate relationship between social science theory and the subject of its query has given birth to a rich and long-standing debate about the merits and demerits of descriptive and prescriptive theorizing approaches (Adorno, 1993; Sayer, 2002; Weber, 1922a). In a descriptive theory-building approach, scholars analyze existing social phenomena and their inner workings as a means of theory development (Sutton and Staw, 1995). In other words, they focus on defining, explaining, and predicting “what was,” “what is,” and “what likely will be” (Bacharach, 1989; Pfeffer, 1997). In contrast, prescriptive theorizing addresses the normative and instrumental questions of “how things should be” and “how they can be achieved” (Freeman, 1999; van Aken, 2004). In following a prescriptive approach, scholars therefore take a prospective view on social behavior “to actively elicit or produce desired outcomes” (Landa, 1983, p. 60). Thus, descriptive and prescriptive theorizing pursue the complementary goals of understanding and guiding social behavior.

Although management research has a rich tradition of both descriptive and prescriptive theorizing, the latter is often (and erroneously) viewed as unscientific, purely practice-oriented, or simply a corollary of descriptive analysis (Bazerman, 2005; Ferraro et al., 2005b; Lado et al., 2006). Moreover, the field’s focus on descriptive theorizing has entailed a certain devaluation or at least neglect of prescriptive theory building (Bacharach, 1989; Daft and Lewin, 1990; Lawrence, 1997; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2021), which is neither warranted nor deserved. In fact, many management theories rely on implicit assumptions about desirable states, such as high efficiency and financial performance (MacIntyre, 1981; Mohr, 1982). However, without explicit supporting theories, there is a danger that such normative premises may be adopted without

deeper reflection, become exempted from scientific discourse, perpetuate outdated assumptions, and lose their relevance as social norms evolve (Astley, 1985; Felin and Foss, 2009; Ferraro et al., 2005a; Marti and Gond, 2018). This is because descriptive theorizing can only describe and predict based on analysis of the past and thus cannot perceive what does not already exist. Thus, mere reliance on descriptive theory building, with its focus on the world “as it is,” can lead to theoretical and ultimately practical blind spots concerning what, normatively speaking, “can be” or “should be” and what, instrumentally speaking, “needs to be done.”

As a consequence of its predominant descriptive emphasis, current management research often overlooks the opportunity to envision alternate states and provide actionable solutions to complex issues (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017; Starbuck, 2004). This neglect becomes pertinent when considering grand challenges (Ferraro et al., 2015), such as climate change, accessible healthcare, digital transformation, and inclusion, which often present “critical barrier(s) that, if removed, would help solve an important societal problem with a high likelihood of global impact through widespread implementation” (George et al., 2016, p. 1881). These intricate challenges demand a form of “disciplined imagination” (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022) that departs from the current social patterns and practices exposed in extant descriptive theorizing. For instance, in the context of climate change, prescriptive theorizing can offer the necessary normative impetus and instrumental guidance for prioritizing, directing, and promoting an organization’s climate initiatives while considering competing goals (Wright and Nyberg, 2017). Similarly, in digital transformation, prescriptive theorizing can offer insights into issues such as artificial intelligence (AI) governance frameworks and implementation strategies, going beyond mere descriptions of corporate current practices (Hanisch et al., 2023). Prescriptive theorizing is apt for tackling grand challenges that require significant departures from prevailing social practices, while descriptive theorizing remains valuable for understanding adopted practices and their motivations.

The motivation behind this *Point* paper is the observation that the scarcity of prescriptive theorizing is not due to its lack of usefulness but rather a result of missing knowledge about its nature and construction. This dearth stands in stark contrast to the abundance of excellent works on descriptive theory building (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Corley and Gioia, 2011; Weick, 1995; Whetten, 1989). Without similar guidance for prescriptive theorizing, we can scarcely hope to see more prescriptive theories in the future. The emphasis of this *Point*, then, is on propagating a form of theorizing without denying the wealth of impactful prescriptions that emerge from the study of current practices (e.g., Wickert et al., 2021). Theorizing in this sense is “a short-hand for a better understanding of how a theory is put together; how it is handled in empirical research—and how it can be taught in an effective manner” (Swedberg, 2016, p. 6). Therefore, to advance prescriptive theorizing in management research, I define its distinctive characteristics, outline a supporting conceptual framework, explain the usefulness of combining descriptive and prescriptive approaches for general theory development, and discuss illustrative applications to societal grand challenges.

Overall, this *Point* shows how prescriptive theorizing offers management scholars new ways to challenge current thinking, develop novel propositions, and ultimately build a bridge to engage with management practice (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013; Ghoshal, 2005; Locke et al., 2008; Tihanyi, 2020; van de Ven, 1989). By integrating prescriptive theorizing into mainstream scholarship, we gain not only greater theoretical variety but also opportunities to combine descriptive and prescriptive elements in theory development, given their complementary nature. Especially as normative and instrumental questions concerning sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Bansal and Song, 2017; Wickert, 2021), digital transformation, ethics and governance (Hanisch et al., 2023), and diversity and inclusion (Nishii et al., 2018), among many

others, are becoming increasingly pressing for managers, sound prescriptive theorizing can offer valuable intellectual support for informed debates and decision-making.

## **HOW PRESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING COMPLEMENTS DESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING**

Management theory faces a critical challenge in capturing the dynamics of variable social behavior, which is influenced by evolving circumstances and new information (Bacharach, 1989; Bamberger, 2008; George and Jones, 2000). This challenge is compounded by the complex interplay between theory and the social phenomenon it seeks to explain (Felin and Foss, 2009; Ferraro et al., 2005a; Marti and Gond, 2018). Specifically, as management theories inform practice, individuals may adapt their behavior in ways that render these theories inadequate in accurately explaining it (Astley, 1985; Knights, 1992). For example, in their influential critique of transaction cost theory, Ghoshal and Moran (1996, p. 14) warn that the “assumption of opportunism can become a self-fulfilling prophecy” and could lead managers to make poor decisions, which is echoed by Ong et al. (2023), who find that students specializing in economics perceive honest behavior as more arduous, leading to increased unethical behavior. Recognizing that management scholarship interacts with the social system it studies, scholars have criticized the general endorsement of “neutral” descriptions and the resulting lack of reflexivity regarding the field’s epistemological stance (MacIntyre, 1981; Mackenzie, 2006; Steffy and Grimes, 1986).

The endorsement of purely descriptive theorizing can become particularly problematic when it serves as the basis for prescriptions. Descriptive theorizing is inherently bound to the current social system and its actors, neglecting alternate and potentially preferable states yet to be realized (see Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010 for an extended argument). Although descriptive theories enable the projection of the current state into the future (prediction of “what likely will be”), they allow very limited extrapolation of the equally important and normatively tinted prospective notion of “what should be.” For example, using descriptive theory to explain and

predict why and when firms fail to engage in corporate social responsibility does not logically support inferences regarding whether or how firms should do so. Such a conclusion requires complementary normative arguments based, for example, on concepts of corporate citizenship and moral obligations (Smith, 2003). This tension reverberates David Hume's (1739–40) famous "is–ought problem," which points to the logical fallacy of developing a prescriptive statement on the basis of purely descriptive observations.

Given the constraints faced by the prevailing descriptive theorizing approach, prescriptive theorizing can offer a valuable complementary perspective. It generally justifies desirable goals and identifies the means for their attainment employing normative and instrumental reasoning, respectively. Stakeholder theories (Freeman, 1999), organizational design theories (Jelinek et al., 2008), critical theories (Suddaby, 2015), and emancipatory forms of theorizing (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Calás et al., 2009) exemplify endeavors employing prescriptive theorizing to drive positive societal change. To highlight the distinctive characteristics of prescriptive theorizing, Table I compares it to descriptive theorizing across several dimensions, including the question of interest, logical structure, boundary conditions, and empirical strategies. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into the normative and instrumental sides of prescriptive theorizing. Each of these can be cultivated using specific guidelines that assist theorists in strengthening their arguments.

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## **DEFINING THE END: THE NORMATIVE SIDE OF PRESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING**

The initial step in prescriptive theorizing involves defining and justifying a specific end or goal, supported by a method of discovery and normative assessment heuristics. I will begin by offering a general overview of normative theorizing, followed by recommendations on how



theorists can enhance the clarity of their goals definition and assess the underlying normative premises more effectively.

In general, goals are “value premises that can serve as inputs to decisions” (Simon, 1964, p. 2). The role of values and norms in social sciences is contentious, beginning with sociologist Max Weber’s (1922b, p. 149) famous “Wertfreiheit” (value-free ideal), according to which empirical sciences should not establish binding norms and ideals (which in itself is a normative premise). In fact, the risk of normative theorizing lies in moralizing or ideological arguments that are supported by some and fiercely contested by others and can lead to contentious turf wars between proponents and opponents (Evered and Louis, 1981; Lado et al., 2006; Reed and Burrell, 2019). However, adhering strictly to the value-free ideal is unrealistic because unless “you believe that the way in which decisions are currently being made cannot be improved, normative and positive [i.e., descriptive] statements about most actors in most situations are different” (Kadane and Larkey, 1983, p. 1366). In fact, solely understanding why, how, and when social practices occur using descriptive theorizing could be an ill-fated approach, as it does not help define what “good” practice is and how it can be achieved (Bettis, 1991). The opportunity, then, lies in integrating normative arguments into the theorizing process to substantiate and advance social science theories.

Acknowledging the need to incorporate normative premises into social science theories, particularly in fields with practical applications such as management studies (e.g., Mohr, 1982; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2005), requires a logic to define what constitutes a desirable state or good goal, a topic widely debated in moral philosophy and ethics (Kagan, 1998; Ross, 1944). From a strictly logical standpoint, normative arguments inherently suffer from recursive reasoning (Spohn, 2020): Regardless of which approach one pursues, there is a need for a preconceived notion, however vague or implicit, of what “the good” might be so that our quest is directed,

i.e., we can recognize “the good” (Hegel, 1813). Plato, for instance, uses the metaphor of the sun as the absolute but elusive good, illuminating evident manifestations of “good” (Plato, 1997). In the literature on business ethics, a more contemporary term for the supreme good by which all other “goods” must be judged is a “hypergood” (Taylor, 1992, p. 66) or “hypernorm” (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994, p. 265). These hypernorms represent a “thin set of universally upheld values” (Douglas, 2000, p. 101) that form the logical underpinnings of most normative theories. In the absence of shared and possibly latent hypergoods, any aspiration to define a “good” goal appears void, and knowledge of good and evil cannot exist at all, as some pessimistically argue (Nietzsche, 1886). Therefore, at a minimum, normative arguments seem to accept the Platonic stance that a form of “good” or “better” can exist and that although we might not recognize it fully, we can move toward it through experience and reflection.

#### *Method of Discovery*

Given the difficulty of defining the content of a “good” goal (*substantiation* problem), the literature has focused on the question of how a proposed goal can be defended to pass as “good” (*justification* problem) (van Oosterhout et al., 2006). This conceptual distinction, although initially appearing paradoxical, signifies that any goal can be proposed but must then be subjected to a rigorous evaluation process. The separation also alleviates the pressure associated with establishing a goal such that the initial inspiration can come from a variety of sources, ranging from personal experience to a theoretical blind spot to a critique of social practices. One strategy would be for a theorist to problematize, trivialize, or even reverse existing latent or explicit goals. For instance, the goal of maximizing economic output and consumption, often considered a primary economic objective, could be problematized for its ecological footprint and potential unsustainability, trivialized as being subordinate to human well-being and quality of life, or even reversed in favor of regenerative economic models that prioritize environmental restoration.

Alternatively, a goal can be inspired by more abstract hypergoods; e.g., specific diversity goals in corporate boards may be derived from abstract principles of human dignity and equal opportunity. This kind of reflective analysis can effectively stimulate the creation of alternative goal propositions. Conversely, the proposed goal may also involve defending the existing state of affairs to prevent certain changes.

From the perspective of the prescriptive theorist, the primary task is not solely the establishment of a goal but rather its rigorous substantiation and justification, which forms the core of normative theorizing. In social sciences, this challenge frequently involves navigating the intricacies of harmonizing conflicting interests, assessing the consequences for stakeholders, and defining the scope of applicability. Particularly concerning grand challenges, where complex demands often compete and partially clash, managers and organizations find themselves in situations where prioritization, management, and the acceptance of tensions are essential. The ultimate aim is to achieve a sustainable equilibrium that effectively balances these conflicts (Doh et al., 2019; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Therefore, the role of prescriptive theorists is to delineate a thoughtful and reasoned approach capable of not only justifying and defending a given normative premise but also prioritizing it. These aspects will be explored further in the subsequent section, which delves into the assessment of normative premises.

#### *Method of Assessment*

In general, the justification of goals involves three critical issues, namely, social acceptability, implications, and contextualization. First, goals must be socially acceptable, which means that they should resonate with a broader audience (Erez and Kanfer, 1983; Suchman, 1995). Second, goals need to be evaluated against their potential implications for various stakeholders (Dacin, 1997). Finally, goals necessitate contextualization, as they may relate to specific situations and contexts, which requires a clear definition of boundaries (Terry and Hogg,

2000). In response, philosophers and scholars have advocated three generic reasoning approaches—consensual, consequential, and comparative—which can address these issues. Consensual reasoning emphasizes social acceptability, consequential reasoning focuses on broader implications, and comparative reasoning explicitly addresses goal transferability across contexts. Finally, using the case of counterfactual reasoning, a logical combination of comparative and consequential reasoning, I illustrate how these generic reasoning approaches can be effectively combined to bolster normative argumentations.

***Consensual reasoning.*** The first way to assess a goal is with consensual reasoning. This builds on the notion that the human understanding of virtues, morals, good, and evil is by no means predefined and universal but rather arises from socialization processes, i.e., social interactions and experiences (see Soule, 2002 for a detailed discussion on consensual ethics in the management context). To gain acceptance, a goal must therefore be consistent with a broader collective belief and reflect a common understanding of what is “right” or “good” (Apel, 2016). As an advocate of consensual reasoning, Habermas (2019) proposes a *discursive process* that engages participants in an open, respectful, and hierarchy-free dialog of goal setting to establish acceptable normative premises. In this process, participants can offer new arguments, refute existing arguments, and revise their positions. In practical terms, this discourse can be reflected in media debates, public forums, and structured focus group discussions, where diverse perspectives can be systematically explored and consensus-building processes can be facilitated. Debating normative premises from different angles promotes awareness and reflexivity and may also help in identifying their bounds. Seeking, challenging, and establishing consensus must be understood as a morphing process of coming closer to a normatively justifiable goal.

*How prescriptive theorists can build strong consensual arguments.* A useful strategy for sharpening a consensual logic is to *think through opposites* and evaluate, in each case, who would

agree (or disagree) with the goal. Oppositional thinking can help uncover the relevant stakeholders, advantages, and disadvantages of a given goal. For instance, when defining “long-term orientation” as a desirable goal for firms, it is useful to simultaneously consider “short-term orientation” as the corresponding opposite. Who would agree with a “long-term orientation” as an organizational goal and who would prefer a “short-term orientation”? What are the minimal conditions for a consensus on one of these goals? Under which circumstances would stakeholders prefer a “long-term orientation” over a “short-term orientation”? Introducing a fictitious devil’s advocate through oppositional thinking can appease ardent critics and generate a more realistic sense of the desirability and bounds of a goal and its expected support. In a way, this process is a mimicry of a parliamentary debate between oppositional parties that ideally results in a more broadly supported compromise.

*Consequential reasoning.* In addition to employing a consensus-based approach for evaluating prescriptive goals, scholars can also embrace the application of consequentialist reasoning. This approach involves assessing the potential consequences of pursuing a specific goal, constructing plausible scenarios, and evaluating whether the outcomes would be deemed acceptable by those affected, akin to a Pareto-efficiency analysis aimed at optimizing social utility. The foundation of this consequential reasoning can be traced back to the European Enlightenment, as exemplified in the works of Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick. Of notable significance is Kant’s categorical imperative (1788), which asserts that the guiding principle of action must withstand the test of becoming a universally applicable law—an idea that finds resonance in the later writings of Habermas and Rawls. By extrapolating individual goal pursuit to encompass the broader social milieu, a consequentialist logic endeavors to uncover conflicts of interest and unintended repercussions. A form of consequentialist argumentation can be observed in the endeavors of climate researchers striving to redirect the objectives of policymakers. To

justify the goal of halting climate change, researchers emphasize the perils posed by rising sea levels, increasingly severe weather events, resource conflicts, and large-scale migration (Carleton and Hsiang, 2016).

*How prescriptive theorists can build strong consequential arguments.* A critical problem of consequential reasoning is that it may suffer from an infinite regress problem. To evaluate a goal, the theorist must assess the desirability of its consequences as if the goal were a universal maxim, which in turn requires *ex ante* knowledge of what is desirable. A partial resolution to this dilemma is to *invert the logic* and consider a current state as a consequence of prior normative premises. Specifically, it can be useful to study a given social consequence that is observable in the present and to identify the maxims that led to this state, which may be easier to assess, in terms of desirability, than possible (nonrealized) future states (Mische, 2014). Through this backward induction, it is possible to reverse engineer a social situation and identify its problematic or desirable normative premises. For example, Bruton et al. (2022) take a critical view of the current prevalence of Western theorizing in management that propagates universal goals for organizations (e.g., profit maximization and firm growth) while ignoring the possible consequences of such maxims in non-Western contexts. Ignorance of such conditions and the propagation of firm growth as a universal maxim can have negative consequences in an environment of material impoverishment, “such as the loss of funds to pay for food or children’s school fees” (Bruton et al., 2022, p. 1066). Based on their analysis of the problematic current state, they call for a reorientation of management theory, namely, that “scholars should develop indigenous theory based on the distinctiveness of local contexts” (p. 1057).

*Comparative reasoning.* A third approach to assessing prescriptive goals is comparative reasoning (Ketokivi et al., 2017). Comparisons can be thought of as similes or metaphors that establish analogies between otherwise unrelated domains (Cornelissen, 2005; Oswick et al.,

2002), allowing theorists to transfer possible goals from one domain to another (Smith, 1989). To structure this reasoning, Cornelissen and Durand (2014) provide a useful typology, arguing that comparative reasoning can be based on heuristic analogy (i.e., similar ideas and assumptions), causal analogy (i.e., similar theoretical mechanisms), and/or constitutive analogy (i.e., similar constructs). To establish analogy, scholars may refer to prior works to identify relevant similarities and even draw from other disciplines for inspiration (Agarwal and Hoetker, 2007; Boxenbaum and Rouleau, 2011; Whetten et al., 2009). In essence, when two contexts exhibit comparable characteristics, it is reasonable to anticipate that their prescriptive goals may also be transferrable. By employing comparative reasoning, Felin et al. (2023) extrapolate ideas and concepts from biology, arguing that firms should search for resources that are not obvious to others, much as animals search for uncontested resources in their external environment.

*How prescriptive theorists can build strong comparative arguments.* Although the general idea of comparative reasoning is to identify similar contexts, theorists can benefit from comparing contexts that greatly differ, known as contrastive analysis (Tsang and Ellsaesser, 2011). By exposing its full spectrum, it may become easier to distill the unique characteristics and conditions that define the focal context. Questions such as “Why is context A not comparable to context B?” and “What are the key differences between contexts A and B?” may help determine the parameters needed for a cross-context comparison. For example, a theorist interested in the “good” goals of top executives might contrast two very different leadership roles, such as that of a parent and that of a business leader, to identify the unique conditions that distinguish a business context from that of a family. By applying this logic, theorists can avoid the pitfall of choosing seemingly arbitrary characteristics to support their comparative reasoning.

*Counterfactual reasoning.* In addition to the three fundamental reasoning approaches, it is also possible to blend and integrate them, with counterfactual reasoning being particularly

compelling. Counterfactual reasoning, a combination of comparative and consequential reasoning, involves contrasting and extrapolating scenarios that could have taken place under different circumstances (Oswick et al., 2011). By projecting alternative trajectories, theorists can evaluate the consequences of contrasting goal scenarios and discern the criteria that potentially validate the chosen goal(s). For instance, applying counterfactual analysis to sustainability initiatives in a business setting can illuminate possible pathways a company might have followed in the absence of sustainable practices and compare these hypothetical outcomes to the actual benefits and drawbacks experienced through sustainable actions. By scrutinizing these counterfactual scenarios, prescriptive theorists can more convincingly demonstrate the merits and societal advantages of pursuing sustainability goals.

*Concluding practical considerations.* In choosing their reasoning approach, prescriptive theorists are frequently bound by pragmatic considerations. For instance, they must weigh the feasibility of establishing a consensual discourse to support their goals. Similarly, being able to credibly project consequences is vital for robust normative theorizing. Oftentimes, combining various reasoning approaches proves most effective in this regard. For instance, normative arguments on gender equality frequently combine consequentialist reasoning, exemplified by the positive spill-over effects of gender quotas in raising aspiration levels (Wang and Kelan, 2013), with comparative reasoning, drawing upon evidence from gender quotas in politics to derive recommendations for corporate board composition (Bohnet, 2018). Normative arguments need not adhere to a single approach; their power can increase through a blend of different reasoning approaches. Such amalgamation can provide compelling responses to questions about social acceptability, impact, and transferability. These deliberations lead not necessarily to the “best possible” goal but perhaps to one “better” than the status quo.



For illustration, assume a theorist aims to challenge the implicit organizational emphasis on “efficiency” in favor of “resilience” in light of disruptive trends such as climate change. Initially, the theorist establishes common ground by building on prior work that underscores the value of resilience amid internal and external pressures. In doing so, the theorist leverages consensual reasoning to support resilience as an organizational goal. Employing consequentialist reasoning, the theorist argues that a lack of resilience can lead to severe consequences, imperiling long-term organizational survival. Organizations fixated solely on efficiency are more vulnerable to unexpected crisis events. Employing comparative reasoning, the theorist highlights resilient features prevalent across life forms, seen in redundancies such as DNA’s double helix or paired sensory organs. Viewing organisms as a form of organizing allows the transfer of resilient traits to the organizational design context. In combination, these three lines of reasoning create a strong foundation for advocating organizational resilience over efficiency. This brief example portrays how normative arguments can be methodically constructed through diverse reasoning strategies.

***Proposition 1:** Normative theorizing on organizational and managerial ends (i.e., goals) should discuss the social acceptability of these ends, their potential consequences, and the context in which they apply. This discussion can be achieved, inter alia, through consensual, consequentialist, and comparative reasoning approaches.*

## **DEFINING THE MEANS: THE INSTRUMENTAL SIDE OF PRESCRIPTIVE THEORIZING**

The second step in prescriptive theorizing involves defining and justifying the means to an end. I will begin with a general introduction to instrumental theorizing, followed by specific suggestions for identifying appropriate means, and then discuss how to evaluate their suitability. Within the social sciences, means, or instruments, encompass specific choices, actions, or interventions that are linked to desired outcomes. The instrumental aspect of prescriptive theory thus establishes

(theoretical) connections between certain practices and certain end states. There is no assumption that the practices will be followed or that the end states are desirable. In instrumental theory, statements are hypothetical—if X, then Y, or if you want Y, then do X. In this sense, X is an instrument for achieving Y. The truth or falsehood of instrumental theories of this latter type is an important issue (Jones, 1995, p. 406).

In research practice, these instruments are also referred to as artifacts, designs, heuristics, guidelines, approaches, techniques, tools, practices, processes, procedures, and methods (Mansoori and Lackeus, 2020; Simon, 1996; Worren et al., 2002). For instance, Denyer et al. (2008, p. 395) refer to a design proposition as a “general template for the creation of solutions for a particular class of field problems.” Regardless of name, the core idea is that the instrument(s) can be used in a purposeful manner to achieve the outcome of interest.

#### *Method of Discovery*

It can be useful to think of instruments as solutions to specific problems, i.e., bridges between the desired and current state (Makowski, 2021; Smith, 1989). Existing knowledge, typically from empirical research, can guide the identification of such instruments. To find instruments when they are not readily available, theorists can draw on several creative methods of discovery (see Abbott (2004) for a detailed exposition). One such method is design thinking, which creatively combines existing technologies and tools to solve a problem from the perspective of end users (Brown, 2008; Elsbach and Stigliani, 2018). By involving individuals with diverse backgrounds, design thinking encourages teamwork and creative idea exchange and is therefore ideal for generating novel instruments. While various other methods exist, leveraging design thinking stands as a valuable starting point for expanding the array of potential instruments.

#### *Method of Assessment*

From a conceptual point of view, the evaluation of the proposed instruments is the most critical aspect, especially in a field such as the social sciences, where their suitability is not just a

matter of mechanical functioning but also of appropriateness. In the context of prescriptive theorizing, the question of “what needs to be done” does not seek authoritarian paternalism; rather, it calls for a thoughtful exploration of alternatives, aiming to suggest well-considered means to an end. To structure this assessment process, I discuss and expand on the fit criteria proposed by Baligh et al. (1996), which instruments must meet to be defensible: effectiveness, viability, efficiency, and proportionality. As a rule, suitable instruments should fulfill all four fit criteria rather than just one criterion. Each criterion further narrows the choice of instruments, with effectiveness and viability being the necessary conditions and efficiency and proportionality representing the supportive conditions.

*Effectiveness.* The effectiveness criterion assesses the extent to which individual instruments or configurations of instruments are appropriate for achieving the desired goal(s). Theorists can employ either inductive or deductive reasoning to establish this causal relationship. The inductive approach resembles Lowe’s (1977) framework for discovering economic policies, which involves envisioning desired outcomes and subsequently deriving the necessary technical and social pathways, behavioral and motivational patterns, environmental contexts, and policies to attain them. This inductive approach can be facilitated through formal modeling techniques, such as game theory, which allow the representation of “strategies” leading to specific outcomes. Conversely, deductive reasoning applies established ideas or uses analogies to elucidate the mechanisms through which instruments are likely to produce the desired outcomes. Establishing effectiveness does not require extensive theoretical grounding but relies on robust evidence from research or practice to bolster the prescription’s validity. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous biopharmaceutical firms explored drug repurposing—employing existing drugs for new diseases. While this strategy succeeded with orphan diseases (Kucukkeles et al.,

2019), it has proven less potent for COVID-19, making it an ineffective prescription for addressing this global health crisis (Hanisch and Rake, 2021).

**Viability.** The second fit criterion for an instrument is viability, which refers to the feasibility and availability (i.e., practicability) of an intervention. Viability typically depends on factors such as the availability of necessary knowledge, technologies, and resources. For instance, when a corporation aims to curtail its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (instrument) to fulfill its climate targets (goal), the availability of appropriate CO<sub>2</sub> capture and compensation technologies becomes decisive, without which the prescribed means would be futile. The easiest way to demonstrate the viability of an instrument is to refer to cases of past use in similar contexts. Furthermore, discussion and cocreation efforts between researchers, managers, and other stakeholders present a potent strategy to substantiate the viability claims of an instrument, especially regarding grand challenges (e.g., Olsen et al., 2016). For instance, Chatterjee et al. (2023) show that a viable strategy for a local child poverty initiative that aims to achieve global scalability requires linking actors and resources in different places and at different levels. Alternatively, the theorist can demonstrate that individual components of an instrument are viable and that they can be reasonably combined into a larger assemblage. This combinatory logic can help develop new instruments that have no empirical precedent.

**Efficiency.** The third fit criterion is efficiency, which refers to the idea that the instrument is comparatively the most economical, fastest, and/or highest-performing means of achieving the goal. In other words, efficiency seeks to minimize the input-to-output ratio (Nicholas, 1982). Efficiency substantiates the claim that the instrument is the best available alternative and that resources are not wasted, which is important for defensible prescriptions. To support the efficiency claim, the theorist can, for example, analyze the transaction cost, time spent, and return on investment associated with the use of an instrument. For instance, Glenk and Reichelstein

(2019) perform an economic efficiency analysis of the conversion of renewable energy to hydrogen to support their contention that hydrogen can be an efficient means of producing green energy. A related example is Fischer et al.'s (2003) welfare comparison of different policy instruments for achieving environmental protection. Accordingly, the efficiency criterion is probably the most straightforward from an economic point of view and ensures that the instrument is defensible against alternative solutions.

***Proportionality.*** Last, the criterion of proportionality mandates that means employed for goal attainment avoid excessive harm (Macdonald and Beck-Dudley, 1994). While effectiveness, viability, and efficiency hold importance, they alone prove insufficient. Consider pollution as a means for greater firm profits—effective, efficient, and viable—but failing the proportionality test due to greater harm caused. To ensure goal achievement without undue harm, theorists must assess and reconcile competing interests. Within grand challenges, Couture et al. (2022) warn how neglecting misaligned interests when trying to address environmental protection can hinder action and well-intentioned initiatives. In fact, social interventions rarely yield solely positive outcomes, necessitating balanced conflict resolution and choosing the instrument that least impairs opposing interests. This step requires weighing the prescribed means against the intended and unintended outcomes. The ultimate choice hinges on factors such as expected benefits and harms, as well as the urgency of the situation, the certainty or probability of the effects, the magnitude of those effects, and the availability of alternative means (Garrett and Klonoski, 1986, p. 6). In summary, proportionality embeds the instrument in a socioenvironmental context but recognizes, for example, that crises may mandate stronger measures than routine operations.

***Concluding practical considerations.*** In instrumental theorizing, the theorist embarks on identifying fitting instruments by aligning predetermined ends with appropriate means. If empirical evidence on appropriate instruments already exists, it could serve as a valuable

foundation for instrumental theorizing. For example, Gabaldon et al. (2016, p. 371) provide a comprehensive overview of the “instruments that can be used to promote women to senior corporate positions.” The instrumental side of prescriptive theorizing can benefit greatly from descriptive evidence in developing actionable suggestions on how to achieve a given goal. Whereas normative theorizing can complement descriptive theorizing in justifying (latent) value premises, descriptive evidence can complement instrumental theorizing by supporting claims of effectiveness, viability, efficiency, and proportionality. In the absence of suitable evidence, an instrumental theorist can propose specific interventions that can then be tested through appropriate experimental interventions or simulations. To this end, Denyer et al. (2008) suggest specifying the context (i.e., actors and environment), intervention (i.e., measures and activities), mechanisms (i.e., relationships and conditions), and outcomes (i.e., intended goals and unintended effects) of the proposed intervention to avert misapplication.

Returning to our previous example, let us briefly examine the instrumental side of achieving the goal of increasing organizational resilience to climate change. The theorist recognizes the effectiveness and viability of redundancy (e.g., standby or distress systems) as a means of enhancing resilience. For instance, in the face of extreme weather events or resource scarcity, having multiple redundant systems, such as alternative energy sources or diversified supply chains, can help organizations maintain operations and minimize disruptions. However, the theorist acknowledges the need to balance efficiency and resilience. While redundancy may incur additional coordination costs and resource utilization, it becomes essential for critical processes directly linked to climate change mitigation or adaptation. For example, investing in generators and reserve water tanks to complement public provision may be crucial for organizations operating in vulnerable regions. The theorist concludes that the creation of redundancy aligns with the proportionality criterion, as the benefits of survival outweigh the

forgone efficiency gains, which would be the primary competing interest of profit-oriented shareholders. Therefore, by strategically implementing redundancy in climate-sensitive organizational processes, organizations can address the grand challenge of climate change and enhance their resilience in an effective, viable, efficient, and proportionate manner.

***Proposition 2:** Instrumental theorizing on the means (i.e., instruments) to achieve organizational and managerial ends (i.e., goals) should discuss the effectiveness, viability, efficiency, and proportionality of the proposed means.*

Table II summarizes the arguments discussed thus far, focusing on the underlying heuristics related to the method of discovery and method of assessment for goals and instruments, supplemented by stylized examples. In addition, theorists may draw inspiration from earlier prescriptive theories. For instance, the works of Barney (1986), Sebenius (1992), and Cavanagh et al. (1981) provide compelling examples of motivating prescriptive theories, with Ferraro et al. (2015) offering an application in the context of grand challenges. Furthermore, Dougherty (2008), Quinn and Jones (1995), and Rindova et al. (2021) can serve as templates for structuring prescriptive arguments. The list is by no means exhaustive but might serve as an initial point of reference for theorists in this domain.

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Insert Table II about here  
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## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

My call for a reinvigoration of prescriptive theorizing highlights how this approach can offer a valuable addition to the prevailing descriptive theorizing approach, especially in its application to theorizing around grand challenges. I believe that these two approaches to theory building are equally valid and rigorous and thus deserve equal standing in management research. Since any prescription based on a descriptive argument presupposes a positive conception of an ideal state and the knowledge of the means to achieve it, it seems only reasonable to make the

prescriptions themselves more central to the theory-building process. Thus, prescriptive theorizing may not only inspire descriptive inquiries into when and why actors might deviate from a prescriptive “ideal” (e.g., Ding and Eliashberg, 2002) but also provide the necessary justifications for management and policy recommendations.

The idea of prescriptive theorizing is deeply rooted in management research, reflected in seminal works that have shaped and oriented nearly all of its subdomains (e.g., Grandori, 1984; Hedberg et al., 1976; Jones, 1995; Porter, 1980; Vroom and Yetton, 1973). Despite some notable exceptions, such as organizational design theories (Jelinek et al., 2008), critical theories (Suddaby, 2015), and emancipatory forms of theorizing (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Calás et al., 2009), prescriptive papers appear woefully underrepresented in leading management journals, as scholars have focused primarily on explaining and predicting existing phenomena, which delimits the scope for truly “radical theorizing” as called for in an editorial by Nadkarni et al. (2018). Against this background, prescriptive theorizing can serve as an intellectual foundation to envision substantial deviations from current norms and practices, allowing for the exploration of “potentialities” (Spicer et al., 2009), the conception of “desirable futures” (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022) and the realization of “fictional expectations” (Beckert, 2016). Beyond this visionary aspect, prescriptive theorizing also offers a pragmatic dimension by delineating the means to achieve specific ends, enabling theorists to map out pathways for expediting desired change. Importantly, a prescriptive approach accommodates the task of substantiating, reflecting upon, and updating the norms and instruments exposed in extant theories, without necessarily demanding a radical departure from prevailing social states.

In addition to its academic value, prescriptive theorizing can enable scholars to address the frequently lamented loss of the practical relevance of management studies (e.g., Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011; Tihanyi, 2020; van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) because prescriptive theorizing is



strongly oriented toward action; i.e., it answers the practically relevant question of which goal should be pursued and how it can be achieved (Denyer et al., 2008; Kieser et al., 2015; Pearce and Huang, 2012). By formulating prescriptive theories, scholars can take a more active role as thought leaders in a constructivist sense and shape the discourse regarding the future steps for management research and practice (Astley, 1985; Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Starbuck, 2004; Weick, 1989). More profoundly, prescriptive theorizing could also lay the groundwork for more radical paradigmatic shifts, as it may challenge the normative foundations of extant theories and propose alternative perspectives (Aktouf, 1992; Barley and Kunda, 1992; Frost, 1980; MacKenzie and House, 1978). Overall, prescriptive theorizing opens up many exciting opportunities to advance the field.

In this *Point*, I have also shown that the value of prescriptive theorizing becomes especially pertinent for theorizing about grand challenges (George et al., 2016), which inherently invoke normative arguments about how things should be and the instrumental side of how such desired states can be achieved. When confronting pressing issues such as climate change and sustainability, aging populations and health, digital transformation, inclusion and diversity, equitable growth and opportunities, and global migration, the traditional descriptive approach often falls short of offering actionable guidance for positive social change. These grand challenges demand not only a clear articulation of the ideal outcomes but also a roadmap for their realization. Prescriptive theorizing steps in as a guiding light, equipping scholars with the tools to bridge the gap between theoretical conceptualization and practical application. By constructing prescriptive theories, scholars can not only envision the ideal or improved state of affairs but also delineate the strategic pathways, policy interventions, and managerial practices necessary to effect meaningful change. Such theorizing provides a compelling platform for stakeholders across academia, industry, and policymaking to converge their efforts in a unified direction. In an

era where the urgency of addressing grand challenges is paramount, the dynamic synergy between normative vision and pragmatic action, epitomized by prescriptive theorizing, emerges as an invaluable asset for shaping a more sustainable and equitable future.

Indeed, management studies could greatly benefit from integrating prescriptive theorizing into mainstream scholarship and participating in major societal debates, including those on the role of corporations in social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, in political debates, such as platform regulation, and in the climate debate regarding the roles that managers and firms must play. Just as economists have played a pivotal role in policy formulation (Bazerman, 2005; Ferraro et al., 2005a; Tihanyi, 2020), it is time for management scholars to similarly engage in this discourse. Shifting from the current scenario, where managerial implications merely find a place as an afterthought in the discussion section of a paper, to a landscape where they take center stage within a theory is imperative. Prescriptive theorizing serves as the bridge between abstract principles and actionable strategies, allowing management research to proactively address real-world challenges. Embracing this paradigm, the field can foster innovative thinking, advance responsible leadership, and propel substantial transformations in business practices. As we navigate major social, economic, and environmental challenges, the infusion of prescriptive theorizing charts a promising trajectory for management scholarship, reinforcing its relevance and impact in a rapidly evolving world.

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**TABLE I**

**Comparison of Descriptive and Prescriptive Theorizing**

	<b>Descriptive Theorizing</b>	<b>Prescriptive Theorizing</b>
<b>Question of interest</b>	What is B and why or how A leads to B	What Y should be and how it can be achieved using X
<b>Theorist's position</b>	Neutral observer	Active agent
<b>Primary objective</b>	Defining, explaining, and predicting phenomena	Devising, justifying, and enabling alternate states
<b>Core argument</b>	Causal mechanism linking independent and dependent constructs	Normative and instrumental logic justifying means/instruments and ends/goals
<b>Boundary conditions</b>	Under which conditions is the causal mechanism strengthened or weakened?	Under what circumstances is the defined end/goal "good" or "desirable?" When are the means/instruments effective, viable, efficient, and proportionate?
<b>Proposition formulation</b>	If A, then B.	1) The end/goal should be Y. 2) To attain the end/goal Y, employ the means/instruments X.
<b>Empirical strategies</b>	<u>Observational</u> : Empirical strategies aim to identify patterns in social phenomena  <i>Quantitative</i> : analysis of archival data, natural and quasi-experiments, survey methods  <i>Qualitative</i> : grounded research, ethnographic studies	<u>Interventional</u> : Empirical strategies aim to construct social phenomena  <i>Quantitative</i> : experimental interventions, vignette studies, simulation modeling  <i>Qualitative</i> : action research, case studies
<b>Practical implications</b>	Based on the choice of independent and dependent constructs since the theoretical mechanism is primarily of academic interest	Based on the normative question of why certain ends/goals are desirable and on the effectiveness, viability, efficiency, and proportionality of the proposed means/instruments
<b>Key limitation</b>	The theorist is bound to existing phenomena, which precludes the study of alternate states.	The theorist presumes to be able to decide what is "good" and "bad."

**Table II (Part 1): Overview of Normative Theorizing and Associated Heuristics**

Theorizing Stage	Description	Possible Heuristic	Explanation of Heuristic	Stylized Examples Pertaining to Grand Challenges
<b>1. Defining the End/Goal</b>	<p><b>Definition:</b> A goal establishes value premises that serve as inputs to decisions.</p> <p><b>Method of discovery:</b> The purpose is to open the option space of possible goal(s) in relation to the topic of interest.</p> <p>In principle, any goal may be proposed as long as it can be justified (see below).</p>	<p><b>a) Resort to existing goals:</b> Transfer goals across contexts</p>	Draw inspiration from other contexts (e.g., different countries, different species, or the physical realm) to define goals.	<i>Embracing the principle of net-zero carbon emissions, inspired by climate goals endorsed by global leaders, should guide corporate sustainability strategies.</i>
		Defend existing states/goals	Use existing goals and defend them against competing alternatives.	<i>Firms should prioritize meritocratic principles over diversity quotas when deciding on promotions to leadership positions.</i>
		<p><b>b) Propose new goals:</b> Derive subordinate goals from (unquestioned) “hypergoods”</p> <p>Use existing states as anchors and reference points for envisioning improved states that serve as inputs to goal formulation</p>	<p>Deduce subordinate goals from overarching goals.</p> <p>Problematize, trivialize, or reverse existing states to deduce desirable goals.</p>	<p><i>Diversity goals in corporate boards are logical derivatives of the desirable principles of human dignity, equal opportunity, and inclusion.</i></p> <p><i>Corporate growth as a goal can be problematized due to its focus on increasing consumption, trivialized as a subordinate goal of organizational adaptation, and reversed in the context of necessary divestitures. Therefore, growth should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a cyclical process of organizational renewal with the ultimate goal of organizational sustainability.</i></p>
<b>2. Justifying the End/Goal</b>	<p><b>Method of assessment:</b> The justification of the goal(s) establishes the necessary bounds on the option space.</p> <p>Only goals that are supported by one or multiple clear normative reasoning approaches can be considered acceptable.</p>	<p><b>a) Consensual reasoning:</b> Discourse analysis</p>	Identify relevant stakeholder to assess the social acceptability of goals through an open and hierarchy-free discourse.	<i>Who would align with or challenge the goal of developing employees’ digital literacy skills at a measurable fixed rate each year, incorporating the perspectives of employees, business leaders, and educators?</i>
		Oppositional thinking	Imagine a devil’s advocate to uncover the bounds of goals.	<i>How would employees and shareholders respond (differently) to the goal of employee retention as the overarching goal of a human resource strategy?</i>
		<p><b>b) Consequential reasoning:</b> Projection</p>	Project the consequences if all relevant entities were to pursue the same goal to assess broader impact.	<i>What would be the potential consequences for society if all organizations were to prioritize environmental sustainability as a core goal?</i>
		Logical inversion	Take an existing state as the consequence of previously defined goal pursuits to better understand causal pathways.	<i>How have implied norms, such as efficiency and competition, shaped the trajectory of strategy research? And how might the field have developed differently if alternative norms, such as resilience and cooperation, had prevailed?</i>
		<p><b>c) Comparative reasoning:</b> Analogical thinking</p>	Search for contexts which exhibit heuristic analogy (i.e., similar ideas and assumptions), causal analogy (i.e., similar theoretical mechanisms), and/or constitutive analogy (i.e., similar constructs) to justify the applicability of goals across context.	<i>To what extent can the adaptive behavioral strategies of animals in response to changing environmental conditions be transferred as a strategy to companies facing increased pressure to adapt due to digital transformation and climate change?</i>
		Contrastive thinking	Search for contexts with markedly distinct characteristics to establish and substantiate essential criteria for the transferability of goals from one context to another.	<i>What prerequisites must be met to effectively adapt participatory decision-making processes from democratic contexts into hierarchical corporate governance structures?</i>

**Table II (Part 2): Overview of Instrumental Theorizing and Associated Heuristics**

Theorizing Stage	Description	Possible Heuristic	Explanation of Heuristic	Stylized Examples Pertaining to Grand Challenges
<b>1. Defining the Means/Instruments</b>	<p><b>Definition:</b> An instrument is a tool that connects specific practices to particular desired outcomes, providing templates for solving related field problems to achieve specific goals.</p> <p><b>Method of discovery:</b> The purpose is to open the option space of possible instruments in relation to the goal of interest.</p> <p>In principle, any instrument may be proposed as long as it can be justified (see below).</p>	<p><b>a) Resort to existing instruments:</b> Utilize instruments that have been employed in analogous situations</p>	For problems with similar properties, check whether existing solutions are transferable.	<i>By studying sustainable waste management practices in urban areas, organizations can transfer these techniques to their manufacturing processes, ensuring reduced environmental impact, optimized resource utilization, and minimized waste generation.</i>
		Transfer instruments across unrelated domains	Draw inspiration from unrelated domains facing comparable problems to discover potential solutions.	<i>By exploring guidelines developed to address the ethical implications of human subjects research, organizations can assess the transferability of these instruments to AI development and deployment. This includes considerations of informed consent, privacy protection, bias mitigation, and accountability, ensuring responsible and ethical AI practices.</i>
		<p><b>b) Develop new instruments:</b> Use structured problem-solving techniques that emphasize logic and planning</p>	Break down the problem into smaller parts, develop a solution for the subproblems, integrate the solutions and assess them.	<i>To develop a solution to broad goals such as crisis resilience, it might be useful to first identify vulnerabilities for each critical value chain activity (breakdown of problem) and develop resilience tools for each activity separately (e.g., measures to counteract supply chain disruptions) before recombining individual solution into a broad resilience strategy.</i>
		Use creative problem-solving techniques that emphasize creativity and spontaneous inspiration	Apply techniques such as design thinking to find novel and unexpected solutions to problems.	<i>To increase healthcare awareness for disadvantaged children, it can be useful to blend concepts from the entertainment industry with telemedicine. Incorporating game design and fun incentives can motivate children to conduct regular self-check-ups, aiding in the early detection of diseases.</i>
<b>2. Justifying the Means/Instruments</b>	<p><b>Method of assessment:</b> The justification of the instruments establishes the necessary bounds on the option space.</p> <p>Only instruments that meet all four fit criteria (effectiveness, viability, efficiency, and proportionality) can be considered acceptable.</p>	<p><b>a) Effectiveness analysis:</b> Causal argumentation</p>	Use empirical evidence and/or logical arguments to assess whether the instrument can produce the desired outcome.	<i>Drawing upon evidence of gender quotas in politics to illustrate how similar measures can be employed to attain gender parity on corporate boards.</i>
		<p><b>b) Viability analysis:</b> Feasibility and availability analysis</p>	Determine whether the instrument is actually available and likely to work in the focal context.	<i>Examining the feasibility of small and medium-sized enterprises in resource-constrained regions adopting sustainable supply chain practices while accounting for factors such as limited financial resources and infrastructural limitations.</i>
		<p><b>c) Efficiency analysis:</b> Cost–benefit analysis</p>	Assess the instrument against alternatives and weigh their relative cost–benefit ratio.	<i>Comparing the costs and benefits of flexible home office policies with corporate child daycare programs.</i>
		<p><b>d) Proportionality analysis:</b> Interest balancing</p>	Check whether the instrument affects the interests of other stakeholders, and choose the instrument that least compromises competing interests.	<i>Determining the optimal extent of investment in renewable energy sources for organizations to reduce carbon emissions, while considering potential effects on profitability and the interests of stakeholders, including shareholders and employees.</i>