Foreword

This book is short, fun to read, and full of good ideas. It also works well as an introduction to how to theorize in organization studies, for students as well as professors. The content is based on eight interviews with key figures in the field, reorganized by theme by the two authors who have also added comments of their own. The result makes for fresh and lively reading, reflecting the ambition of Anne Vorre Hansen and Sabine Madsen to say something new and to do so in a new way.

The topic of the book is theorizing and its main message is one of *inspiration*. The authors also want to present the reader with knowledge on the basics of theorizing, and they do a good job in this as well. First, however, they want to get the reader to theorize herself or himself.

Theorizing is the process through which a theory is created, from the first feeble hunch to the final theory, presented in print to the reader. This whole process, the authors emphasize very strongly, is personal – it is *you* who theorize. You must not repeat or channel someone else's ideas. This would be to turn yourself into a ventriloquist's dummy! You must 'dare to find your own approach to theorizing, and as a very important point thereof – your own voice'.

It is also important to realize that it is not possible to theorize well in organizational studies just by sitting down at your computer and starting to create a theory. You first have to observe some phenomenon carefully; you also need to know quite a bit about your field. How to observe is something you learn in methods classes. How to develop ideas that resonate with your field, however, is more of a challenge. The authors' solution to this problem is that you first create a 'personal canon' of authors and books that are meaningful to you. They describe such a canon in the following way:

A close relationship with a few selected authors and their texts allows both for quick inspirational reading (because the thoughts are already familiar) and in-depth thinking and theorizing infused by the ideas and concepts of a small, consciously chosen family of thinkers. Thus, the building up of a personal canon seems to be a part of becoming yourself as an academic and of finding your own voice as a writer.

In addition to having a personal canon, it is also necessary to have a good knowledge of the literature in your field. To be able to draw on both these types of knowledge is a precondition for being creative in your theorizing. It also helps to know something about what is happening in fields other than your own:

In academia, the idiosyncratic is often frowned upon and considered a regrettable property of human cognition and behaviour. Here we suggest the opposite. Namely, that it is precisely due to close reading of a personal canon and a sense of belonging to (several) communities of thought – for example, philosophy, sociology, literary fiction – that are only vaguely or completely unrelated to the time and topics of one's field that it is possible to have ideas and develop theories that are new to the field.

Theorizing is also an activity that takes quite a bit of time, according to the authors. You may not want to follow a step-by-step procedure, they say, but you have to realize that what is involved is a process – and a process that takes time. You also have to get into the right kind of mood to theorize well. According to one of the authors:

For me, it is useful to think about the *process* of theorizing. When thinking about it as a process, it becomes more apparent and acceptable for me as a quite result-oriented person that it takes time, patience and effort to get to the results – and that the process is important and delightful in itself (at least some of it/to some extent). However, I think I would use the term 'to conceptualize' to express what it is I actually do during the process of theorizing. That is, during the process of theorizing I conceptualize the topic I am studying by experimenting with figures, tables, labels, names and metaphors to see if they fit. When the concepts seem to fit, it is (1) because they highlight the important differences and similarities (patterns) and foregrounds the unique aspects of (my own and/or others') experiences with the topic under study. And (2) because they make sense to others too, and not just to me.

In the last half of the quote, a mention is made of the centrality of concepts. This is a useful reminder of the fact that it is important to have a knowledge of concepts when you theorize, and know how to

handle these when you are in the middle of an empirical analysis. To this can be added that just as there is a practical side to theorizing, there is also what may be called *a technical side*. By this last term I mean knowledge about what a concept is and what existing research about concepts can tell us. This also goes for other tools of the theorizer, such as analogy, abduction, visualization and more (see, e.g., Richard Swedberg, 2014a and 2016). Without a foundation of this type of knowledge it is difficult to theorize well. Social scientists have largely ignored this issue. This, however, is not the case in all of the sciences. Especially in philosophy and cognitive science there is abundant useful material of this type, which anyone interested in becoming good at theorizing will want to learn a bit about.

Some readers may want to know something about the position of this book by Anne Vorre Hansen and Sabine Madsen in the history of theorizing, especially in organization studies. First, there currently does not exist much material on theorizing in the social sciences. And much of what does exist is primarily on theory construction rather than on theorizing. These are closely related but theory construction is more formal in nature and close to the philosophy of science, while theorizing is much more realistic and practical in its approach (see, e.g., Shanyang Zhao, 1996). Another way to put it is that theory construction helps you to formulate the result of your theory work when it is ready for publication, and also to put it in such a form that it can be clearly understood and properly tested. Theorizing, in contrast, is more about dealing with the empirical problems you encounter on the way to the production of a full-fledged theory and also the difficulties you have to face in trying to explain a phenomenon. If the theorizer works a bit like a detective, and primarily wants to solve the case, the theory constructor takes over when the case is ready to enter the courthouse and has to be presented to the judge and jury. You always want to know who the culprit is (what the solution is), but you also need to prove the case according to the laws of the country (according to the norms of evidence in your field).

Even if the material on theorizing is small, there is more on this topic in organization studies than one might have thought. The reason for this may well be that this field from its inception and onwards has drawn on several disciplines; it has also continued to have one foot in academia and another in society at large. That there is a fair

amount of material on theorizing in organization studies means that people from the other social sciences may want to know more about this and learn from it. For a very helpful introduction to the type of theorizing that works with models, there is first and foremost an excellent book by Charles Lave and James March: *An Introduction to Models in the Social Sciences* (1975). While this book is not focused on organization studies per se, quite a bit of the material is relevant for students of organization, such as the discussion of diffusion in Chapter 7. There are also several chapters that describe models from economics and psychology, and this material is easily applicable to organizations as well.

The intellectual core of the book by Charles Lave and James March, however, is to be found in its two introductory chapters devoted to the topic of speculation in theorizing. ‘Speculation’, according to Charles Lave and James March (1975, p. 2), ‘is the soul of the social sciences’. It is especially useful to be good at speculation when you work on the explanation of some phenomenon. You need to learn to come up with many explanations, they argue; working with only one explanation is a mistake, in their view. Throughout their book the reader will also find a number of theoretical problems of the type that you encounter when you do empirical research, followed in bold letters by the words **STOP AND THINK**. The reason for this admonition is that students tend to read a book straight through, and not take time to stop and *think*. They are trained in how to read, but not to think. The two authors suggest a new version of Gresham’s law (bad money drives out good): reading drives out thinking.

James March is not only known as a first-class student of organizations but also of many other topics and the same can be said of Arthur Stinchcombe, the author of another classical book on theorizing in social science. His book appeared in 1968 and is entitled *Constructing Social Theories*. While James March and Charles Lave are exclusively interested in models, Arthur Stinchcombe also discusses verbal theories. Both, however, are primarily interested in teaching students to theorize by coming up with many explanations.

Besides these two books, there are also a number of articles on theorizing in the literature on organizations. Some of the most important of these can be found in two theme issues on theory development

that were published in *Academy of Management Review* in 1989 and 1999, and in an issue from 1995 of *Administrative Science Quarterly* that contains a discussion of ‘what theory is’ (Kimberly Elsbach, Robert Sutton and David Whetten, 1999; Robert Sutton and Barry Staw, 1995; David Whetten, 1989a). Many important issues are discussed in these articles, such as abstraction, imagination, and what differentiates theory from theorizing.

A special mention must also be made of the work on theorizing by Karl Weick because he is the person who has done the most during the last few decades to draw attention to the importance of theorizing in organization studies (see, e.g., Karl Weick, 1989, 1995, 2014). Karl Weick has summarized much of his work on theorizing in an article entitled ‘The experience of theorizing’, which is highly recommended (Karl Weick, 2005). Karl Weick’s approach, like that of Anne Vorre Hansen and Sabine Madsen, is deeply personal in nature. It is not easy to summarize Weick’s work in one sentence, but perhaps you can say that in his view it is by going back and forth between thinking and action that you are able to theorize and also to make sense of things. This goes for the analyst as well as people in general (everyone theorizes, in Karl Weick’s view). For the analyst, including Karl Weick himself, writing is an especially important technique for theorizing.

During the last ten or so years, Weick has become something of a lone voice who advocates theorizing in organization studies. This book by Anne Vorre Hansen and Sabine Madsen is therefore extra welcome. This is also a good place to mention another of their many interesting ideas – that a book on theorizing does not come to an end once it has been finished and published. From this point on, they say, it is up to the reader to make it come alive, by allowing himself or herself to be inspired to start theorizing.

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