The Grand Challenge of Preparing OD Scholar Practitioners for Grand Challenges

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The Grand Challenge of Preparing OD Scholar Practitioners for Grand Challenges

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE OPUS COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SAINT THOMAS

by

Lisa M. Meyer

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
OF THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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Abstract

This doctoral dissertation investigates a set of problems in the field of organization development (OD) that I believe have become barriers to innovation in the field and to OD professionals doing more inspired work. These include the problem of exclusion, the problem of marginalization, the problem of integration and the problem of relevance. Using Weick’s (1989) concept of theorizing as disciplined imagination, I apply the methodologies of radical theorizing to imagine OD differently, to make novel interpretations of the work of Kurt Lewin, and to conceive of new approaches to OD practice. A conceptual framework that encompasses the diverse and fragmented elements of the study and practice of OD is presented as (a) an OD scholar practitioner mindset, (b) a different way of thinking, (c) a new vocabulary, and (d) a new belief system. A model for the OD scholar practitioner that based upon the alignment of integrated thinking, practice-based theory and philosophical pragmaticism is proposed.

Keywords: organization development, Kurt Lewin, integrative thinking, stakeholder theory, pragmatism
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Preamble

This doctoral dissertation investigates a set of problems in the field of organization development (OD) that I believe have become barriers to innovation in the field and to OD professionals doing more inspired work.

There are two important perspectives I bring to this work. First is that of an academic outsider who brings fresh perspectives to conceptions of the OD scholar practitioner, and second, as someone who brings an acute awareness of the types of problems facing today’s organizations, wicked problems that require systems thinking and processes that integrate diverse perspectives.

At the core of my argument is a belief that OD belongs in a class of disciplinary thought, along with design, innovation and entrepreneurship, that is incompatible with an exclusively “scientific” approach or a formalistic view of management. This class of disciplinary thought is distinguished by practice-based knowledge that incorporates human intentionality and environmental contingency and is focused on practical problems that are inherently indeterminate, ambiguous and change over time (Simon, 1996; Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997).

This dissertation is an intentional departure from the established norms of doctoral dissertations that emphasize methodological rigor and knowledge accumulation, as those norms are more appropriate for refining existing theory than for challenging deeply embedded assumptions. I believe this departure is not only appropriate but necessary for reconceptualizing the OD scholar practitioner in the tradition of OD’s founding father, Kurt Lewin; a reflexive and path-(up)setting scholar who is intellectually broad-minded, independent, imaginative, willing to take risks, enthusiastic about intellectual adventures, and frequently provocative.
Background

I suppose anyone who has earned a doctorate degree believes they were influenced by the times in which they received their doctoral training. I am no exception and can recount several events, experiences and paradoxes that have shaped my doctoral journey.

There is the richness of coming back to academia with my working career to reflect upon, and the diversity of my cohort to bring me new perspectives and learning. This was coupled with a growing awareness of the intellectual tension in business schools over the relevancy of academic scholarship to organizations, managers and leaders (Banks et al., 2016).

In 2014 and again in 2016 the importance of OD served as an ominous backdrop when the spotlight of public scrutiny shone on General Motors (GM) and Wells Fargo leaders who failed to include healthy, sustainable organizational cultures as part of their leadership responsibilities. This was coupled with the paradoxical timing of long time practitioners of OD saying that the field of OD is in a confused and weakened state (Minahan, 2016).

Over the three-plus years of coursework, I have come to believe that due to my diverse interests and multi-disciplinary background, I have something unique and valuable to offer the field of OD. I want to create what Karl Weick (1999) called moving theories that synthesize backward understanding and forward living. These theories come from a compassionate view of organizational life; they pay attention to feeling and engagement; and represent a more inclusive epistemology that values equally the domains of objective knowledge, reflection, and practical knowledge.
Researcher Interest

So, how did I come to be writing a doctoral dissertation in OD? Leading up to this, my working career typified what Douglas Hall (1996) called a protean career, which is a career characterized by continuous learning and identity change.

Starting out with a bachelor’s degree in music education, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in arts administration, my 20-plus-year career includes work in several organizational settings beginning with arts organizations and then to advertising agencies where I led teams that served clients of various sizes in a range of industries. Following that, I was responsible for marketing and administration in a large privately held regional financial services company (a former client). After that firm was acquired by Wells Fargo, I led a high-tech, creative, post-production company that was eventually spun out into two successful employee-owned firms. I followed this by becoming part the leadership team at the University of Minnesota Foundation where I was responsible for significantly increasing private support for the university and successfully navigating the financial crisis of 2008.

Hall (1996) described protean careers as being driven by the person, not the organization, and reinvented from time to time as the person and environment change. They are careers that are measured not by chronological age and life stages but by continuous learning and identity changes.

For me, a protean career has meant that in addition to acquiring business knowledge from my experience working in many industries and firms, I have learned resiliency and how to be an integrative systems thinker. Additionally, through my work in the creative industries and as a musician, I have learned to embrace and practice design thinking and improvisation.
Probably most important to the story of how I came to be writing a doctoral dissertation in OD are the observations I made about relationships between my clients’ successes and their organizations. In the course of helping many firms achieve business success by building strong outward-facing brands, I realized that my work did not address what was often my clients’ most significant barrier to success; their own organization. I began to notice how an organization’s culture, their ability to attract and retain talent, their ability to work across teams, their structure and their incentives all impacted their business success, and that there was a need for greater alignment between organizational culture, performance, and business and branding strategies. Over time, I had reflexively acquired an OD mindset to go along with my marketing mindset, and in hindsight, I can’t think of a better preparation for continuing my protean career as an OD scholar practitioner.

Early in my doctoral coursework I wrote about how I thought it was an exciting time to be pursuing a doctorate in OD and I still believe it to be true. The economic success that is important in all organizations whether they are privately held or publicly traded corporations, mission-driven nonprofits, education institutions or philanthropic foundations, is sustainable only when it is powered by great strategies and healthy organizations. My multidisciplinary background in (then) marketing and (now) OD, makes me uniquely suited to help organizations pursue this purpose.

I envision accessing and integrating my formal, practical, and tacit knowledge in a highly relevant manner to help organizations better understand themselves. I want to tackle big questions such as: How can organizations learn to balance the needs of many stakeholders and deliver on their mission more purposefully, ethically and sustainably?
The concepts I propose differ substantially from other loose definitions of the OD scholar practitioner that have previously circulated in the literature and, accordingly, I ask that the reader set aside past conceptions while I challenge assumptions and introduce new ideas that could fundamentally reshape future discourse on the topic.

Why Grand Challenges?

The title of this dissertation refers to two kinds of grand challenges. The first is about the preparation of the OD scholar practitioner, which, I argue, takes two forms: (a) an academic preparation that happens in graduate studies, and (b) a practical preparation that happens over a lifetime of practice. Both are necessary for producing new ways of thinking and identifying new vocabularies that are needed to shape future discourse in OD.

The other kind of grand challenge referenced in the title speaks to the type of practice problems for which OD and OD scholar practitioners are best suited. These grand challenges present extensive theorizing opportunities, calling for new concepts, relationships and logics of organizing, and also advancing social progress. They present problems that are complex and call for novel ideas and unconventional approaches for tackling their evolving mix of technical and social elements. They also require individuals who are able to work with multiple perspectives, across multiple disciplines and in the messiness of real-world problems (Eisenhardt, Graebner, & Sonnenshein, 2016; Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015).

Problems Facing the Field of Organization Development

The original theoretical concepts behind OD were, and continue to be, highly innovative. Beginning in the 1940s with Kurt Lewin’s field theory and action research, and continuing in the 1960s and 1970s with Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, and others who contributed ground-breaking approaches to change; this group of OD scholar practitioners, with their sustained energy and
commitment to innovation helped maintain a high level of academic interest in OD. But, as business schools shifted to a research-based model of education, the integrated, practice-based work of scholars like Lewin, Argyris, and Schein was de-emphasized and formal progress in OD slowed. Today it is ironic that at a time when organizations are seeking ways to become more purposeful, ethical and sustainable, OD has become less innovative.

In the following section I will outline the problems I have identified that have become barriers to the innovation needed in the field of OD.

The Problem of Exclusion

There is a persistent question I have asked myself whenever a firm faces a crisis that is attributable to an organization failure: Why is OD so often missing from the leadership table?

I asked this question in 2014 when I learned of the GM ignition switch failure that led to at least 13 deaths and a recall of nearly 30 million GM cars worldwide. An investigation identified a critical factor in the initial delay of fixing the switch was cultural: Everyone had responsibility to fix the problem; nobody took responsibility. It was an example of what one top executive described as the “GM nod,” when everyone nods in agreement to a proposed plan of action, but then leaves the room and does nothing (Valukas, 2014).

I again wondered about the absence of OD at Wells Fargo & Company in 2016 when it was discovered that improper sales practices led to the opening of over 3.5 million unauthorized customer accounts. The investigation conducted by the independent directors found that a transactional approach to problem solving obscured management’s view of the broader cultural context: the bank’s sales practices. As a result, opportunities to analyze, size, and escalate issues were missed, leading to a failure to understand the root causes and identify remedial actions. (Shearman & Sterling, 2017).
There are a variety of possible explanations as to why OD is excluded from leadership circles. One is that, unlike other management disciplines, there is no OD career path to the executive suite. Traditional management disciplines such as finance and operations are longstanding members of the C-suite and newer roles like the chief marketing officer and chief information officer have been created for marketing and information technology. The entry of human resources professionals to the executive suite with the CHRM title points to an awareness of missing voices, however mission-critical aspects of organizational success like organizational culture and learning are too easily lost in the type of GM situation where everyone has responsibility, but nobody takes responsibility.

**The Problem of Marginalization**

OD logics have been marginalized in management and organization studies (Jacques & Durepos, 2015) and OD practices and practitioners can become stuck in limited roles (Bradford & Burke, 2006). This contributes to the perception of OD as an event-based activity with a focus of “fixing problems” rather than integrating OD work into the strategic fabric of an organization. Negative perceptions of OD have developed from some taking on a “savior” mentality or charismatic leaders who believe mistakenly that they already “are the change” committing themselves to personally role modeling desired behaviors but accomplishing no significant organizational change (Merron, 2006).

A marginalization of important OD theorists in historical narratives of organization and management studies is a problem. Some scholars have noted the absence of substantive discussions of Lewin’s group dynamics or Argyris’ work on power and conflict in management histories. The nuanced thinking of these innovative OD theorists is lost when it is reduced to general, prescriptive n-step theories for approaching change and then plugged into an
evolutionary narrative of management. Theories are detached from the context of their production, and the ideological forces behind their construction are ignored (Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2017; Jacques & Durepos, 2015, p. 97).

The Problem of Integration

While management studies are said to draw from many disciplines, each of its related disciplines—economics, sociology, and psychology—focuses on different facets of societal issues. Therefore, research questions, underlying assumptions, and the way organizations are conceptualized differ dramatically across the disciplines. Rather than being multidisciplinary and integrated, where insights from many perspectives are considered or combined, Agarwal and Hoetker (2007) found the body of management research largely to be influenced by multiple disciplines but pursued only one discipline at a time.

Slinger (1999) observed an almost complete exclusion of important sociopsychological work in economic literature noting that work that is cited widely in the management and applied psychology literature is almost never cited in economics, including Emery and Trist’s sociotechnical systems approach, or McGregor’s theory X and theory Y.

The proliferation of single discipline theoretical perspectives in economic, strategic management and organization theory has contributed to the lack of a coherent and cumulative research program in management and organizational studies, which in turn has created significant alignment problems for OD.

The Problem of Relevance

Concepts for what an OD scholar practitioner is have become less distinct as the overall field of OD has changed and become less distinctive. Currently, there are disagreements concerning what contemporary OD is, or isn’t, and debates on this topic have played out in the
literature with a wide range of views on the current state of the field of OD. In an analysis of 15 articles on this topic published between 2003 and 2017 in the *OD Practitioner* (*n* = 7), *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences* (*n* = 4), *Organizational Dynamics* (*n* = 2), *Human Relations* (*n* = 1) and *Journal of Organizational Change Management* (*n* = 1), four themes were found regarding the current state of OD and how it might change (see Appendix).

**Loss of clarity in OD.** Reflections on conventional OD practices of the past produced problematic views of the current state of OD. These problem statements had to do with a perceived lack of clarity in the discipline and a separation of theory and practice:

- The roots of OD are grounded in scholarship, but these ties now are nowhere near as strong as they were in the 1960s.
- In OD, scholarly knowledge and practice have drifted apart.
- There is no clear and desired future state for OD.
- There is no systemic, integrated theory of organizational development.
- OD is largely a fragmented field that is focused on intervention methods of specific narrow problems.
- The field of OD is no longer viewed as following a science-practice model.
- OD is now currently in a weakened condition due to its gradual morphing into a variety of applications that may or may not represent OD in its original form.

**Better-prepared practitioners.** Emerging from the literature was an expressed need for better prepared practitioners who can integrate theory into their practice and have the ability to exercise multiple ways of thinking:

- We need more scholar practitioners. Without this the field of OD will become stale and frozen in time.
• It is incumbent on us to keep up, stay informed and to keep learning. This means returning to scholarly works where OD began.

• As scholar-practitioners we must ensure that we continue to codify, articulate, build capability, and reinforce the core aspects of the field that make it unique.

• A cadre of scholars with experience as practitioners will hopefully serve as bridges between the theory and practice of the field and the acceleration of meaningful and helpful research.

• The duality of being firmly grounded in the core of OD and yet being able to flex and stretch to work in an emergent way is a key mindset we need all OD students to develop.

• Scholar consultants help managers solve problems through diagnosis and the development of new practices responsive to the diagnosis and rigorous analysis of multiple cases.

**Greater impact.** Authors voiced a strong need for practitioners who have the ability to confidently and competently interface with organizational leadership and focus their skills on the big issues facing leaders in organizations:

• OD practitioners must be able to wear both a traditional OD and newly minted MBA hat.

• OD can move ahead only if it learns more about the substantive issues facing organizations and how to address them and only if it gains in power and reputation for helping senior management to resolve these issues.

• OD needs to reach out and create integrative solutions for major strategic issues facing tomorrow’s organizations.

• There is an increasing appreciation of the importance of design in shaping behavior.
• The diversity and effectiveness of the field would be enhanced if more practitioners incorporated related content areas, such as organization design and sustainability into their practice.

• OD can improve not only effectiveness but also the capacity of a system to change in the future.

• Organizational change and development consultants can play a role in guiding organizational transformations which are both holistic and healing.

• Leaders should look for wise, capable, systemically thinking consultants who can be thought partners with them in learning about their own enterprise and in helping them craft interventions based on what they learn.

• The credibility of OD depends on being able to demonstrate robustly the effectiveness of the various OD methods.

Strong philosophical underpinnings. Emerging from the literature was a desire to return to the intellectual foundations of OD which began in the 1940s with the research and writing of Kurt Lewin:

• The separation of theory and practice did not exist in the early days of OD when the influence of Kurt Lewin was strong.

• What is needed is a genuine commitment by both academics and practitioners to restoring Lewinian rigor and relevance to OD.

• In the early 2000s, while many in the OD community were busy questioning its purpose and values, other scholars often from outside the community, were rehabilitating Lewin and OD.
• Scholars argue the philosophy of Lewinian OD, with its emphasis on democracy and fairness, fits neatly with the egalitarian nature of postmodern organizations.

• Appreciative inquiry is a form of action research and as such one can find strong similarities with Lewin’s approach to change.

A Growing Crisis

The first three of these themes reveal a set of circumstances and a series of missed opportunities that together indicate a growing crisis in OD. It concerns all aspects of the field: the knowledge base, the focus of education, the quality of practice, and the need to elevate the impact of OD within organizations.

The fourth theme is, however, more optimistic. It points to a growing recognition of the importance and relevance of OD’s Lewinian heritage (Burnes, 2006). This is adding to OD’s rigor and symbolizes an increased desire to learn lessons from its history. Burnes and Cooke (2012) wrote that a return to the early driving force of OD is necessary for an OD resurgence and that leaders in a modern OD movement should engage with and be galvanized by the big questions of the day, like the need to promote ethics and democracy in order to build a better, more sustainable world. Worley (2014) continued with this sentiment in a call for OD to help organizations figure out and implement answers to the following question: “What’s the next, best, right thing that this organization must learn to do to become more agile and sustainable?” (p. 71).

The most optimistic voices in this discussion see OD going through a process of renewal that has the potential to restore the synergistic link between theory and practice. This renewal is spurred, in part, by a rehabilitation of the work of Kurt Lewin on the part of scholars from both inside and outside the OD community (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). However, this cannot be done
using the textbook-like accounts of Kurt Lewin’s legacy as the founding father of OD as they do not emphasize those aspects of his work that are most salient to, and that give insight into, a new conceptualization of the OD scholar practitioner.

**Revisiting Kurt Lewin**

After Kurt Lewin’s untimely death in 1947, his image began to suffer by being looked at as disconnected pieces, like, for instance, the simple line-and-box drawings that show change as three stages, or as a myth-like caricature of a genius “practical theorist.” Additionally, critics of Lewin have argued that his planned approach to change was simplistic and outmoded. These accounts have clouded the nature of his influence (Billig, 2014; Burnes, 2006).

Bargal, Gold, and Lewin (1992) argued that because Lewin rejected the traditional atomistic, positivist, reductionist, behaviorist philosophy of science of psychology, much of Kurt Lewin’s work is now missing from the historical narrative of organization and management studies. They pointed to the third edition of the 1985 *Handbook of Social Psychology* edited by Lindzey & Aronson to support their claim, noting that only two pages were devoted to Lewin’s field theory, replacing the 60 pages by Morton Deutsch found in the first and second editions.

Lost from most accounts is the vision Kurt Lewin had for the future. This vision can be found in the seminal article “Frontiers in Group Dynamics” where Lewin (1947) proposed three objectives for a new stage of development in social sciences: (a) integrating social sciences, (b) moving from the description of social bodies to dynamic problems of changing group life, and (c) developing new instruments and techniques of social research. This is an example of how Kurt Lewin, a forward thinking, integrated scholar who was based in practice has influenced academic scholarship.
An Integrated, Practice-Based Scholar

Kurt Lewin was “an alien in academia” (Weisbord, 2012, p. 83). He never held a tenured faculty position. His Research Center for Group Dynamics focused on both scientific and practical, real-world problems. He integrated psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology into instruments for studying group life. Critical to his pursuit of problem-oriented scholarship were the practice-based environments he created for his work. He cut across disciplinary boundaries and could not be easily placed with mainstream academia (Deutsch, 1992; Marrow, 1969; Patnoe, 1988).

The type of scholarship pursued by Kurt Lewin—multidisciplinary, integrative, problem-oriented—appears as the scholarships of integration and application in Ernest Boyer’s (1990) pluralistic model of scholarship. Boyer’s model consists of four separate yet overlapping types of scholarships—(a) the scholarship of discovery, (b) the scholarship of integration, (c) the scholarship of application, and (d) the scholarship of teaching—with the scholarships of integration and application closely matched to Lewin’s approaches and representing the potential for an “academic home” for OD scholar practitioners.

Pushed to the Periphery

Boyer (1990) argued that the rationalist orientation to scientific inquiry, which is centered in the scholarship of discovery, has been the central focus of the academy, while the scholarships of application and integration, which seek to make connections across disciplines and place specialties in a larger context, have been pushed to the periphery.

Boyer’s (1990) concepts have proven to have an enduring relevance. Many influential management scholars have embraced this pluralistic model of scholarship including Ghoshal (2005), Bartunek (2007), and Alvesson and Sandberg (2013), who referenced Boyer’s four types
of scholarship in their arguments for greater diversity and relevancy in management scholarship. Christensen and Eyring (2011) used Boyer’s model in shaping the arguments in their book *The Innovative University*, and it appeared in two recent Academy of Management presidential addresses as a construct for the future of the Academy of Management (Ireland, 2015; Shapiro, 2017).

Boyer (1990) saw the type interdisciplinary and integrative work pursued by Kurt Lewin to be too long on the edges of academic life. He believed it needed to move toward the center to respond to new intellectual questions and to pressing human problems. Figure 1 illustrates the imbalance Boyer perceived between the four types of scholarships.

![Boyer’s Four Types of Scholarship](image)

*Figure 1. Boyer’s four types of scholarship: the ideal and the reality.*

**Enlarging the Perspective**

Boyer’s intent was to define scholarship in ways that closely resemble Kurt Lewin’s motivations—to respond more adequately to what he saw as urgent new realities within the academy and beyond. This makes several aspects of his pluralistic model of scholarship extremely salient to the OD scholar practitioner.
**Equity not gaps.** Boyer’s pluralistic view of scholarship has been referenced in discussions of gap filling, as in gaps in the literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) or academic-practitioner gaps (Bartunek, 2007). However, Boyer did not express his pluralistic vision in terms of gap filling, but in terms of equity. Discovery, integration, application, and teaching were all on an equal footing to address what he described as urgent academic and social mandates in academia.

**A non-dualistic view.** Important to the creative reconsideration of scholarship as described by Boyer (1990) is the potential for a non-dualistic view of scholarship and practice. Much like the views of Kurt Lewin, Boyer wanted scholarship to be defined in ways that give more recognition to interpretative and integrative work; where theory and practice vitally interact, and one renews the other. He believed knowledge can be acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching.

**Different sets of logics.** Boyer (1990) provided insight into the logics behind each of the scholarships by offering examples of the types question each one asks. The scholarships of application and integration ask the type of questions that Kurt Lewin would ask: How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? Can social problems themselves define an agenda for scholarly investigation? These questions not only provide meaningful differentiation between different scholarships, but they also provide insight into type of logic to be used for each type of scholarship. They show, for instance, how integrative thinking and abductive reasoning can be used in the scholarship of integration when making connections across the disciplines or illuminating data in revealing ways. Or in answering questions like: Is it possible to interpret what’s been discovered in ways that provide a larger, more comprehensive understanding? Understanding the different logics behind the scholarships helps to facilitate
meaningful dialogue between different types of scholars and asking different kinds of questions that cut across disciplinary boundaries, the way Kurt Lewin did.

**Problems Facing Today’s OD Scholar Practitioners**

There is currently, in the field of OD, confusion over what constitutes a scholar practitioner or scholar practitioner work. Is it the practitioner who gets a graduate degree and continues in practice? Is it the tenure-track PhD faculty member who also takes on occasional consulting projects? Is it the clinical faculty member who has extensive practitioner experience in his or her background? Is it all of these? Compounding the confusion is that none of these descriptors capture the qualities of the OD scholar practitioner that come from Kurt Lewin’s integrated, practice-based blending of science and practice.

For most OD professionals, their development as OD scholar practitioners begins in a graduate program where they engage in learning activities grounded in the theoretical aspects of organizations and change. This is where OD scholar practitioners have the opportunity to connect past experiences to new learning, to place it in the larger context of OD and develop their OD mindset.

Many, like myself, come to these graduate programs with practice experience in a variety of fields. As a result, they are able to call upon a broader set of vocabularies and experiences, which may, or may not, be helpful as they attempt to navigate the culture of academia. For example, in academic discourse, “practice” is ideologically separated from “scholarship,” and the terms “scholar” and “researcher” are often used interchangeably and almost always associated with the norms of science and academic publishing. Although this vocabulary seems widely accepted in academic circles, it places limitations on a pluralistic view of scholarship and creates
dissonance when discussing the meaningful differences between academic scholars and scholar practitioners in the academy and in practice.

**The Relevance Gap**

Contributing to the dissonance between OD scholar practitioners and academic scholars is the persistent concern over the practical relevance of academic research in management and organizational studies.

How the OD scholar practitioner is impacted by this ongoing debate over relevance can be examined by reviewing two recently published articles—each presenting a comprehensive, systematic overview and analysis of the relevance gap debate as it has played out in over 250 articles in top-tier management journals. The first article is “The Practical Relevance of Management Research,” written by Kieser, Nicolai, and Seidl and published in the 2015 *Academy of Management Annals*, and the second is a 2017 *M@n@gement* article by Carton and Mouricou entitled, “Is Management Research Relevant?”

Kieser et al. (2015) and Carton and Mouricou (2017) offer slightly differing views of the content of the relevance debate but there is a notable concurrence in their views on the character of the debate. Both indicated that the debate has led to little or no advancement in the practical relevance of management studies. Kieser et al., citing various scholars, suggested the relevance debate is fragmented and repetitive, often dominated by ad hoc statements, largely devoid of empirical support, and strongly influenced by normative expectations. Carton and Mouricou similarly observed that the arguments employed by the advocates of each position are unchanged and constantly repeated, which has resulted in an accumulation of arguments rather than a discussion of the arguments between the parties involved. They also noted that the forum in
which these debates have played out is controlled by only one side of the debate (the academic) which has served to prolong the debate indefinitely (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014).

Both Kieser et al. (2015) and Carton and Mouricou (2017) found that in the majority of cases, authors argued for a balance between rigor and relevance, although they did not agree on what constitutes relevance in practice. There was, however, a growing uniformity noted by Carton and Mouricou on the criteria that was important to academics in judging relevance (or impact) of research; frequency of citation, press coverage, and dissemination efforts were most commonly mentioned. This was characterized as a “closing of ranks” in defense of the scientific nature of management research.

What’s missing from the literature? As with most literature reviews, these analyses can only provide insight into what is published in the literature on the relevance gap debate. They cannot tell us what is not there, what alternative viewpoints are missing, what opportunities are not discussed.

For example, while academics from several disciplines have been worried about their relevance to practice, there has been little or no concern with relevance to each other. There has been little integration of organization theories with management theories or leadership theories with economic theories. OD concepts are rarely mentioned in the transformational leader literature and transformational leader concepts are seldom mentioned in the OD literature (Eisenbach, Watson, & Pillai, 1999; Warrick, 2017).

Another salient observation made by Carton and Mouricou (2017) was the peripheral role of practitioners in the debate. This is despite an agreement on the part of most that greater value should be placed on the roles and expectations of the people who work in the organizations they study.
Keiser et al. (2015) argued that the relevance debate should shift its focus away from seeking immediate solutions for the problem of relevance and onto developing rigorous research programs on the utilization of management research and the social dynamics between academic and experiential knowledge. They argued that one advantage of focusing on utilization is that there would be fewer restrictions on the ways research is used, fewer prescriptions as to who can use it, and what role the users play in the process. In furthering this argument, the authors held that a refocus on utilization would introduce the possibility for original knowledge to be transformed or enriched as it becomes utilized, allowing for the integration of diverse streams of research and a better understanding of the relationship between management science and its external constituencies.

Keiser et al. (2015) also found a reliance upon models that are based upon what they called “the problematic notion of a simple linear transfer of knowledge” noting that these models fail to “capture the complexities of utilizing management research.” They asserted that a broad research program on how management research can be utilized could benefit from “comprehensive theoretical models that allow for a more holistic view of the dimensions of the utilization process” (Keiser et al., 2015, p. 214).

In their analysis of the relevance gap debate, Carton and Mouricou (2017) found four themes, one of which was a view expressing that “relevant research should be able to provide answers to major social and societal issues facing the contemporary world” (p. 177). The starting point for this position was the belief that management and the activities of business are not neutral in terms of their effects on the lives of other human beings, and therefore, management science needs to expand beyond the study of intangible objects, such as the performance of business or productivity. Carton and Mouricou called this “refocusing on the
common good.” They saw it as a link between management research and grand challenges. This is consistent with Banks et al. (2016), who proposed taking major issues facing the contemporary world into account when establishing research programs. The authors, in noting the scale of change required to shift management research toward the common good, advocated for a collective effort that involves not just management scholars, but all members of the academic community and in addition, I would argue, expanding beyond the dominant rationalist view of scholarship to a more pluralist view.

**Disconnects for OD**

Embedded in the relevance gap debate are several “disconnects” between OD as it is theorized about and practiced, and much of mainstream academic theorizing (Bartunek, 2008). The relevance debate exposes a stark contrast between the way academic scholars approach problems and the integrated, practice-based approaches used by Kurt Lewin and other OD scholar practitioners.

An example of the contrast in Lewin’s approaches can be found in a story Margaret Mead provided to Alfred Marrow (1969) about Lewin’s work with Mead on the Committee on Food Habits during World War II. Margaret Mead was the Executive Secretary for the committee, but it was Lewin’s idea to combine the work of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists in answering the question of how to change the eating habits of the American public. (An interesting side note is that in 1940, soon after Lewin, the German from Berlin was naturalized as a U.S. citizen, he was quickly granted security clearance to consult on the U.S. war effort because of the high value placed on his unique approach to problem solving.)

In Mead’s (1969) telling,
As anthropologists, we came to the conclusion that our first task was to find out what American food habits were, what was the cultural setting within which different groups of Americans—those of foreign stock, from different parts of the county—selected, prepared, ate, and enjoyed foods that kept them well or indifferently nourished. (p. 129)

Here, Mead is describing the scientific approach to understanding the problem.

Lewin, however, saw the problem very differently. He saw in the question an opportunity to pursue an understanding of the best psychological approaches to change, with food habits as the setting for the research (Marrow, 1969). This is consistent with how integrative thinkers take a broader view of what is salient and always have the entire problem in consideration. His imagination turned first to field-based experiments that involved participants responding to conjectures of different eating patterns. The phenomenon of interest (change) was always in view while using open-ended action research that was based upon carefully constructed cultural hypotheses about food choices and consumption.

This series of studies eventually led to the formulation of the social theories known as *gatekeepers* and *group decisions*. In Mead’s words, it was from these studies the experimenters learned that groups of people “can do a thing better when they themselves decide upon it, and also how they themselves can elect to reduce the gap between their attitudes and actions” (as cited in Marrow, 1969, p. 130). Mead herself took part in the action research, recalling an ill-fated experiment in which she was brought in as the prestige expert from Washington “to express publicly her high approval of turnips—which had no effect at all” (Marrow, 1969, p. 130).

Colleagues of Lewin’s who observed the working relationship between Lewin and Mead recalled that the contrast between their two approaches was always in play, but they would go at it and finally come out with some agreement. This demonstrates how, with integrative thinking,
unpleasant tradeoffs can be avoided and replaced by a drive toward a creative resolution of tensions.

**A nagging sense of inferiority.** Donald Schön (1995) provided an evocative metaphor for the contrasts between Mead’s scientific-based ideas and Lewin’s integrated, practice-based approaches. He saw mainstream academics like Mead on the high ground with manageable problems that lend themselves to solutions through the use of research-based theory and methodologies supported by their research paradigm. However, the OD scholar practitioners like Lewin he saw in the swampy lowlands with problems that are messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution. He described the scholar practitioner’s work as a deliberate immersion into confusing but critically important situations, with methods of inquiry that incorporate experience, trial and error and intuition. Yet he observed, scholar practitioners sometimes find themselves with a “nagging sense of inferiority in relation to those who present themselves as models of technical rigor” (Schön, 1995, p. 27).

This sense of inferiority is to me, an important point. The models of technical rigor to which Schön (1995) refers (and from which OD scholar practitioners are disconnected) come from Thomas Kuhn’s (1962) concept of research paradigms where different philosophies are associated with different scientific communities and types of scientific inquiry. By this definition it can be argued that the OD scholar practitioner’s sense of inferiority comes not only from feeling disconnected from academic scholars, but also, from lacking their own models of technical rigor and a community with which to share them.

**Stuck between two worlds.** There is a view that the scholar practitioner sits between two worlds and not fully within either one. This statement about “sitting between two worlds” appeared on a slide in a presentation I attended at the 2016 annual meeting of the Academy of
Management and it went unchallenged. But, for me it created a dissonance that conjured up a kind of “no-man’s land” that robbed scholar practitioners of their own narrative. The idea of being between two worlds had the OD scholar practitioner frozen in place by old norms that can interfere with new approaches (Cummings & Worley, 2009). The problematic and dynamic aspect of this assumption of sitting between two worlds is not whether it is true or false, but that it is true and false.

Assuming the reference to two worlds means scholarship and practice, it is true that the world of the academic scholar is different from that of the scholar practitioner. Primary drivers for academic scholars are research and publishing, balancing teaching loads and other demands of academic life. Academic scholars who are situated in the scholarships of discovery are expected to focus their research efforts on projects in their area of expertise, applying existing theories to problems that are central to their field of inquiry (Nadkarni, Gruber, DeCelles, Connely, & Baer, 2018). This does not describe the world of most OD scholar practitioners.

Shifting to the scholar practitioner being not fully in the world of practice, this is neither true or false. The relationship between the OD scholar practitioner and the world of practice would be more accurately described as variable and rich. Many OD scholar practitioners come to the field with considerable practice experience and continue to engage in practice by holding positions in management, public administration, human resources, health care, the arts, higher education, law enforcement, consulting, and research. The point here is that there are many ways for the OD scholar practitioner to fit into the world of practice.

The part of the original statement that I argue is false is the notion of being between two worlds. The scholar/practice dichotomy that is used to separate academic scholars from people who work in organizations is not useful in a discussion of OD scholar practitioners. An implied
continuum between these two worlds produces flawed models of the scholar practitioner: those that view scholarship and practice as opposites or polarities with gaps to be spanned or bridged. These assumptions create an intellectual barrier to alternative concepts, like the view of scholarship and practice being integrated and inseparable. They prevent moving beyond dichotomous descriptions like a person with one foot in each world or playing different roles, one in scholarship and one in practice.

**Not a hyphenated scholar.** In addressing the problem of two worlds and using a postmodernist perspective to pay attention to how language can create either marginalizing or empowering positions for the OD scholar practitioner (Hatch, 2013), I do not use a hyphen when referring to the general concept of scholar practitioner, except when I am citing research that uses the hyphenated scholar-practitioner.

My rationale for not using a hyphen in the term scholar practitioner comes from a perspective shared with Steven Brookfield regarding the choice to not hyphenate the term African American. As Brookfield (2005) described it, Scipio J. Colin III viewed a hyphen as a punctuation device that emphasizes the separation, rather than the interconnection of two words (or worlds). I feel this view is appropriate to attach to the concept of the OD scholar practitioner. Just as many African American scholars in the diaspora do not use the hyphen because they do not view themselves as “hyphenated Americans” but rather as Africans in/of America, I choose to view the OD scholar practitioner not as a hyphenated scholar but rather as a scholar in/of practice.
The Problem of Vocabulary

Researchers who studied scholar practitioners have found the vocabulary of journal-based theories to be lacking when it comes to identifying, assessing, and describing the actions of scholar-practitioners.

In one research stream, Hay (2004), and Tenkasi and Hay (2004) used activity theory to study scholar-practitioners in practice. They examined organizational projects that were successful in two ways, delivering business results and furthering academic knowledge. They found scholar-practitioners used devices they called theory-practice linkages for framing, influencing and legitimizing, sensemaking, and demonstrating. They also identified turns and scaffolding as types of strategies used by scholar-practitioners in interrelating theory and practice. Tenkasi and Hay (2004), in their analysis, found the vocabulary of academic discourse lacking as they tried to bring to life “convergent streams of action on the part of the scholar-practitioner that appear where they did not exist and disappear when their time is over” (p. 204). They also noted that the tradition of discussing theory independent of practice had the effect of sacrificing one stream of action for the other, which caused the authors to speculate that the established academic discourse contributes to the persistent gap between theory and practice.

In another stream, Wasserman and Kram (2009) used role theory to study scholar-practitioners. They began their theorizing believing that the role of the scholar-practitioner could best be understood as a continuum of roles, rather than “just one identity, with pure scholar and pure [emphasis added] practitioner anchoring each end of the continuum” (Wasserman & Kram, 2009, p. 14). However, as the study progressed, they recognized there were tensions and conflicts that exist within the roles of scholars and practitioners that could not be accommodated in the continuum. This caused them to consequently alter their concept of the scholar-
practitioner as a continuum of roles, saying that it “did not adequately portray the nuances of the scholar-practitioner role that crystalized during the study” (Wasserman & Kram, 2009, p. 32).

Both of these research streams noted the lack of a common vocabulary for referring to scholar-practitioners and their work. Convincing evidence for this was provided by Wasserman and Kram (2009):

There are many terms used to describe those practitioners who participate in scholarly pursuits, including “researcher-practitioners” (Lynham, 2002), “scientist-practitioners” (Brewerton & Millward, 2001), “scholar-practitioners (Graham & Kormanik, 2004), “practitioner-theorists” (Lynham, 2002), “scholarly practitioners” (Ruona, 1999), and “reflective practitioners” (Jacobs, 1999, Schon, 1983). Similarly, the dual agendas of developing new knowledge and influencing practice are alternatively referred to as “collaborative management research” (Pasmore, Woodman & Simmons, 2008), “action research” (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), “action science” (Argyris, Putman & Smith, 1985), and “insider/outsider team research” (Bartunek, 2008; Bartunek & Louis, 1996).
(p. 13)

Revised assumptions. Many of the methodologies commonly used in journal-based research tend to emphasize methodological issues over the phenomena of interest (Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1984). This proved to be the case for these researchers as they found the vocabulary of their theories, specifically activity theory, used by Tenkasi and Hay (2004) and role theory, used by Wasserman and Kram (2009) to be inadequate in identifying, assessing, and interpreting the actions of scholar-practitioners. Additionally, anomalies were found in both research streams that led to disconfirmations, elaborations and new learnings.
**Disconfirmations.** Tenkasi and Hay (2004) disconfirmed an original assumption that equated theory with non-action, and practice with action, as they observed both theory and practice to be mediators of action. More specifically, they found theory and practice to be different types of tools used by the scholar-practitioner to mediate different kinds of action. The commonly held view that knowledge is the distinction between theory and practice was disconfirmed as they observed both theory- and practice-mediated actions that involved knowledge, albeit different kinds of knowledge. These findings challenged the researchers’ dualistic, “either/or” view of scholarship and practice and introduced the possibility of “both/and.”

**Elaborations.** Tenkasi and Hay in a later work (2008) expanded upon the concept of scholar-practitioner in the context of collaborative management research with the introduction of the Aristotle’s concept of *phronesis*. Phronesis claims that true knowledge of events and situations emanates from the creative integration of knowledge based on theory, practice, and experience. This involves the merging the worldviews of the scholar and the practitioner the “creative and active use of different types of reasoning” that can be found at the heart of theoretical breakthroughs (Cornelissen & Durand, 2012, p. 1019).

**New learnings.** Kram, Wasserman, and Yip (2012) shifted away from dualistic either/or identities of scholar and practitioner toward a position of scholar and practitioner being mutually enhancing instead of conflicting or competing. Metaphors of scholar-practitioner as connector, translator, and cycler were presented to create positive pathways that enable scholar-practitioners to build a complementary identity structure and minimize role conflict. They identified knowledge from prior practice experience as a key factor in enabling the scholar-practitioner to imagine the bridging and cycling that led to their conceptual metaphors.
In these elaborations, Tenkasi and Hay (2008), and Kram et al. (2012) used concepts such as metaphors, phronesis, tacit knowledge, relationships, trust, and identity to extend their theorizing and support an integrated, both/and view of the scholar practitioner. They found greater richness in their work when they expanded their vocabulary and began to “imagine alternatives to the traditional contexts that have served as home bases thus far” (Kram et al., 2012, p. 332).

A Cumulative Toll

When taken all together, the problems facing OD and OD scholar practitioners take a cumulative toll that manifests in the lack of an umbrella concept or theory—either organizational or managerial—that encompasses all of the diverse and fragmented elements of the study and practice of OD. This sets up as a grand challenge that requires novel ideas, unconventional approaches, and individuals who are able to work with multiple perspectives, across multiple disciplines and in the messiness of real-world problems (Eisenhardt et al., 2016; Ferraro et al., 2015).

Methodology

Kurt Lewin’s methods for problem formulation and his action research concepts are similar to the integrative approaches used by designers when approaching a design problem. Believing “the problem” cannot be fully understood in isolation from the consideration of “the solution,” solution conjectures, or abductive reasoning, are used as a means of helping to explore and understand the problem formulation. In other words, the problem is perceived and framed in terms of the perceived relevant solutions (Schön, 1987).

This differs from the notion that research should be “value-free” with an exclusive focus on describing and explaining the objective reality “out there,” which is, in itself, a value-based
decision. Instead of prioritizing the explanation of existing reality, integrated approaches are efforts designed to transform that reality (Argyris, 1993; Romme & Reymen, 2018).

I refer to the views of both Lewin and Argyris to support my argument that OD belongs in a class of disciplinary thought, along with design, innovation and entrepreneurship, that is incompatible with an exclusively “scientific” approach or a formalistic view of management. This class of disciplinary thought is distinguished by practice-based knowledge that incorporates human intentionality and environmental contingency and is focused on practical problems that are inherently indeterminate, ambiguous and change over time (Simon, 1996; Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997).

Romme and Reymen (2018) described disciplines that are practice based, such as entrepreneurship and OD, to be at the interface of science and design in that they are inherently value driven. Research at the interface of design and science embraces a broad array of potential research inputs and outputs, including theoretical constructs and models, values, principles, and practices. Design is not only about creating new practices or changing established practices into new ones, but it also involves developing new kinds of knowledge (in the form of values, constructs, models, and/or principles). Moreover, it may also involve creating knowledge about practices that “might be” or “should be” (Romme & Reymen, 2018). Figure 2 presents the five types of research outputs as slices of a larger body of practice knowledge, to emphasize that each of these research outputs is essential to a professional body of knowledge.
Figure 2. Research in/outputs: values constructs, models, principles, and practices (Romme & Reymen, 2018).

**Radical Theorizing**

Nadkarni et al. (2018) borrowed from research on innovation, organizational learning, and the philosophy of science to construct a typology of four methodological approaches that they call radical theorizing. It is a form of novel, interesting, and bold theorizing that plays an important role in achieving scientific progress using methodologies designed to lead to new theoretical insights or substantial departures from existing paradigms.

Radical theorizing builds on the idea of theorizing as disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989) and emphasizes the achievement of significant creative leaps. The goal is to introduce new research directions that may fundamentally shape future discourse on a topic.

**Four methodologies.** Figure 3 shows the four methodologies of radical theorizing as outlined by Nadkarni et al. (2018) beginning with (a) *inductive theory generation* - using observations, frameworks, and models in an iterative approach to theorizing; (b) *theoretical consensus shifting* - using anomalies and inconsistencies that contradict existing theory to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and logics in established research; (c) *evocative*...
theoretical boundary spanning - stretching theoretical boundaries and looking for explanations in other disciplines; and (d) diverse theoretical integration - taking two established perspectives that “speak to the same or similar phenomena in different ways” (p. 374) and bringing their insights together in a novel way to present a holistic understanding.

Figure 3. A taxonomy of approaches to radical theorizing (Nadkarni et al., 2018).

The starting point for radical theorizing is a dissonance between firmly embedded viewpoints and the observations of phenomena that contradict that view (Nadkarni et al., 2018). Using this description, Kurt Lewin, along with other important OD scholar practitioners like Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, and Karl Weick were all radical theorists. They creatively applied methodologies from radical theorizing like evocative theoretical boundary spanning to address problems they saw in more conventional approaches, and diverse theoretical integration to combine ideas from different disciplines and then relate those ideas to management and organizations. Their efforts resulted frame-breaking contributions like Lewin’s field theory,
Argyris’ organizational learning theory, Schein’s organizational culture theories, and Weick’s organizational sensemaking (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014).

**Purpose.** There are two important purposes to radical theorizing. First is to alert observers to the existence of a crisis and the insufficiency of existing theories. This has been argued at length in the above sections on problems facing OD and OD scholar practitioners.

The second purpose behind radical theorizing is to provide a set of evidence that could spark a new direction of thinking. The ultimate goal is to introduce new directions that may fundamentally shape future discourse on a topic.

**Imagining a Common Framework**

Weick’s (1989) concept of theorizing as disciplined imagination allows us to ask the question: If there actually were an umbrella concept, or theory, that encompassed all of the diverse and fragmented elements of the study and practice of OD, what would it look like? How would Kurt Lewin have imagined it?

Such a framework would require an expanded view that includes perspectives from not just social psychology and organization and management theory but also economic theory and ethics. It would require stitching together seemingly disparate and even possibly opposing theories and perspectives. It would be cumulative to account for insights gained and ideas extended over time and it would embrace systems thinking; an understanding that organizations are multilevel structures consisting of interdependent relationships, where each level influences and is influenced by the other levels. It would draw from practice experience and experimentation and be sensitive to context, recognizing how the structure and the culture of organizations influence the behavior within them, and, lastly, it would be practical, to allow focusing on practice-based problems. Kessler and Bartunek (2014) from whom I borrowed some
of this thinking believed such a framework could provide prescriptions for action that, if followed, would offer “elucidating perspectives and sensible guidance” (p. 237).

Reshaping Future Discourse for the OD Scholar Practitioner

In the following sections, the methodologies of radical theorizing are used in imagining a common framework by grouping together a set of constructs, principles, models, values, and practices essential to a professional body of knowledge. When these elements are placed in alignment, an umbrella concept that encompasses the diverse and fragmented elements of the study and practice of OD begins to emerge. This set of evidence is presented as (a) the OD scholar practitioner mindset, (b) a different way of thinking, (c) a new vocabulary, and (d) a new belief system.

The OD Scholar Practitioner Mindset

Mindsets are understood at an abstract, ideational level rather than at the level of specific tools and techniques (Astley & Zammuto, 1992). A non-dualistic mindset for the OD scholar practitioner removes the traditionally held dualistic assumption between scholarship and practice and creates a new conceptual platform that makes it possible to move beyond a view of scholarship and practice as either separate lenses, or as requiring a mix of blending or bridging (Bobko, 1985).

Kurt Lewin’s non-dualistic mindset can be understood in four core themes of his work as summarized by Argyris (1993). They are first, how he integrated theory with practice by framing social science as the study of problems of real life, and he connected all problems to theory. Second, he designed research by framing the whole, and then differentiating the parts. Third, he produced constructs that could be used to generalize and understand the individual case, particularly through the researcher as intervener and his notion that one could only understand
something when one tried to change it. Fourth, he was concerned with placing social science at
the service of democracy, thereby changing the role of those being studied from subjects to
clients so that, if effective, quality of life could be improved, leading to more valid knowledge.

This mindset can be compared to a computer’s operating system, which provides the
basic logic for organizing all the computer’s technology, or in this case, the basic logic needed
for the integration of the theory and practice in OD. This mindset becomes the starting point for
differentiating OD scholar practitioners from academic scholars and also from previous
conceptions of the scholar practitioner. It is similar to how the operating system in Apple
computers differentiates Apple computers from other personal computers. Apple doesn’t claim
their computers are better than other PCs, but instead explains how the operating system is
different in ways that could be meaningful to their users.

This operating system metaphor is useful in explaining how an OD mindset is not better,
but different from conventional thinking in ways that can be meaningful to organizations and
their leaders. Martin (2009) outlined how it has to do with the way integrative thinkers view the
nature of the world and their role in it:

*Nature of their world:*

1. They recognize that existing models are not the same as reality;
2. They seek out paradox and they leverage opposing models;
3. They believe that better models always exist that cannot be seen;

*Their role in it:*

4. They believe that they are capable of finding a better model;
5. They are willing and enthusiastic about wading into complexity; and
6. They give themselves the time to create; they aren’t rushed to find ‘the answer’ to a problem. (p.108)

**A Different Way of Thinking**

An alternative to the conventional mode of either/or thinking is integrative or both/and thinking. It is useful when a problem presents both interdependent and contradictory elements, or when multiple demands conflict with one another and there are no clear-cut choices. With a non-dualistic mindset, the goal is to maintain a dynamic equilibrium between two opposing elements (Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2016). Integrative thinking is then used to constructively resolve the tension between opposing ideas. Instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, the goal is to creatively resolve the tension through the generation of new ideas that contain elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each (Martín, 2009).

There are four ways that integrative thinking differs from conventional thinking. The first is that integrative thinkers take a broader view of what is salient; one wants to contemplate the entire problem and not prematurely edit out features that may later prove to be relevant. The second difference is the consideration of multidirectional and nonlinear relationships. This involves breaking down the either-or type of thinking found in conventional theorizing. By relaxing bipolar assumptions, the theorizing can shift to constructs that are integrative and non-dualistic (Bobko, 1985).

A third difference in integrative thinking is the architecture of decision making. With integrative thinking, a problem is not broken out into independent pieces to be considered separately, the entire problem is always in view even while working on the parts. The impact of decisions on multiple stakeholders is taken into consideration and unintended negative consequences are avoided.
The fourth difference between integrative thinking and conventional thinking is in how unpleasant tradeoffs can be avoided and replaced by a drive toward a creative resolution of tensions. This often involves employing abductive logic, offering solution conjectures (“what-ifs”), examining things ever more deeply (“maybes”), and generating new options until often, the result is a new-to-the-world model (Martin, 2009).

Integrative thinking supports the logic used in radical theorizing where connections are made across disciplines, and it is used to answer the type of questions found in Boyer’s (1990) scholarship of integration like: What do the findings mean? Is it possible to interpret what’s been discovered in ways that provide a larger, more comprehensive understanding?

Because OD is an interdisciplinary field that aims to increase the effectiveness of organizations through an integration of theory and practice (Cummings & Worley, 2009), integrative thinking is especially useful for OD scholar practitioners. The dissonance of being between two worlds can be resolved with a non-dualistic mindset and integrative thinking. This is the first step in building an umbrella concept that encompasses all of the diverse and fragmented elements of the study and practice of OD.

**A New Vocabulary**

Traditionally, the vocabulary of OD has been based on the values and language of humanism and social psychology (Bradford & Burke, 2004). But in imagining a common framework for the OD scholar practitioner, a vocabulary that also speaks the language of business and value creation is needed. This however, is not new thinking. Lewin believed in integrating the vocabularies of the social sciences starting with economics, which he thought was essential to understanding and addressing the issues inherent to the real-world problems of organizations (Colucci & Colombo, 2018).
**A theory of the firm.** One way to explore a vocabulary that speaks the language of OD and also the language of business and value creation is to think about it in the context of the theory of the firm. This is a concept that emerged after the First World War when there was a shift in economic theory away from industry or market-level analysis to analysis at the level of the firm. In simplified terms, a theory of the firm aims to answer questions regarding (a) existence: Why does the firm exist? (b) boundaries: Why are they as they are? (c) organization: Why are firms organized the way they are? and (d) heterogeneity: Why are the firm’s actions/performances heterogeneous? This shift in emphasis, from markets to firms as the unit of analysis, was adopted by other disciplines in the social sciences, which gave rise to alternative theories of the firm in the managerial and organizational sciences.

To a large degree, different theories are developed by placing a different phenomenon of interest in the center. For example, resource-based theories focus managerial attention on a firm’s assets, capabilities and competencies, and a knowledge-based theory of the firm considers knowledge as the most strategically significant resource.

Figure 4 shows some of the twenty theories of the firm have been put forward in the economic, organizational, and strategy literature in the last decades. These include economics-based theories such as principal-agent theory and transaction-cost economics, organization-based theories of the firm such as behavioral theory, and strategy-based theories of the firm such as the value-chain model. All these theories are differentiated along two dimensions: (a) whether they consider things or people as the primary building block, and (b) whether they view the firm as atomistic (i.e., a bundle of contracts) or with a systemic view (i.e., a more elaborate and holistic understanding of how firms are organized; Kraaijenbrink & Spender, 2011).
### Figure 4. A comparison of extant theories of the firm (Kraaijenbrink & Spender, 2011).

**Principal-agent theory.** The theory of the firm that has dominated mainstream economic and managerial thinking for decades can be traced to a 1970 *New York Times* article written by Milton Friedman who laid out a case for the sole purpose of a firm being to make money for its shareholders. This economic argument was developed and later put forth in a 1976 paper by Michael Jensen and William Meckling and published in the *Journal of Financial Economics*. The article, entitled “Theory of the Firm: Managerial Behavior Agency Costs and Ownership Structure,” held as its main argument that the singular goal of a company should be to maximize the return to shareholder. The paper became one of the most famous and widely cited academic business articles of all time and management scholars were quick to adopt this view, leading to principal-agency theory becoming the dominant theory of the firm in management studies.

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<td><em>Firm as production system</em></td>
<td>Political theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Firm as interest-alignment system</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The swift adoption of the principal-agent theory created a divergence between behavioral-based scholarly work and economic-based scholarly work. It was as if the management theorists got on the shareholder train with the economists and left the behavioral theorists behind at the station. This contributed to what Ghoshal (2005) called a propagation of “ideologically inspired amoral management theories” (p. 76) that had a negative influence on the practice of management, and concurrently contributed to the failure of organization theory-based literature to produce a dominant framework for setting and implementing direction within organizations (Freeman, 1984). An “upward infinite regress” of competing theories (Felin & Foss, 2005, p. 447) contributed to an unhealthy academic insularity with little explicit “fit” between the organization theory literature and the strategy literature, as well as the systems theory and the corporate responsibility literatures (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & de Colle, 2010).

The least explicit fit with principal-agent theory is arguably found in OD. The principal-agent theory (also called shareholder or stockholder theory) is an integration of elements from three economic theories; the theory of agency, the theory of property rights and the theory of finance (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). This means there are assumptions from economic theory embedded within shareholder theory that diverge in significant ways from assumptions found the theories of Kurt Lewin. Figure 5 outlines the divergence in the assumptions between economic theory and the theories of Kurt Lewin.
**Figure 5.** The divergent assumptions in economic theory and Kurt Lewin.

**Stakeholder theory.** In 1984, Edward Freeman published a book entitled *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* that, at its simplest level, proposed an alternative to shareholder-based theories of organizations (Freeman, 1994). It put forth a vocabulary that speaks the language of business and value creation with a concern for ethics, and incorporates the language of humanism found in OD. The concept, then called stakeholder approach, was derived from several bodies of literature including strategic management, corporate planning, systems theory, organization theory, and corporate social responsibility.

Stakeholder theory, as it is now known, is an approach to business that is about creating as much value as possible for stakeholders (customers, employees, suppliers, financiers, and the community) without resorting to tradeoffs. Since its inception, stakeholder theory has influenced a variety of different fields, including strategic management, finance, accounting, management, marketing, law, health care, public policy, and environment (Freeman et al., 2010).
Freeman describes stakeholder theory as a framework, a set of ideas from which a number of theories can be derived (Freeman et al., 2010). This is much like the way that Lewin saw field theory not as a theory in a formal sense, but as an approach to the conceptualization of theories (Patnoe, 1988). From a stakeholder theory perspective, business can be understood as a set of relationships among groups that have a stake in the activities that make up the business. It is about how customers, suppliers, employees, financiers (stockholders, bondholders, banks, etc.) communities interact to jointly create and trade value (Parmar, et al., 2010).

Stakeholder theory begins with the assumption that values are necessarily and explicitly a part of doing business. It rejects the separation thesis that assumes ethics and economics can be neatly and sharply separated (Freeman, 1994). The creation of value, regardless of how the value it is defined, is necessary for sustainable growth for all organizations. Without it, there would be no reason for them to exist. Value creation is an activity that is directed toward someone or something specific, therefore any discussion of value creation must indicate for whom the value is created. Stakeholder theory emphasizes that firms create and trade value for many stakeholders. By buying products, they have value for their suppliers, by paying wages they provide value to their employees, and so forth. This implies that in stakeholder theory the creation of value is a multidirectional activity. Value creation that involves both a supply side and a demand side, makes explicit the ethical dimension of stakeholder theory, and as a theory of the firm, it makes the relationship between economic and ethical values its central issue (Kraaijenbrink & Spender, 2011).

For the OD scholar practitioner, stakeholder theory as a theory of the firm, holds an intuitive appeal because of its integrative, multidisciplinary approach that draws from both economic and behavioral disciplines, its non-dualistic stance that says that business can be
simultaneously about both economics and ethics, and also for its alignment with the traditional humanistic values of OD. But beyond the immediate appeal for how stakeholder theory facilitates conversations between leaders, managers and OD professionals, there are also theoretical linkages that connect stakeholder theory to OD at an even deeper level.

*Tracing the roots of stakeholder theory.* The roots of stakeholder theory, like many philosophical movements, are very diffuse. Freeman (1984) initially thought the word *stakeholder* first appeared in the management literature in an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International, Inc.) in 1963. However, Beer (2013) points to an earlier use by Hewlett Packard (HP) in 1957, the year the company went public. This was when HP’s leadership outlined “the HP Way”: a corporate vision that was based upon value creation for all stakeholders as a fundamental objective of the firm.

Of greater significance to OD is the connection of stakeholder theory to the Tavistock Institute in London. This connection was made by Giles Slinger (1999) who suggested that work done at the Tavistock Institute for Social Research in London, including Eric Trist’s work on self-organizing work groups and Wilfred Bion’s work on the role of participation and inclusion, informed most of the early development stakeholder theorists in the 1960s.

Eric Trist, a founder of Tavistock Institute, was a devotee of Kurt Lewin. Trist’s first opportunity to meet Lewin was in 1932 when Lewin visited Cambridge where Trist was an undergraduate student. They later reconnected when Trist was a graduate student at Yale and he continued to be in touch with Lewin at Cornell and then later at the University of Iowa Child Development Center and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Trist modeled the Tavistock Institute after the multidisciplinary, practical approaches Lewin had brought to Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He recruited members from
various social science disciplines including psychoanalysis and economics and organized it to be problem- rather than discipline-centered. Lewin’s action research approach and group dynamics theories were used at the Institute where they adopted a systems approach to collaborating with participants as opposed to studying them from a distance (Tavistock Institute, 2018).

Trist, like Lewin, was an integrative systems thinker. This is evidenced in his work with Emery and their sociotechnical systems theory that noted the requirement for loose rather than tight management when faced with the need for innovation. Their theories concerning organizations in turbulent environments spread widely in the organization sciences and generated further applications, often involving the active participation of a wide range of stakeholders in planning their environments and futures (Tavistock Institute, 2018).

Trist credits his relationship with Kurt Lewin for helping to legitimize the work of the Tavistock Institute and establishing Tavistock’s international reputation through the journal Human Relations, which Trist and Lewin jointly created in 1947. The journal provided a publishing platform for Trist to connect Lewin’s action research with his socioclinical, action-oriented work and two important papers that Lewin wrote, including the seminal article “Frontiers in Group Dynamics” appeared the first two issues of Human Relations. Unfortunately, Lewin died just before they were published (Trist, 1993).

During the 1980s after more than 20 years with the Tavistock Institute and a short time at University of California, Los Angeles, Eric Trist was at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business along with Russell Ackoff, James Emshoff, Ian Mitroff, and a young Edward Freeman. At that time, Freeman was part of the Wharton Applied Research Center which was organized much like Lewin’s Research Center for Group Dynamics and Trist’s
Tavistock Institute—a kind of real-world consulting firm combining a multi-disciplinary group of research staff, students, and faculty and focusing on real-world problems.

Trist and Freeman both participated in a faculty seminar at Wharton organized around the question: What are we to make of this stakeholder idea? It was from this seminar that Freeman began formulating his ideas. The original stakeholder approach incorporated the views of many thinkers, including Trist, and drew on various literatures including corporate planning, systems theory, and corporate social responsibility (Freeman, 1984). It was, from the start, managerial in nature as it was concerned with the problem of value creation and trade against a backdrop of unending environmental turbulence: increasing takeovers, activism, foreign competition, new industrial relations, a worldwide resource market, government reform, a rising consumer movement, increasing environmental concerns, and changes in communication technology. (Freeman et al., 2010; Laplume, Sonpar, & Litz, 2008).

Although Freeman was, at the time, unaware of the connection of Eric Trist to Kurt Lewin, Lewin’s influence on the development of stakeholder theory is undeniable (and has also been acknowledged by Freeman). From the very start, the stakeholder approach was integrated, practice-based and problem-oriented. As stakeholder theory has evolved to incorporate questions of purpose, values and ethics, it has grown ever closer to sharing the foundational values of OD.

**Connecting stakeholder theory to OD.** In the diverse theoretical integration methodology of radical theorizing, the insights of two established perspectives that speak to the same phenomena in different ways are brought together in a novel way to present a holistic understanding (Nadkarni et al., 2018).

Stakeholder theory, like most OD theories, including field theory and organizational learning, is based in practice and shares the belief that people need jointly to seek and create
meaning within organizations (Freeman et al., 2010). Stakeholder theory is considered a macro-level theory for how it speaks to organizations in their environments. OD theories like Lewin’s field theory and Argyris’ organizational learning theory are meso-level theories because they work at the organization level (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014).

Through diverse theoretical integration, the macro-level and meso-level practice-based theories are brought together in a novel way to provide a rich set of ideas: a holistic integration of managerial and organizational concerns; sensitive to the dynamics of organizing at a systems level; and supportive of decisions that involve strategy development, organization design, work system design, goal setting, prioritization, and resource allocation (Beer, 2013; Freeman et al., 2010).

In Figure 6, the relationship between OD and stakeholder theory is outlined through a set of shared and complementary dimensions.

**A New Belief System**

The last of the elements being examined in imagining a common framework is the belief system. This concerns the philosophy that grounds a research paradigm or what Thomas Kuhn (1996) also called a *disciplinary matrix*. Kuhn described how belief systems are formed, shaped and reinforced by the communities to which they belong. This however, poses a challenge for OD scholar practitioners as it is difficult to find a fit for Kurt Lewin’s integrated, practice-based approaches in the mainstream academic belief systems. For example, it is problematic to place Lewin’s approaches into one of the four Burrell and Morgan (1979) research paradigms commonly associated with the social sciences (Hassard & Wolfram Cox, 2013), resulting in innovative researchers like Lewin being “lost in some hole in paradigmatic space” (Deetz, 1996, p. 192).
A belief system is essential to rigorous scholarship regardless of what type of scholarship is under consideration. For OD scholar practitioners, the belief system must support the type of competencies displayed in situations of uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness, and conflict. These competencies require “a kind of rigor that falls outside the boundaries of technical rationality” (Schön, 1995, p. 10). The belief system should not take sides between scholarship and practice but view both as important to innovative work in OD. It should also support the logics of Boyer’s (1990) scholarships of integration and application, which encompass both practice-based integrative thinking and abductive reasoning as a way of responding to new intellectual questions and to pressing human problems.

Figure 6. Shared and complementary dimensions of organization development and stakeholder theory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Organization Development</th>
<th>Stakeholder Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship (Boyer’s Model)</td>
<td>Integration &amp; Application (practice-based)</td>
<td>Economics, Ethics, Organization Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplinary Influences</td>
<td>Behavioral Sciences, Social Psychology, Organization Theory</td>
<td>Economics, Ethics, Organization Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Intellectual DNA</td>
<td>Kurt Lewin, Eric Trist, Wilfred Bion, Tavistock Institute</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying Belief System</td>
<td>Philosophical Pragmatism</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenon of Interest</td>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Value Creation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit of Analysis</td>
<td>Organizations</td>
<td>Relationships between organizations and the groups and individuals who can affect or are affected by it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Philosophical pragmatism.** A belief system that meets the criteria as outlined above can be found in philosophical pragmatism as conceived by John Dewey and others (Dewey, 1937). Dewey’s philosophy of pragmatism supports a non-dualistic mindset that highlights the moral dimensions of organizing and provides frameworks and methods for overcoming dualities like theory and practice or the description-prescription divide. Charles Sanders Pierce’s contribution to pragmatism is the concept of abductive reasoning which is used in design thinking, a process for imaginatively creating explanatory hypotheses and generating “maybes” in response to “what-if” inquiries (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011; Romme et al., 2015; Wicks & Freeman, 1998).

This philosophical pragmatism is very different from the way pragmatic thought has been previously associated with OD, which has been generally less than positive. Pragmatism has been associated with utility, quantifying performance outcomes or as something for which clients are willing to pay (Bradford & Burke, 2004; Cummings & Worley, 2009; Friedlander, 1976; Pasmore, 2014). These views represent the often-misunderstood idea of pragmatism being “whatever works.”

To understand the potential of philosophical pragmatism as a belief system for the OD scholar practitioner, it is extremely important that readers set aside these previous conceptions of pragmatic thought in OD. While previous uses of the term pragmatism suggested that an OD scholar practitioner be apologetic for considering a pragmatic approach, I am suggesting the opposite, that the OD scholar practitioner enthusiastically embrace philosophical pragmatism as a belief system to more innovative work in OD.

**Pragmatism for the OD scholar practitioner.** The originators of pragmatism never set out to establish a doctrine or a school of thought. Rather, they saw their ideas as a movement in philosophy that offers a method to think and act in a creative and insightful manner in social
situations and using inquiry as an empirically grounded way for accessing fresh insights. A pragmatist approach fosters an environment in which people see the relevance and importance of values in leadership and change and helps to nurture engagement in discussions regarding which purposes are advanced and why (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011).

Wicks and Freeman (1998) referencing Hambrick (1994) said that with a pragmatist approach, organization studies cease to be an abstract discipline written for other academics and instead become a way of connecting the insightfulness and skill of the intellectual with the needs and challenges of those engaged in the practice of business in a given sociopolitical context. Dewey’s pragmatism does not have a narrow conception of practice but a larger vision that is attentive to the values at stake in the experience of organizational, economic, and political life (Selznick, 1996).

In pragmatism, the standards of scholarly rigor and thoroughness are still applicable, and the importance of theory as a means of explaining and predicting phenomena is still recognized. But, with a pragmatic approach, inquiry is not bound by description and normative guidelines. Instead it involves emotion and judgement and allows for experimentation, creativity, and abductive reasoning. The questions addressed are related to the practical requirements of decision making at a particular time in a particular context. This allows the pragmatists to select the approach and methodology most suited to a particular research question and to use both quantitative and qualitative tools. Epistemological constraints that tend to marginalize ethics and make research less useful are set aside and the focus is on serving human purposes that are morally rich and useful to organizations (Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011; Morgan, 2014; Wicks & Freeman, 1998).
A pragmatic approach places an emphasis on shared meanings and joint action. In other words, to what extent are two people (or groups) satisfied that they understand each other, and to what extent can they demonstrate the success of that shared meaning by working together on common projects. The emphasis is on the actual behavior, the beliefs that stand behind those behaviors, and the consequences that are likely to follow from different behaviors (Morgan, 2007). Creating this new epistemological framework makes it easier to raise non-quantitative questions and, because science is no longer privileged, to use both ethics and humanities-based approaches to address them (Wicks & Freeman, 1998).

**Philosophical pragmatism and Kurt Lewin.** While they were both living, John Dewey and Kurt Lewin were only modestly aware of each other’s work, but they have been described as kindred spirits for the interconnections in their work and the ideas they had in common, including the rejection of dualisms and the adoption of a holistic approaches that provided the basis for their interdisciplinary work. Both Dewey and Lewin were deeply concerned with the workings of democracy and at the core, both were concerned with the relationship between theory and practice with a consequent emphasis on the process of change (Colucci & Colombo, 2018; Marrow, 1969).

The interconnections between Dewey and Lewin are not superficial, but instead, grounded in a common belief system. Both Dewey and Lewin took social relevance to be the ultimate purpose of knowledge and research and both adopted methodologies consistent with these beliefs. They both opposed the fragmentation of knowledge that results from narrowly focused disciplinary inquiries, and both strongly advocated for interdisciplinary approaches (Colucci & Colombo, 2018).
The revolutionary ideas put forth by Lewin, that social science methods could be applied to practical problems, along with his emphasis on participatory processes, invoke a philosophical pragmatist perspective. Lewin’s action research, with its phases of diagnosis, problem analysis, intervention, evaluation, and feedback, is consistent with Dewey’s (1937) five phases of reflective thinking—encounter a problem, intellectualize, hypothesize, reason, and test hypotheses in action. Deweyan inquiry is very close to the notion of designing in the broad sense of that term—an inclusive process of making things under conditions of complexity and uncertainty where all the information can never be known (Schön, 1995).

Pragmatism provides a belief system that is fully grounded in active participation in the world and in the human condition, which is consistent with the OD scholar practitioner being a scholar in/of practice. Due to having many original contributors, it is difficult to boil pragmatism down to a single coherent doctrine or definition. However, a synthesis of the classical pragmatists’ views points the OD scholar practitioner toward an acceptance of all forms of inquiry, a human process of making sense, and the experience of active engagement as opposed to sitting on the sidelines in the role of detached observer (Bachkirova & Borrington, 2018; Elkjaer & Simpson, 2011).

An Aligned Model for the OD Scholar Practitioner

Thomas Kuhn (1996) wrote, “Every practice needs some implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism” (p. 16). An intertwined theoretical and methodological belief for OD and the OD scholar practitioner would combine the elements of the OD mindset: non-dualistic and integrated, with the practice-based knowledge coming from the work of Kurt Lewin and stakeholder theory, and a pragmatic, problem-oriented philosophy.
The emerging model that aligns these elements of integration, practice-based knowledge and pragmatism fits with Kuhn’s (1996) description of how a disciplinary matrix forms a whole and the component parts function together as though they were all of one piece. It is a conceptualization of the OD scholar practitioner that can, as radical theorizing suggests, fundamentally reshape future discourse on the OD scholar practitioner. Figure 7 shows the aligned elements of integrated thinking, a new practice-based vocabulary and a new belief system.

Figure 7. An aligned OD scholar practitioner.

The complementary fit between stakeholder theory and OD is an important discovery for this disciplinary matrix. A simplistic explanation of the fit and why it is important to OD is that, as a theory of the firm, stakeholder theory is lacking a set of behavioral theories that support it, while OD, as a set of behavioral theories, is lacking a compatible theory of the firm. It is as if one completes the other.

The disciplinary matrix as described by Kuhn (1996) provides a community with a shared vocabulary and set of shared beliefs. This disciplinary matrix is at the service of the community
to determine a wide range of practices including avenues of inquiry, question formulation, relevance and meaning making. With a common disciplinary matrix, “the community is freed from a constant need to re-examine its first principles . . . so members of the community can concentrate on increasing both the effectiveness and the efficiency with which the group as a whole solves new problems” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 163).

With the alignment of OD and stakeholder theory, the language of OD becomes incorporated into the language of business and value creation, and stakeholder theory is supported by important OD theories and practices like Lewin’s field theory, Argyris’ organizational learning theory and action research.

Aided by a stakeholder vocabulary, leaders, managers, and OD scholar practitioners, instead of talking across competing theories and perspectives, can now engage in productive conversations about values and value creation. Even if stakeholder theory is not an espoused theory of the firm, it can still, through the language and values of OD, be useful in connecting different perspectives, different needs, and ethical considerations to questions of organization strategy, design, innovation, and value creation.

**Reflections on Stakeholder Theory, Kurt Lewin, and OD**

Using common sense, it seems improbable that Edward Freeman who has been writing and lecturing on stakeholder theory since 1984 was not aware, until 2018, of its strong connection to Kurt Lewin and OD. Yet, this seems to be the case due to what Slinger (1999) called “strange blind spots” in the literature. Organizations may be integrated systems, but organizational science is not. Perspectives are spread across different disciplines and literatures, obscured by the barriers of jargon and confused by competing theoretical frameworks and
analytic systems, with each level—organization, group and individual—the province of different disciplines, theories and approaches (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000).

The rise and eventual dominance of the principal-agent theory of the firm has adversely impacted OD work in organizations to the detriment of organizations, the people who work in them, and society as a whole. Ghoshal (2005) faulted the dominance of the principal-agent theory on an extremely restrictive definition of the term scholarship. He alternatively advocated for a wisdom of common sense that “combines information on ‘what is’ with the imagination of ‘what ought to be’ (abductive reasoning) to develop both a practical understanding of and pragmatic prescriptions for ‘phenomena of organized complexity’” (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 81). Here Ghoshal, taking a pragmatic stance, described a return to Lewinian beliefs and the tenets of Boyer’s scholarship of integration and application. But did he not know about stakeholder theory?

Had Kurt Lewin been alive when the principal-agency theory of the firm was on the ascent, it seems likely he would have led a counterattack. Being an integrated, systems thinker, he had already sketched out concepts that could have undermined the principal-agent theory, like for example, the interdependencies of task and fate. Lewin believed it was not the similarity or dissimilarity of individuals that constitutes a group, but the interdependence of fate. He believed a person who had learned to see how much his own fate depends upon the fate of this entire group will be ready and even eager to take over a fair share of responsibility for its welfare. This introduces a stakeholder perspective to group behavior and is consistent with the views of stakeholder theory; seeing stakeholder interests as joint and inherently tied together, like the way Lewin saw interdependence; forming the group as a “dynamic whole,” a concept that ties to systems theory (Bargal et al., 1992; Parmar et al., 2010).
Had the alternative perspectives of Lewin, Freeman, Ghoshal, and others led to a pluralism of theories of the firm instead of being lost in the dominance of shareholder theory, one can imagine that OD as a field might be in a very different place. But where would that place be? That is a question that is best answered by imagining the possibilities of the future of OD with a common disciplinary matrix. Maybe the revolution started by Kurt Lewin and joined by Chris Argyris, Edgar Schein, Karl Weick, and others can continue.

**Changing the Language of Change**

“The language of change can be an analytical prison or a liberating intellectual force” (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001, p. 700). For OD, in its beginning, the language of change was a liberating intellectual force. But increasingly, the conventional theories of change, those that focus on diagnostic processes and intervention techniques designed to manage planned change have become the dominant approach. This deficit-based view of change, that change is about overcoming problems of the past, is consistent with the prevailing system of management that values measurement, uniformity and predictability over learning and innovation (Senge, 2006). All this has contributed to a shift in the language of change; from being a liberating intellectual force built upon the work of Lewin, Argyris, and others, to an analytical prison of the prevailing system of management.

**Overcoming the Conventional Narrative**

An uncritical acceptance of a conventional narrative is an unnoticed barrier to innovation (Cummings et al., 2017). To be clear, the conventional narrative of OD has many positive aspects. It has served as an enabling concept for professional OD work that encompasses a wide range of theory and practice. However, the current narrative of “managing planned change” has lost the attention of the C-Suite and reinforces unfavorable dualisms like hard versus soft.
Instead of accepting the history of OD as a set of immutable facts to be overcome, a change can occur by reframing attitudes and preconceived notions about the past (Suddaby & Foster, 2017). A new narrative for change can reframe constraining notions, like managing planned change, into enabling notions like change can be desired and that change can make us better. With this reframing, the deficit-based model associated with the prevailing system of management becomes an innovation-based model associated with continual learning and adaptation. By shifting the narrative of change from managing planned change to “accomplishing desired change” we reframe our attitudes and preconceived notions about the past and recapture the language of change as a liberating intellectual force; a necessary first step to needed innovation in OD.

**Implications**

Perhaps the best way to think about the far-reaching implications of the concepts that have been presented here is to place them in the mindset of not only what is but also what can or could be (Weick, 1999). In a manner that is similar to how Freeman describes stakeholder theory as a framework, a set of ideas from which a number of theories can be derived (Freeman et al., 2010) and the way Lewin saw field theory not as a theory in a formal sense, but as an approach to the conceptualization of theories (Patnoe, 1988)—a disciplinary matrix that aligns integration, a practice-based vocabulary, and pragmatism is just the beginning of new thinking for OD and the OD scholar practitioner.

The concepts put forth with the disciplinary matrix for OD and the aligned model for the OD scholar practitioner present a multitude of opportunities for further research and refinement through practice. Some high-level opportunities for elaboration include:
• Further integration of stakeholder theory’s language of value creation into the vocabulary of OD. This recognizes that economic success is important in all organizations whether they are privately held or publicly traded corporations, mission-driven nonprofits, education institutions or philanthropic foundations, and economic success is sustainable only when it is powered by great strategies and healthy organizations.

• Advancing the concept of the OD scholar practitioner not as an identity, activity, or a role, but as an aspirational ideal—of professional excellence grounded in theory, informed by experiential knowledge, motivated by personal values and ethical conduct (McClintock, 2007), and with two forms of preparation: an academic preparation that happens in graduate studies, and a practical preparation that happens over a lifetime of practice.

• Further development of Boyer’s pluralistic model for scholarship using the concept of a class of disciplinary thought that is distinguished by practice-based knowledge that incorporates human intentionality and environmental contingency and is focused on practical problems that are inherently indeterminate, ambiguous, and change over time, as a basis for the scholarships of integration and application (Simon, 1996; Tsoukas & Cummings, 1997). This would include such disciplines as design, innovation and entrepreneurship along with OD.

• Using the methodologies of radical theorizing to explore the way knowledge is generated and exchanged in integrated, practice-based work as the basis for generating more innovative educational opportunities in OD. This may include expanding into executive education and the potential of new kinds of terminal graduate degrees.
• Exploring ways of using action research to advance the principles of value creation in stakeholder theory, utilizing the powerful notion that human systems can only be understood and changed if one involves the members of the system in the inquiry process itself (Burnes, 2006).

Conclusion

When the work on this dissertation began, I outlined four overarching objectives. The first was to demonstrate a process that was integrated, practice-based, pragmatic, and based upon the scholarships of integration and application, and to use this process to develop a concept for the OD scholar practitioner that is integrated, practice-based, pragmatic, and based upon the scholarships of integration and application. Much like the title of this dissertation, the circularity was intentional. Paraphrasing Thomas Kuhn: A disciplinary matrix is what the community shares and, conversely, a community consists of people who share the disciplinary matrix. “Not all circularities are vicious” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 176).

Second was to conceive of a model for the OD scholar practitioner that fits coherently within the worlds of the academy and practice but is not defined exclusively by either one. The arguments on this topic have shown that this can be accomplished only by adopting a pluralistic, stakeholder view of both scholarship and practice.

The third objective was to present theories for not only what is, but also what can or could be (Weick, 1999). This involved using integrative thinking, abductive reasoning, and taking on Corley and Gioia’s (2011) challenge for theorists; to aspire to create theories that are useful in rapidly changing environments, that can anticipate problems and inform future thought and action. This raised the level of theorizing to the macro-level, the theory of the firm, and led to the discovery of the alignment with stakeholder theory.
The fourth and final objective was for my theoretical model of the OD scholar practitioner to form a coherent whole in the way Kuhn (1996) described a disciplinary matrix: forming a whole where the component parts function together as though they were all of one piece.

A full definition of coherency includes not only being logical and well-organized, it involves being logically and aesthetically ordered, having clarity and intelligibility, and having the quality of holding together (“Coherency,” n.d.). This is the way Lewin saw all his work, from field theory, group dynamics, action research, and the three-step model of change: an integrated, unified whole where each element is supporting and reinforcing the others and all of them are necessary to understand the complex phenomena of change, whether it be at the level of the individual, group, organization, or society (Burnes, 2006).

For OD to increase its value to organizations and the people in them, it is necessary to imagine OD differently, to make novel interpretations of the work of Kurt Lewin and to conceive of new approaches to OD practice. This new narrative for OD is based upon a non-dualistic mindset that eschews the ideological separation of scholarship and practice. It speaks to new approaches that emphasize multi-disciplined, integrative thinking. It places less emphasis on discrete change projects in exchange for more emphasis on processes and designs that enable sustainable, continuous adaptation in ever-evolving environments. This new narrative is pragmatic and places an emphasis on shared meanings and joint action. Its academic home is the scholarships of integration and application. It sets the stage for innovation in OD so that OD scholar practitioners can better support organizations looking to balance the needs of many stakeholders, and grow in ways that are more purposeful, ethical, and sustainable.
References


Burnes, B., & Cooke, B. (2012). The past, present and future of organization development:


# Appendix

## Table A1

*List of Publications Used for Analysis*

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<th>Publication</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Author</th>
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<td><em>OD Practitioner</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Beer</td>
<td>“Organization Development at a Crossroads”</td>
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<td><em>OD Practitioner</em></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Burke</td>
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<td>“Something Old, Something New”</td>
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<td>Worley</td>
<td>“OD Values and Pitches in the Dirt”</td>
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<td>“Organizations, Education, and Predictions”</td>
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<td><em>OD Practitioner</em></td>
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<td>Minahan &amp; Cheung-Judge</td>
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