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Perspectives: Pragmatism in Organization Studies

The Contemporary Resonances of Classical Pragmatism for Studying Organization and Organizing

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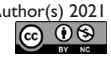
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Abstract

The legacy of classical American Pragmatism – Peirce, James, Dewey, Addams, Mead, Follett and others – in organization theory is significant, albeit that much of its influence has come through implicit and indirect routes. In light of recent calls for an empirical stance as an alternative to the prevailing metaphysical stance in organizational research, we reread Pragmatism as a process philosophy that can profoundly inform process views of organization and organizing. Our particular reading highlights Pragmatism's emphasis on process and emergence, its theory of knowing as fallible and experimental, its denouncing of dualisms, its future-oriented meliorism, its sensitivity to ethics and democracy, and its positioning of experience as both the start and end of inquiry, arguing that these features lay invaluable groundwork for the study of organization and organizing. We advocate a reappraisal of this legacy, mobilizing seven articles from the back catalogue of this journal in a virtual special issue that demonstrates how classical American Pragmatism can reinvigorate the field while also opening up new questions and new ways of questioning.

Keywords

empirical stance, ethics, practice, Pragmatism, process

Introduction

In recent decades, the field of organization studies has witnessed an explosion of interest in process philosophies and their potential to shed new light onto how organizing happens (e.g. Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). We read this trend as indicative of a deeper dissatisfaction with traditional entitative organizational scholarship, something subcutaneous that is bubbling up in response to the intellectual spirit of our times. However, according to du Gay and

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Vikkelsø (2017), much of this new work subscribes to a 'metaphysical stance' concerned primarily with constructing a conceptual apparatus that defines organization in process. By contrast, an 'empirical stance' (cf. Van Fraassen, 2002) attends to the practical actions of organizing that arise in emergent situations. This stance, however, is lamentably absent in contemporary organizational research. In this Perspectives piece, we address this absence by revisiting classical American Pragmatism to illustrate and argue for its potential, not just as a theoretical framing, nor merely as a clutch of 'handy tools' for researchers, but as a style of thinking, an attitude, which anticipates, elaborates and substantiates an empirical stance. Our goal is to demonstrate Pragmatism's versatility and richness as a source of practical ideas that can bring fresh insight and point towards productive avenues for future researching into the processes of organization and organizing.

Organization Studies has arguably played an important role in bringing Pragmatism to the attention of today's organization scholars, publishing greater numbers of explicitly Pragmatist-informed articles than other leading journals in the organization and management domain.[1] In this article, we introduce a virtual special issue that explores the utility of Pragmatism in organizational research by drawing on a selection of seven exemplary contributions previously published in this journal (Cohen, 2007; Kelemen, Rumens, & Vo, 2019; Lorino, Tricard, & Clot, 2011; Martela, 2015; Rippin, 2013; Simpson, 2009; Taylor, 2011).[2] These articles are, in effect, the empirical materials that we engage in building our argument for Pragmatism. We did consider other papers for inclusion, but ultimately our choices were guided by the depth and distinctiveness of their authors' analytical engagements with Pragmatist ideas as they sought to illuminate the processes of organization and organizing. The scope of our analysis is necessarily limited to the contributions of classical Pragmatist writers in the field of organization and management. We cannot, and do not claim in any way to do justice to the whole canon of Pragmatist writing. We nevertheless believe that our particular reading of Pragmatism will speak to the broad interests of the *Organization Studies* readership.

We begin with a brief survey that explores the origins of Pragmatism's influence in the field of organization and management. We then lay out three key features of Pragmatism – process, knowing and the future – that in combination articulate the distinctiveness of this philosophical tradition and its relevance to processual studies of organization and organizing. Next, we illustrate the interplay between these distinguishing features in the seven articles that constitute this virtual special issue. Our analysis is structured around three themes – 'the making of practice', 'researching the mess' and 'doing ethics' – each of which involves an intricate engagement with Pragmatist ideas. We conclude by looking forward to organizational research that is open to the processual possibilities which arise from a Pragmatist-informed empirical stance.

But First, What Is Classical Pragmatism?

Pragmatism is a philosophical tradition that rejects high-minded metaphysics in favour of understanding the everyday practicalities of living in an uncertain and ever-changing world. The socio-political-economic conditions in late 19th-century United States of America – traumatized as it was by its civil war, challenged by massive immigration, and energized by unprecedented development in terms of economic growth, innovation and industrialization – animated the prodigious intellectual efforts of notable writers such as Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), William James (1842–1910), John Dewey (1859–1952), Jane Addams (1860–1935), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) and Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933). These thinkers had far-reaching influences across disciplines as diverse as education, politics, ethics, logic, semiotics, psychology, social welfare and public administration. Although its impact waned somewhat when analytic philosophy rose to prominence in the mid-20th century, classical Pragmatist thinking (as distinct from the neo-Pragmatism of Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom, or the French Pragmatism of Luc Boltanski and

Laurent Thévenot) has continued to evolve, with many scholars and philosophers still drawing inspiration from this intellectual movement.

Part of its ongoing appeal is that in philosophical terms, classical Pragmatism still seems remarkably fresh and modern. Several commentators point out that its sensitivity for the 'ethical' and proclivity for social critique both anticipate and resemble 20th-century continental philosophy (Bernstein, 2010; Fairfield, 2010) and critical social philosophy (Joas, 1993; Visser, 2019). Indeed, Hickman (2007, p. 13) suggests that Pragmatism is 'post-postmodern' and – quoting Richard Rorty – claims it is further along 'the dialectical road which analytic philosophy travelled . . . [and] which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently travelling'.

Another part of its appeal lies in the conceptual tentativeness shared by Pragmatism's proponents. Of course, there are considerable differences between Pragmatists (e.g. Lovejoy, 1908), but their commonalities are significant and valuable for the study of organization and organizing. All express a profound distrust of certainties, finalities and universals, arguing instead for experience as the only admissible source of practical and moral knowledge. Their philosophy is non-foundationalist and non-dualist, acknowledging the pluralist and relational nature of life and its evolutionary dynamics, a commitment to selves that are social and continuously emergent, and a desire to improve on present experience. Pragmatism offers a perspective that is emancipatory and affirmative, one that helps us 'to find out what may be, the possibilities now open to us' (Follett, 1924, p. xii). These commonalities amount to a shared attitude or disposition to engage with change, uncertainty and emergence, and to accept the possibility that knowing is fallible, but also emphatically oriented towards mobilizing creativity and imagination in order to ameliorate the present situation. This is especially appealing for those scholars more interested in exploring what organizing may accomplish than in finding out what organizations are.

Pragmatism also appeals to practitioners and scholars because of its concerns about how to proceed in an unpredictable world in which we are nevertheless required to act – surely a perennial issue for all managers in their daily practice? Pragmatist thinkers have always sought to engage directly with and be relevant to workplace management, from the early involvements of Addams, Dewey, Mead and Follett in the Settlement House movement, to Follett's role in advising the Bureau of Personnel Administration, in 1924–1925, and Dewey's presidency of the League of Industrial Democracy, in 1940–1941. It is surprising, then, that their ideas are not more evident in contemporary management and organization scholarship, and that, if acknowledged at all, they are often relegated to mere historical footnotes rather than being embraced as a lively source of intellectual stimulation. Recent exceptions include the ground-breaking anthology by Kelemen and Rumens (2013), which presents essays that use a Pragmatist lens to examine organizational phenomena such as collaboration, finance, learning, ethics and public administration, and Lorino's (2018) richly empirical illustrations of how Pragmatism can simultaneously inform both organizational research and organizational practice.

The Historical Presence of Pragmatism in the Organizational Literature

In surveying how Pragmatism has been consequential in the organizational literature, we see three historical threads that can be traced back to Mead, Dewey and Follett, respectively. This is not to suggest that Peirce, James and Addams are irrelevant to organization studies, but rather that their systematic appearance in this literature is much more recent.

Beginning with Mead's contribution then, it was his student, Herbert Blumer, who coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' (1969), which subsequently acquired a strong presence in sociology and organization studies. Following Mead, he argues that meaning is continuously created in

social interaction, but in formulating his position, he regrettably rejects some of the more radical implications of Mead's notion of 'social selves'. Blumer's ideas were subsequently carried forward by his student, Anselm Strauss, as is evident in books such as *Mirrors and Masks* and *Negotiations*, as well as in his collaboration with Barney Glaser in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Strauss is also associated with Irving Goffman through the so-called 'Second Chicago School' of sociology.

Courtesy of Blumer, Strauss and Goffman then, Mead has been very influential in the development of both organization theory and organizational psychology, with Karl Weick (1995, p. 41) declaring 'symbolic interactionism . . . the unofficial theory of sensemaking'. More recently, sociologists such as Hans Joas and Mustafa Emirbayer have returned to the original writings of Mead, to reconnect with a wider view of the relational and temporal dynamics in his thinking. In addition, several new streams of organizational research re-engage with Mead. For instance, the 'Montreal School' of communicatively constituted organization (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019) draws on his 'conversation of gestures', while Ralph Stacey and his colleagues have proposed a theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2001, 2009) as an antidote to complex adaptive systems theory.

Similarly, Dewey influenced the early literature on management and organization through the works of writers such as Donald Schön, W. Edwards Deming, C. Wright Mills and Philip Selznick. Further, although rarely explicitly referenced, a Deweyan approach to addressing questions of organization and organizing has found its way into contemporary social science research approaches that seek to stimulate scholarship in an engaged sense, rather than as a merely technical endeavour (e.g. Van de Ven, 2007; Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008). Within the domain of organizational research, Dewey's ideas have been taken up particularly in the organizational learning and routines literatures. For example, in support of a more generative and dynamic theory of routines, Winter (2013) and Cohen (2012) advocate Dewey's view of habits as evolving dispositions to act (rather than as fixed behaviours), while Elkjær (2004) is a strong proponent of Dewey's approach to learning. She argues that the transformation of ambiguous or puzzling situations through the active and continuous interplay of experience, habit and inquiry offers a more complexified alternative to learning conceived as either knowledge acquisition or participation in communities of practice. More generally, Farjoun, Ansell and Boin (2015) propose Dewey's Pragmatism as a productive way of engaging with problems of organizational change and complexity, which otherwise are often reduced to fit the metaphysical assumptions of either rational choice or structural theories.

Finally, Follett's work, although seriously under-represented in contemporary organization research, stands out among the classical Pragmatists as most directly relevant to problems of administration and industry. She was well respected as a consultant and business advisor, as demonstrated, for instance, by a series of invited lectures that she delivered to the Bureau of Personnel Administration, where she presented new and radical ideas for industrial management (Follett, 1941). In arguing that management is better understood as continuous and relational practice, she positions herself in diametric opposition to the scientific management of her contemporary, Frederick Winslow Taylor (Rylander Eklund & Simpson, 2020). If Taylor's approach has been inspirational to evidence-based management, then Follett's work is central to the rehumanizing of management. Ansell (2009) claims that difficulties in classifying Follett in any conventional disciplinary sense arise because, consistent with an empirical stance, she preferred to work in an intensely interdisciplinary way that sought to break free of the conventional boundaries separating political science, public administration, democracy and management. Regarded as a 'prophet of management' (Graham, 1996), her particular contribution to the overall Pragmatist agenda is a practical account of power and the exercise of authority in organizational experience (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Calás & Smircich, 1996). Attending to both the integrity of the individual and the

vitality of community, she argues that organizing can be, and indeed must be, creative (Follett, 1924).

This brief survey demonstrates that Pragmatism has already had a rich and diverse influence on the field of organization studies, albeit often in implicit and derivative forms. There is, however, much that still can be usefully mined from this tradition, so let us now turn our attention to Pragmatist philosophy in order to surface some of this potential.

What Makes Pragmatism Distinctive?

In assessing the uniqueness and intricacies of this tradition, we elaborate three particular characteristics of Pragmatism, which individually do not define its distinctiveness but, when taken together, present a unique philosophical perspective on the day-to-day realities of lived experience. These three characteristics are, first, a commitment to process and emergence, second, a naturalistic and experimental approach to knowing, and third, an awareness that the meaning of actions taken in the present is in their anticipated future consequences.

Pragmatism's commitment to process

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* significantly shaped how the classical Pragmatists appreciated their world(s). This theory presents evolution as an ongoing process in which organisms adapt to, and at the same time modify, the environments they inhabit, using the very capacities with which the process of evolution has endowed them. Pragmatism extends these insights beyond biology *in strictu sensu* to the realms of social life. It specifically develops Darwin's notion of the co-evolution of multiple, mutually dependent forms of life as they continuously adapt to and thereby transform their conditions, but without any particular teleological objective. Life, then, is an ever-changing, temporal and emergent flux, involving both animate and inanimate aspects in an endless process of continuous and interconnected growth. In Dewey's view, life is not only 'precarious and perilous' but also full of opportunity:

> We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate. (Dewey, 1929a, p. 47)

The inherent dynamism of this living process poses a challenge in terms of how we make sense of our experience. As suggested by William James (1952, p. 318), when our senses are assailed by the 'great blooming, buzzing confusion' of experience, we make meaning out of this mess by moulding our confused perceptions into practical conceptions. We do so creatively by making comparisons based on notions of similarity and difference (see also Follett, 1924). Dualisms emerge from this sense-making in a three-pronged move: first, conceptions of similarity and difference are taken to be more fundamental than the perceptions they are meant to clarify; then subsequent perceptions are represented by prior constructed conceptions; and finally these conceptions are reified as foundational, finite and ultimate. This series of actions manifests a metaphysical stance.

Dewey (1920, 1929b) consistently rejects such dualistic thinking on the grounds that it divides the ongoing flow of experience into discrete and opposing metaphysical categories of knowledge that are cut out of, and set adrift from, living processes. Dualisms, such as subject vs object and theory vs practice, reduce the entire spectrum of experience to one or other of two opposites, forcing hard epistemological distinctions that, at best, can be relevant only as analytical ploys in a

world presumed to be at rest. The Pragmatist solution to this problem is to engage an empirical stance, recognizing that continuities and movements are inextricably bound to and inseparable from lived experience. They are aspects of the same rather than opposites; in the language of Dewey and Bentley (1949, pp. 5–6) they are 'namings, thinkings, arguings, reasonings'. As such, conceptions remain subservient to making sense of perception, and the naming of conceptions is deemed satisfactory only to the extent that it is 'tentative, postulational, hypothetical' and productive of further inquiry (Dewey & Bentley, 1949, pp. 48–49). It is by retaining the qualities of duality (not dualism) that the continuity of living process is preserved.

Of course, the notion of duality is not new to organization studies, as evidenced for instance in Giddens' (1984) 'structure and agency', Chia's (1997) 'being and becoming', Mintzberg and Waters' (1985) 'deliberate and emergent strategies' and Weick's (1979) 'nouns and verbs'. Another key duality appears in the title of this article: 'organization and organizing'. In each case an entitative conceptualization (structure, being, deliberate, noun, organization) is paired with a processual way of engaging (agency, becoming, emergent, verb, organizing). The entitative and processual aspects of each duality have different but not necessarily opposing implications for the doing of research, each inviting different types of questions and different processes of inquiry.

Process research may, therefore, be approached in one of two ways. One way first identifies the stuff, entities or 'things' of the situation, and then secondarily considers how these move and interact with each other – Langley and Tsoukas (2016) characterize this as a 'weak' process approach. The other way first engages with the flows and movements of the situation, and secondarily looks for emergent and necessarily ephemeral 'things' – a 'strong' process approach (Langley & Tsoukas, 2016). Both 'weak' and 'strong' process approaches seek to engage with all of the things and all the movements of life, but the difference between them is in their starting points – things or movements, entity or process – as they proceed to form practical conceptions.

Whereas there is no shortage of methodological advice on doing entity-based ('weak') process studies of organization, there is little guidance for empirical researchers who wish to step out on a 'strong' process pathway. It is here that Pragmatism offers some useful analytical 'tools', which we discuss later in the section on 'researching the mess'. In privileging the dynamics of socially emerging situations, Pragmatism recognizes the precarity and tentativeness of living experience, suggesting a 'strong' approach to research that emphasizes engaged participation and 'withness' (Shotter, 2006) rather than questing for universal truths.

Pragmatism's approach to knowing

Pragmatism is also clearly differentiated from other philosophical traditions by its fallibilist view of knowing, which values naturalistic explanations grounded in experience over abstract explanations drawn from a supernatural metaphysics (Misak, 2013). The Pragmatist agenda is fundamentally concerned with the practical knowing that is called for when ambiguous, indeterminate or problematic situations arise, when established habits and old ways of thinking and acting are no longer efficacious, and these situations need to be transformed into something more satisfactory. Dewey (1938) argues that this process of knowing is applicable whenever indeterminate situations arise, whether these be in science or the arts, ordinary daily life or any other aspect of human experience. It generates 'truths' that arise in empirical experience, while at the same time shaping this experience; they are always relative to knowers and their situations, and they are inescapably performative in the sense developed by Barad (2003). Such 'truths', or 'warranted assertions' as Dewey prefers to call them, function as handy and malleable tools rather than as absolute and inalienable facts. They are 'handy' to the extent that the knowing derived from previous experience

proves helpful in transforming the present situation, and they are 'malleable' to the extent that they prove inadequate for the situation and therefore need to be reconstituted in some way.

Knowing is a necessarily social process that emerges from the relationality of situations created by what Follett (1924, p. 61) calls a 'circular response', whereby situations are continuously modulated by anticipations of what might happen next. Dewey, in his late collaboration with Arthur Bentley (Dewey & Bentley, 1949), elaborates this relationality by contrasting the notions of 'inter-action' and 'trans-action' as two alternative modes of social engagement. Their definition of inter-action corresponds with the assumptions of a 'weak' process approach wherein discrete objects act upon each other, rather like the balls on a billiard table. Although the balls can influence each other's position and velocity, in and of themselves they are assumed to remain unchanged. Trans-action, on the other hand, is consistent with a 'strong' process approach that resists the carving up of experience into discrete and (relatively) stable entities. The emphasis here is on the mutual and ongoing transformation of trans-actors and their situations. Bernstein (1960, p. xl) summarizes this trans-actional dynamic:

> In a transaction, the components themselves are subject to change. Their character affects and is affected by the transaction. Properly speaking, they are not independent: they are phases in a unified transaction. Thus transaction is a more rigorous formulation of the category of the organic which is embedded in Dewey's earliest philosophic writings. Transaction is a generic trait of existence.

This Pragmatist view of knowing contrasts with metaphysical accounts in which 'truth' is taken to correspond with, or accurately represent, a 'real' world that exists independently of any observer. Dewey (1929b) disparagingly refers to this intellectualist account as the 'spectator theory of knowledge', in which the knower is supposedly external to and independent of what is known.

Although Pragmatists all share the conviction that knowing is a fallible process derived from experiencing, there are nevertheless significant differences between their views on 'truth'. Whereas Peirce hopes it can be asymptotically approached through systematic, collective inquiry and James locates it ultimately in individual (religious) belief, Dewey privileges an intelligent experimentalism that is always aimed at improving the situation. It is Dewey's articulation that, according to Hickman (1998, pp. 166–167), is the best we can hope for as 'a measure of stability in an otherwise precarious world'. Here, knowing is normative, requiring judgement in selecting a way forward that can bind communities together, while at the same time remaining a deeply human phenomenon that is plural, mutable and dynamic. The issue of normativity is not about how we should conduct our lives according to some *a priori* moral principle, but rather how we can act to improve the current situation. Normativity in Pragmatism thus takes the form of tentative proposals for action that are continuously forged and tested in the transformative processes of inquiry (Dewey, 1938; Pappas, 2008).

The general tenor of this approach to knowing will already be familiar to, for instance, members of the science and technology studies and sociomateriality communities (e.g. Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Law, 2004; Leonardi, 2012). However, Pragmatism's particular concern for the generative potentials residing in every living moment adds an agentic immediacy that admits a multiplicity of possibilities in any given situation. It is the creative unfolding of these possibilities that differentiates the Pragmatist empirical stance to knowing from metaphysical stances that start from some *a priori* indisputable 'truth'.

Pragmatism's future orientation

A third key feature of Pragmatism is its orientation towards the future. The idea that the meaning of actions and choices taken in the present lies in their conceivable future consequences was first

articulated by Peirce (1878, p. 293). Accounting for our actions is always more than the mere accumulation of experience; actions (trans-actions) are also performative, simultaneously influencing and being influenced by emerging futures. Our actions in any current situation are inspired by what we conceive to be their future implications so Pragmatism's concern is with a self-reflexive progression rather than any form of historical determinism (Joas, 1996). It is its anticipatory, abductive, 'what if' sensibility that affords the capacity to engage with emergence as a generative dynamic, so whenever we encounter uncertainty about what to do next, we are challenged to creatively develop choices, each of which anticipates an alternative future. This notion of abduction is, in Peirce's view (1903: CP5.171), the only possible source of novelty and change in experience. It is an inferential logic that is distinguished from deduction, which proves something must be true, and induction, which demonstrates the actuality of something. Abduction is a creative leap that imagines what might be, a moment of choice in which the various options for ongoing action are evaluated (see also Paavola, 2004).

This future-orientation underpins the Pragmatist faith in human progress and liberal democracy. Meliorism – the idea that humans can always act to improve their situations – runs throughout Pragmatist thinking. Through our actions, we endeavour:

> to convert strife into harmony, monotony into a variegated scene, and limitation into expansion. The converting is progress, the only progress conceivable or attainable by man. Hence every situation has its own measure and quality of progress, and the need for progress is recurrent, constant. (Dewey, 1922, p. 282)

The practical application of this future-orientation is contained, for instance, in Dewey's (1938) notion of inquiry. This process is triggered by indeterminate situations where the way forward appears to be blocked, or there is doubt or ambiguity about what action to take. An eventual choice about how to act is premised upon its conceivable consequences, and by so acting we bring clarity to what has now become a transformed situation.

Yet in line with Pragmatism's commitment to process, such a choice is never final, never an ending, but just another step in the unfolding continuity of choices. Reflecting this sense of continuity, Dewey refuses to differentiate between means and ends. They are a duality:

> two names for the same reality. The terms denote not a division in reality, but a distinction in judgement. . .. The 'end' is merely a series of acts viewed at a removed state; and a means is merely the series viewed at an earlier time. (Dewey, 1922, pp. 27–28)

Their distinction is 'temporal and relational' (Dewey, 1939, p. 43); means and ends both become 'ends-in-view'. To speak of 'ends' instead of 'ends-in-view' is to render them final, static, immutable. '[T]he thing which is a close of one history is always the beginning of another, and in this capacity the thing in question is transitive or dynamic' (Dewey, 1929a, p. 100). In a similar vein, Mead's (1934, p. 63) 'conversation of gestures' describes how selves that are always already social emerge continuously in engaged dialogue. This process of *becoming* involves each conversant 'taking the attitude of the other' (Mead, 1934, pp. 173–178), not to build consensus, but rather to anticipate and shape ongoing communication. To the extent that conversants modify their own gestures in response to these anticipated futures, selves and their situations are transformed in conversation.

The anticipatory aspect of Pragmatist thinking adds a temporal dimension that is much needed if we are to grapple effectively with the processual nature of experience. It goes beyond dualistic conceptions of time as the ordered passage of past, present and future, to focus on the temporal

resourcing of generative social processes. Mead (1932) developed this quite radical alternative for thinking about temporality in relation to the Pragmatist commitment to ongoing living experience. His argument resonates with the temporalities of Bergson (1911) and Heidegger (2010), in which socially constructed pasts and futures interpenetrate to create movements of change in the living present (Simpson, Tracey, & Weston, 2021).

Pragmatism in Organization Studies Today

The works of the classical Pragmatists are frequently cited in articles published in this journal, but it is relatively rare that authors engage forensically with Pragmatist ideas with a view to uncovering new inspirations. The seven articles that we selected for this virtual special issue all fall into this latter category. Although Mead and Dewey remain a consistent presence in these contemporary studies, Follett, the third of our set of key Pragmatist influencers in the early organizational literature, has faded from sight and has been replaced by a growing interest in the contributions of Peirce.

Reading across these seven articles, we see three crosscutting themes that demonstrate the ways in which Pragmatism can inform further developments in researching organization and organizing. We label these themes 'the making of practice', 'researching the mess' and 'doing ethics'. In what follows, we present these themes in turn, briefly locating each within a wider literature, then outlining the particular perspective that Pragmatism can bring before turning to our set of selected articles to demonstrate ways in which these themes have been developed in *Organization Studies*. In presenting this argument, however, it becomes apparent that these themes are not at all distinct, as they continuously evolve together in living situations.

The making of practice

The past two decades have seen a decided turn towards practice among organizational scholars (e.g. Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Raelin, 2016; Whittington, 2006) as they have sought more situated and more relational ways of grappling with social worlds in all their dynamic complexities. A variety of theoretical perspectives has been brought to bear on this enterprise, including those of Bourdieu, Giddens, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Vygotsky (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Nicolini, 2012;). Practice theory is thus characterized by a rapidly expanding and increasingly confusing terrain that cries out for simplifying typologies to classify and categorize different influences and traditions.

Responding to this need, Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) suggest three different foci for researching practice – as an empirical phenomenon, as a theoretical perspective, or as a philosophical orientation – which they rather surprisingly simplify by mapping them respectively onto the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why' of organizational practices. Like any typology, these categorical classifications are based on dualistic assumptions, distinguishing first between the empirical and the theoretical, and second, between these epistemological concerns and the ontological focus of their philosophical orientation. Schatzki (2001) has taken a different cut across the practice literature. His typology distinguishes between 'practices and social order', 'inside practices' and 'posthumanist challenges', where the first two categories are separated on the familiar social/individual dualism, while once again there is an epistemological/ontological separation between these and the third category. Thus, many practice studies bring in through the back door categorical oppositions and dualistic assumptions that tend to emphasize the stability of practices (entities) ahead of the dynamism of practising (process).

A Pragmatist perspective explicitly rejects these dualisms, orienting instead towards the movements and flows of practising in the mutually constituting, socially situated, embodied and material

engagement of agents, whether human or non-human. Here, practices are understood as the fallible habits, or predispositions to certain actions, that are learned and relearned in the continuous processes of practising together. For Mead (1934), practising is carried in 'conversations of gestures' where conversants shape the meanings that direct their coordinated actions. Conversants are always already socially constituted selves whose communications are mediated by 'significant symbols' capable of producing similar responses among participants in any given conversation. Practising, then, is the process by means of which social selves and their contexts are continuously making each other, *sympoietically*. The transformative potential of such understandings of practising leads Hickman (2007) to suggest that Pragmatism is not only a philosophy of praxis, but also a philosophy of production, encompassing both the generative and normalizing dynamics that go into making human action (see also Joas, 1996). These themes are taken up and developed in all seven articles in this virtual special issue, but in the interests of word count, we limit our discussion about making practice to three of these contributions: Taylor, 2011; Cohen, 2007; Simpson, 2009.

James Taylor (2011), who is generally regarded as the founder of the 'Montreal School' for the communicative constitution of organization (Schoeneborn et al., 2019), draws particularly on Mead to show how organizations both make, and are made in, the ordinary everyday performative practising of conversation, or speech communication. He argues, for instance, that the identity work of both organizations and their individual members involves the same process of 'authoring', which is a recursive communication that seeks a holistic analysis, engaging both organization and organizing in the continuity of practising. He argues that this process generates, and is resourced by, imbricated layers of identity and meaning that serve to sustain and renew socially constituted selves. Taylor (2011, p. 1290) concludes his essay with a quote from Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916, pp. 3–4), which succinctly sums up the constitutive force of communication:

> Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication . . . Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common, and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.

Michael Cohen (2007) engages with Dewey's (1922) *Human Nature and Conduct* as a way of reimagining the recurrent patterns of routines, or practices. He observes that the routines literature is fraught with difficulties arising from assumptions that they are invariant, mundanely predictable, mindless and cognitively encoded. How then can routines evolve and adjust to changing circumstances? Cohen's answer lies in reconceiving routines as habits: not as inflexible patterns of behaviour but as learned dispositions to act in certain ways, which may be modified and relearned through ongoing social engagements. From this Pragmatist perspective, habits are far from the automated rigidity that is often associated with the concept of routines. Their fluidity invites us to attend to what is changing, rather than to what is fixed, in any given situation. Contrary to popular theories of decision-making that prioritize cognition, Cohen argues that a Pragmatist view of practice involves the 'dynamic interplay of habit, thought, and emotion' (Cohen, 2007, p. 777). But if we are to take advantage of this dynamic integration, he suggests we will need to make some radical changes to the ways in which we research and think about routines.

Barbara Simpson (2009) draws on Mead's less frequently cited *The Philosophy of the Present* (1932) to focus on what it is that makes practising generative (see also Lombardo & Kvålshaugen, 2014; Simpson, 2018). She argues that the 'conversation of gestures' alone provides an inadequate account of the emergent and improvisational dynamics of practising. There must also be a way of accommodating temporal experience. Mead's notion of sociality, which he defines as the process of adjustment that arises in the liminal phase 'betwixt and between the old system and the new' (1932, p. 73), offers a way of engaging with temporality that complements the transactionality of

gestural conversation. Practising, then, 'is the conduct of transactional life, which involves the temporally-unfolding, symbolically-mediated interweaving of experience and action' (Simpson, 2009, p. 1338).

Researching the mess

Aligning with the call for an empirical stance, there is a growing clamour for new ways of researching organization and organizing (Gherardi, 2019), which are suited to a world that is ephemeral, elusive, plural and emergent (Law, 2004), and which recognize researchers as integral to the performative practising of their particular situations (Shotter, 2006; Helin et al., 2014, pp.10–14). The challenge is to elaborate new ways of engaging with living situations in the midst of their practising. Reminding us of the importance of 'sociological imagination', Mills (2000) observes that the point of social science is neither the perfection of theoretical edifices in which 'conceptions have indeed become Concepts' (p. 23), nor the endless measurement and processing of data in which 'methods have become Methodology' (p. 24), but to elicit the cultural and political meanings of its practice. He advises that social scientists, including organizational scholars, should not position themselves unreflexively or unwittingly, nor lose themselves in wordy irrelevance.

In actuality though, most researchers are trained in methodological principles that assume worlds are ordered, relatively stable and predictable, and can be represented using dualistic distinctions between, for instance, quantitative and qualitative forms of data, or deductive and inductive forms of inferential logic. Although these limitations are acknowledged by many researchers today, they nevertheless remain deeply buried and untested in much research practice. What is needed is a more comprehensive re-visioning of what research can mean in conditions of fluidity and performativity, recognizing that theory cannot provide unitary answers and that methods produce not 'truths' but practical insights into 'the unsystematic events that are unfolding in plain view before us' (Shotter, 2006, p. 587). Pragmatism responds to this need by pursuing practical and local solutions rather than grand theoretical agendas.

To demonstrate this potential, we now elaborate three specific analytical devices or 'tools' found in Pragmatism: inquiry, sociality and symbols. Each helps to heighten the researcher's sensitivity to movements and flows as they engage with the messiness of experience.

Inquiry is perhaps the best known and most widely used device in Pragmatism. Peirce (1877) introduced it as the 'struggle to end the irritation of doubt' through the operations of scientific research, but arguably Dewey's formulation is better known, especially in its extension to ordinary everyday experience. Dewey (1938, p. 108) defines inquiry as:

> the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.

Explaining this, he invokes the metaphor of a 'traveler faring forth' (Dewey, 1922, pp. 127ff) who is stopped in his tracks by

> shock, confusion, perturbation, uncertainty. For the moment he doesn't know what hit him, as we say, nor where he is going. But a new impulse is stirred which becomes the starting point of an investigation, a looking into things, a trying to see them, to find out what is going on.

Inquiry is thus a dynamic and emergent process, the purpose of which is creatively and imaginatively – in 'dramatic rehearsal' (Dewey, 1922, pp. 189ff) – to transform this momentary doubt

into a clear view of what to do next by imagining the various options available for action and appraising the potential of each of these for transforming the current situation. It comprises a deliberative abductive move to explore and select from a range of potential options for action, an experimental deductive move through which the predictive power of the chosen action is confirmed (or rejected), and an experiential inductive move that examines the efficacy of the chosen action in practice. The process is thus 'consummated' (Dewey, 1934, chapter 3) – brought to a temporarily satisfactory closure – while also setting the stage for further inquiries as the now transformed situation inevitably will bring its own shocks and surprises. Edward and Willmott (2015) erroneously reduce these complex dynamics to a simple linear, multi-stage decision-making process. However, inquiry is never merely a 'rational, mechanical and algorithmic process' of decision making (p. 199); its objective is always to transform the present situation.

The second Pragmatist tool we examine here is Mead's notion of sociality, which he defines as 'the capacity of being several things at once' (Mead, 1932, p. 75). He argues that it is this capacity to simultaneously experience self and other, to in effect walk in the shoes of the other, that accounts for the ineluctably social nature of selves. Through this experience of simultaneity, our mutual becomings are continuously adjusted according to how we anticipate our actions will be perceived. However, this experience is also necessarily a temporal phenomenon as the interpenetration of pasts and futures resources present actions (e.g. Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2018). It is in these simultaneities of the old and the new, and of selves and others, that creative action emerges and progress is accomplished. As an analytical device then, sociality sensitizes the inquirer's gaze to the 'withness' (Shotter, 2006) of change by focusing on the simultaneities occurring in situations where social conduct is actively unfolding. Since inquiry is a collective endeavour, it is necessarily threaded through with sociality.

Symbols, and especially their mediating effects, are the third analytical device in our Pragmatist toolbox. Building on Peirce's triadic theory of signs (for an overview, see: Atkin, 2013), Mead (1934, pp. 71–72) recognizes symbols as significant in the sociality of gestural conversation to the extent that they mediate meanings in ongoing dialogue. Knorr Cetina (1997) refers to such symbols as epistemic objects, which are intrinsic to the very processes of generating meaning, opening up new understandings by virtue of their interpretive flexibility. Regardless of whether these symbols are material, textual or conceptual, their mediating power resides in their situatedness within social relations. In the context of research, symbols are engaged in both inquiry and sociality as concepts, data and other epistemic objects that *stand in* for something. They are not 'given' as preformed representations, but rather they are selected, created or 'taken' by the inquirer (Dewey, 1929b, p. 178) to provide meaning that is relevant to the context at hand (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Thus, the relationship between symbols and things is much more ambiguous, equivocal, convoluted and complicated than suggested by representational epistemologies (Vesa, Krohn, & den Hond, 2020). Building on Mead's work with significant symbols and Peirce's triadic theory of interpretation, another Pragmatist, Morris (1946), proposed a theory of semiotics that is expressed in terms of syntactics, semantics and pragmatics, each of which reflects a different aspect of the ways in which symbols are used. The Pragmatist roots of this theory continue to inform the contemporary literature on semiotics (e.g. Eco & Sebeok, 1988).

Although most of the seven articles included in this virtual special issue recognize the importance of developing new ways of researching that can more effectively work with the messiness of lived experience, three engage explicitly with these Pragmatist devices (Lorino et al., 2011; Rippin, 2013; Kelemen et al., 2019). Specifically, they show how their inquiries are articulated through sociality and symbols. Philippe Lorino and his colleagues (2011) take up the challenge of the representationalist orthodoxy, proposing a profoundly processual alternative that they call 'dialogical mediated inquiry'. In this, Dewey's inquiry, Peirce's triadic theory of interpretation and Morris's

theory of semiotics are integrated using Bakhtinian dialogue, which resembles Mead's notion of sociality in gestural conversation. They demonstrate how this approach invites 'the *complex interpretation of systems* rather than the *observation of complex systems*' (Lorino et al., 2011, p. 773, emphasis in original) by transcending the many dualisms that characterize representationalist research. This article also reminds us that inquiry is more likely to produce valuable outcomes if the process is structured democratically to accommodate multiple interests, to recognize potentially conflicting value orientations, and to proceed in a prudent experimental manner in which each step is revocable.

Ann Rippin (2013) builds from Dewey's (1934) *Art as Experience* to argue for the importance of the aesthetic and sensory aspects of experience in processes of inquiry. She advocates arts-based approaches for exploring the day-to-day experiences of living, suggesting that the making of art is actually fundamental to social progress. To be specific, she describes a studio practice of quilt-making in which the quilt is an emergent symbol of her own experience of an organization. 'The work tells me things that I had previously overlooked – it brings them graphically to my attention' (Rippin, 2013, p. 1554). Rippin, in her arts-based inquiry, thus seeks to find novel ways to engage with sociality and symbols. She reminds us that inquiry is as much about 'stating meaning' (the alleged domain of research) as it is about 'expressing meaning' (the alleged domain of art) (Dewey, 1934, p. 84), in that both concern the creation of meaning out of an uncertain situation. Although she observes that arts-based approaches are not entirely foreign to organization studies – and indeed, Kelemen et al. (2019) are enthusiastic about the possibilities of theatre as a research methodology – fully worked empirical examples remain rare in this journal.

Mihaela Kelemen and her colleagues (2019) elaborate the duality of 'questions' and 'questioning' in the specific context of inquiry. Starting from the observation that questioning in organizational scholarship has largely been confined to its role in critique and position building, they make a plea for questioning 'out of curiosity', which has a number of unique affordances grounded in inquiry and sociality. As Kelemen et al. argue, it 'can build new dialogue and open up new methodological avenues. This will help change the habitual ways in which we explore ideas, problems and situations in organization studies as well as lead to more democratic forms of organizing' (p. 1529). This kind of questioning is transformational and indispensable for researching the messiness of living experience.

Doing ethics

Research in the field of organization and management is still very much founded on a metaphysics of universal truths, objective knowledge and representational validity. It is true that these assumptions have been somewhat unsettled by interpretive researchers, but even they typically adopt a relatively disinterested, independent-researcher stance. This 'outsider' perspective advances an amoral position where 'facts' become separated from 'values', and are reduced to data, to variables whose numerical values are more important than their practical meanings. Ultimately, this has resulted in processes of valuation and their moral implications being banished from consideration in the doing of 'scientific' research.

The moral neutrality claimed by organizational research is, therefore, quite ironic, especially in the context of ethics. Although increasingly evident in teaching and learning, business ethics is frequently disparaged as a soft subject (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2007) that serves merely to reduce the ambiguities and uncertainties in processes of decision-making. Critics observe that this overly simplified perspective has produced an ethics that is 'unreflective' and 'shallow' (Rosenthal & Buchholz, 2000, p. 5), persistently unwilling 'to grapple with tensions between theories of ethical reasoning' (Derry & Green, 1989, p. 521), 'restrictive' rather than 'empowering' (Kjonstad &

Willmott, 1995), and inclined to conceptual 'foreclosures' that privilege a narrow and impoverished view of what constitutes ethics (Jones, Parker, & ten Bos, 2005). Moral arguments in the organization literature thus remain largely invisible (Ezzamel & Willmott, 2014), with ethical debate reduced to contests between epistemological facts and meta-ethical strongholds, rather than engaging in any substantive manner with practising and organizing (Wicks & Freeman, 1998).

For Pragmatists, however, scientific research, and indeed all inquiry, is an inherently ethical activity. They make no separation between ethics and inquiry. Consistent with a commitment to process, there is no absolute moral law that can be taken as a finality (Evans, 2013). Rather, moral action emerges continuously, so 'the only moral "end"' is growth or progress towards a more fulfilling life (Dewey, 1920, p. 177). Here, 'growth' and 'progress' refer to an experimental and incremental approach to enhancing experience.

In developing his moral argument, Dewey engages directly with the dualistic distinction between facts and values, and the gulf that it opens up between science and ethics (Misak, 2013; Putnam, 2002). Once again, he turns to inquiry as a process that transcends these distinct categories of knowing by attending to the movements that integrate them in practice. Wherever there is doubt, therefore, there will also be a moral choice to be made; the resultant action is deemed moral if the situation is transformed and growth results.

> The ultimate 'goal' of this open-ended dynamic process is enriching growth or development, not final completion . . . differences should not be eradicated, because these differences provide the necessary materials by which a society can continue to grow. (Rosenthal & Buchholz, 2000, pp. 13–14)

The relationship between morality and action is recursive. Action is 'the sole medium of expression for ethics . . . the sphere of morals is the sphere of action . . . We arrive at moral knowledge only by tentative and observant practice' (Addams, 1902, pp. 273–274). The moral quality of transformational action is further developed by Mead (1934), specifically with respect to the relational and temporal dimensions of sociality. He argues that the choices we make when faced with ambiguous and uncertain situations are necessarily social and moral. They require us to be:

> ready to recognize the interests of others even when they run counter to our own, . . . the person who does that does not really sacrifice himself, but becomes a larger self. . . .When we reach the question of what is right . . . the only test . . . is whether we have taken into account every interest involved. (Mead, 1934, pp. 386–387)

This Pragmatist sensitivity to ethics also encompasses an ongoing concern for democracy – not in the popular sense of occasional elections from which the winner takes all, but in the more practical sense of continuous engagement. For example, Addams insists on a clear connection between ethics and democracy, arguing that:

> It is most difficult to hold to our political democracy and to make it in any sense a social expression and not a mere governmental contrivance, unless we take pains to keep on common ground in our human experiences. (1902, pp. 221–222)

For Pragmatists, the notion of democracy extends beyond the realm of politics to include industrial organization. Addams (1902) is concerned with the role of workers in 'industrial amelioration', and Follett (1941) argues compellingly for an involved and participatory approach to industrial administration. Doing ethics from a Pragmatist perspective is, therefore, an experimental process of continuously transforming society to accommodate the broadest possible range of

interests relevant to any given situation. This perspective has radical implications for ethics, as it draws attention to the potential for transforming life – whether individual, organizational or societal – rather than merely judging it.

All seven articles in this virtual special issue engage in some way with a Pragmatist view of practising and researching, but it is Frank Martela (2015) in particular who brings ethics into the foreground. Martela positions his argument by comparing a Pragmatist approach to inquiry with realist, critical realist and constructivist perspectives. He emphasizes the role of abduction in inquiry, pointing out that Pragmatist inquiry is always done with ends-in-view, which allows for the valuing of different theories and propositions. Ends-in-view point to the moral choices that underpin transformative change. Martela suggests that Pragmatism offers a unique and thoroughly defensible way of approaching organizing as a necessarily human practice. In so doing, he places moral conduct at the very heart of organized social action.

Looking Forward

The particular reading of Pragmatism that we present in this article responds to the call for an empirical stance in the study of organization and organizing. We demonstrate that this stance did indeed motivate the work of the early Pragmatists. However, over time, at least in organizational research, it has been overtaken by metaphysical stances. Du Gay and Vikkelsø (2017) observe this regress from lively practice to moribund metaphysics in organization theory, Lorino (2018) notes a similar retreat from a richly empirical stance in the development of lean management, while Elkjær and Simpson (2011) comment likewise on the evolution of sensemaking theory. In making this transition from what Deleuze and Guattari (2004) describe as 'nomadism' to 'Royal Science', representational forms are assumed as convenient simulacra that stand in for experience, but at the expense of generative and emergent new ways of doing, thinking, and being. Reinvigorating organizational research to address the apparently intractable problems of today will, we believe, require comprehensive re-engagement with the empirical stance that underpins Pragmatism in general and 'strong' process studies of organization and organizing in particular. It is this 'strong' process view that, in our opinion, offers radically different ways of engaging with the ever-increasing complexities of our world, complexities that require us to be fleet of foot, ready to respond creatively, and willing to extend our imaginations to embrace more-than-human perspectives (e.g. Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016).

What classical Pragmatism offers is a coherent empirical attitude consistent with a thoroughly processual approach that cannot be reduced to metaphysics without the loss of creativity and emergent novelty. The particular features we have emphasized – Pragmatism's commitment to 'strong' process, fallible knowing and performative futures – suggest approaches to both researching and organizing that stay close to the social and ethical dynamics of living situations. There are some obvious similarities with other research traditions, but whereas critical management scholars, for instance, elaborate dualistic differences between knowledge categories (e.g. gender, class, religion and race), Pragmatists seek a transformative continuity of knowing across differences. It is not so much the pursuit of a 'third way' (Elkjær, 2004; Farjoun et al., 2015) as the continuous transformation of doubt and critique into novel, creative, democratic moves forward (Evans, 2013). This radical engagement with unfolding experience sits remarkably comfortably alongside recent developments in the critical posthumanities (Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2019) and post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2018), which invite us to step down from the self-created pedestals that we have occupied as 'masters of the universe' to a more humble acknowledgement that we are mere bit players in a much larger and infinitely more complex whole.

From our reading of the seven articles selected for this virtual special issue, it is apparent that Pragmatism has considerable potential to inform research that genuinely engages with the messiness of living situations, appraising 'the rich thicket of reality' rather than reducing it to a mere 'skinny outline' (James, 1907, p. 68). It is fair to say, though, that this potential remains largely unrealized, as much in this journal as in the wider field of organizational research. We acknowledge that reading Pragmatism requires a significant intellectual investment, but the possible returns are immense. There are many topics currently developing in organization research and practice that call for an empirical stance such as that offered by Pragmatism. For instance, Follett's exploration of power-with, or co-power (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Pratt, 2011) offers a productive alternative to the critical, but dualistic preoccupation with the powerful and the powerless, the empowered and the disempowered. Feminist scholars are increasingly drawn to Pragmatism by its promise of emancipation through ordinary, everyday experience (Seigfried, 1996; Stivers, 1996). And a growing awareness of what it means to be a caring society draws out a different sort of ethics that is fundamentally relational (Held, 2006; Mol, 2008). There is also considerable scope for Pragmatist ideas about democratic and pluralist governance to provide an alternative to neoliberal managerialism, as well as an ameliorative approach to wicked problems and grand challenges (Buchanan, 1992; Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015). These few suggestions are offered simply as *amuse-bouches*, but in our view the opportunities for Pragmatist approaches in organizational practice are unlimited.

In conclusion, Pragmatism offers radically different ways of thinking and acting in organizational contexts, but if Pragmatist ideas are to flourish in *Organization Studies*, our community needs to understand better the implications of this approach for research practice. We hope that this virtual special issue and our introductory article act as stimuli to take seriously the legacy of classical American Pragmatism, which exemplifies the empirical stance that the processual spirit of contemporary organization and organizing is calling out for.

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Note

1. A rough and ready search for "pragmatis*" in the top 10 journals in organization and management found 172 occurrences, of which the largest number (23%) appeared in *Organization Studies*.
2. The associated Perspectives issue can be found here:https://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections-oss/oss-1-perspectives-pragmatism-in-organization-studies/oss

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