

**J.D. THOMPSON'S *ORGANIZATIONS IN ACTION*
50th ANNIVERSARY: A REFLECTION**

EDITED BY FRANCESCO MARIA BARBINI AND GIOVANNI MASINO

Abstract

At the 50th anniversary of James D. Thompson's fundamental book, *Organizations in Action*, TAO Digital Library proposes a reflection on this great master's legacy and the evolution of organizational studies. Twelve researchers, from different disciplinary fields, analyze both the texts utilized for teaching and the contribution of several important journals, particularly in recent decades. The outcome is an overall picture that may stimulate different, divergent evaluations and, even more importantly, desirable, deeper reflections.

Keywords

J.D. Thompson, *Organizations in action*, Organization theory, Organization studies.

J.D. Thompson's *Organizations in Action* 50th anniversary: a reflection, Barbini Francesco Maria, Masino Giovanni (Eds.). Bologna: TAO Digital Library, 2017.

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ISBN: 978-88-98626-15-1



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ISSN: 2282-1023

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Publicato nel mese di novembre 2017
da TAO Digital Library – Bologna

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Table of contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
FRANCESCO M. BARBINI, MASSIMO NERI, Thompson's legacy on education	4
GIOVANNI MASINO, MICHELA MARCHIORI, ASQ: history and debates	41
ENRICO CORI, <i>Organization Science</i> : recent theories and research	85
MICOL BRONZINI, STEFANO NERI, The sociological view and organization theory	101
GIUSEPPE SCARATTI, LUCA VECCHIO, The psychological view and organization theory	129
CRISTINA DALLARA, Political science and organization theory	154
LUCIA MARCHEGIANI, Managerial studies and organization theory	169
MARCO ZAMARIAN, The editorial structure of top organization journals	191

Introduction

James D. Thompson published *Organizations in Action* in 1967. Fifty years have passed. TAO Digital Library has decided to dedicate to such anniversary a reflection.

It is well known that Thompson's theory meant to indicate an innovative pathway which, while avoiding subjectivist and objectivist radicalisms, was aimed at interpreting the "variability" of organizational action. It is also known that such interpretation should integrate the separate contributions from different social disciplines, in particular economics, sociology, social psychology, political science. The subtitle of *Organizations in Action*, indeed, is *Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory*. Thompson's theory corresponds to the program that himself had indicated a decade earlier for the study of organization by founding *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

Were Thompson's teachings carried over? How have they been interpreted and preserved in subsequent studies? Did an "organization science" develop, one capable of accommodating the contributions of various disciplines within a unified framework? The celebration of *Organizations in Action's* fiftieth anniversary promoted by TAO Digital Library tries to find answers to these questions.

Twelve researchers from different universities, representing those disciplines that are more interested in the study of organization, participated to this shared reflection. Francesco Maria Barbini and Massimo Neri highlight how Thompson's theory was presented in a significant number of handbooks and important theoretical books that are often used for teaching. Giovanni Masino and Michela Marchiori both reconstruct the history of *Administrative Science Quarterly* by comparing Thompson's initial intentions with the orientations of subsequent editors, and document the theoretical production

hosted in the journal until today. Enrico Cori examines Thompson's legacy and the relevance of articles published in *Organization Science* in the last two decades.

Micol Bronzini and Stefano Neri investigate, in the same recent period of time, about the contributions, in terms of organizational theory, of the two most relevant sociological journals, *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review*, which until the 80s had published crucial articles from different authors, including Thompson himself. Giuseppe Scaratti and Luca Vecchio discuss the possible relationships between Thompson's theory and the perspective of organizational psychology, and examine the articles published in the last two decades by *Organization Studies* and *Human Relations*. Cristina Dallara reflects on Thompson's legacy in political science with an analysis of articles published in the journal *Public Administration* in the last three decades. Lucia Marchegiani carries out her inquiry on *Academy of Management Journal*, as it seemed useful to verify the reception of Thompson's thought and the presence of contributions on organization theory in the management field as well.

Marco Zamarian, by analyzing the editorial boards' membership of two important journals, *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Organization Science*, shows that such community tends to reproduce itself, a phenomenon with relevant consequences for the development of organization theory.

How does Thompson's legacy look like today? What benefits have been seized from his fundamental teachings? How did organization theory develop in the last half-century? The Italian introduction to *Organizations in Action* observed that in the 70s and 80s already Thompson's thought was often interpreted in incorrect or even distorted ways, and that successful theories of that period were indebted with Thompson's theory, mostly without any acknowledgement, but they drifted away from its epistemological presumptions. After a great season of social-psychological and sociological functionalism in the 30s and 40s, and after the alternative route sketched by Barnard, Simon and Thompson until the 60s, organization studies show a

gradual impoverishment, instead of fruitful developments. Organization always appears an object for different disciplinary perspectives, uninterested in building a unitary “science”.

This collective book, thanks to an analysis – necessarily not without limitations – of some important journals and books utilized in courses, aims at providing an inspiration for reflection. Readers are invited to such reflection, and to imagine how organization theory might hopefully regain vitality, especially by leaning on a great teaching that, nonetheless, is still unforgotten.

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Thompson's legacy on education

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Introduction

Fifty years have passed since the publication of *Organizations in Action: Social Science Bases of Administrative Theory*, by James D. Thompson.

This book has always been considered as a milestone in the development of organization theory. Early reviews recognized the great potential of the theory proposed by Thompson: "*Organizations in Action* is a careful, major, and uniformly exciting book" (Lundberg, 1967: 341), "the reader will have to go far to find another sociological work with such high standards" (Litwak, 1968: 413), "this could just possibly prove to be one of the best books on organization theory of the past decade. [...] It could be something of a landmark" (Udy, 1968: 132-133), "James D. Thompson's *Organizations in Action* and Robert Boguslaw's *The New Utopians*: these two gems, although different, stand by themselves to be admired, and to provide aesthetic pleasure as well as illumination" (Zaleznik, 1968: 776).

Over time, *Organizations in Action* has established itself as a classic of organization thought, it has been adopted in university courses and MBAs, translated into many languages, and widely cited by distinguished scholars.

In 1988, in his introduction to the Italian translation of *Organizations in Action*, Maggi (1988/1990: 46-47, our translation) notes that "the modernity of Thompson's theory has not declined over the last two decades. Successive organization theories are indebted to Thompson. [...] His strong proposition of a general and intendedly exhaustive framework can obviously be overcome, as any other theory, but it seems that this has not happened so far in the organizational literature". According to Maggi, Thompson's theory opposes the dominant functionalist perspective and the rising contingency theory. Maggi

also notes that the organization theories of the 1970s and 1980s take pieces and develop parts of Thompson's theory, often not recognizing his primogeniture and moving away from his vision of the world.

In 2003 the book was reprinted, with a preface by M.N. Zald and new introduction by W.R. Scott: "You hold in your hands one of the half-dozen most influential books on organizations written in twentieth century" (Scott, 2003a: xv).

On the occasion of this reprint, the prominent journal *Administrative Science Quarterly* organized a review symposium in which eminent scholars discussed the modernity of Thompson's theory: "with the reprinting of Thompson's (1967) *Organizations in Action*, subsequent generations have an opportunity to revisit - and reinterpret - this classic. The book is invaluable in understanding the history of modern organization theory" (Hargadon, 2003: 498); "rereading *Organizations in Action* after several years reminds me that much of North American organization theory consists of footnotes to James D. Thompson. Subsequent authors tested, extended, or disagreed with Thompson, but it is startling just how much of what we now think of as organization theory can be traced to this book" (Davis, 2003: 502), "*Organizations in Action* still merits its place on reading lists for comprehensive exams, and it repays a re-reading even for grizzled veterans of the field. In addition to providing a genealogy of influential ideas, it still has useful hypotheses to be tested" (Davis, 2003: 504); "to 'do' Thompson is to reaffirm our joint commitment to better understand uncertainty, paradoxical demands, managing as mediating between open and closed systems, and the enduring value of well-thought-out 2 x 2 matrices" (Weick, 2003: 508).

Fifty years after the first edition, despite of public celebrations and the number of citations in current scientific literature, it is interesting to reflect on the relevance of *Organizations in Action* within the current organizational discussion and to assess its impact on university education.

In addition, if we refer to Davis' discussion (2003: 503), "Stinchcombe (1982) wrote in 'Should Sociologists Forget Their Mothers and Fathers?' that

there are six reasons to read the classics: as examples of excellence that we can emulate; as developmental tasks to make minds more complex (in particular, the minds of graduate students); as short-hand for identifying one's tradition in the first paragraph of a paper; to better understand the genealogy of fundamental ideas in a field; as a ritual function to bind together the profession and give it a sense of shared history; and as a source of hypotheses that have not yet been explored. While *Organizations in Action* could be read for any of these reasons, I focus on the last", we should discuss the value of Thompson's theory in current organizational debate.

Thompson's legacy in contemporary literature: a review of academic books

What is the relevance of *Organizations in Action* in the current organizational debate and in academic education? And how Thompson's theory is interpreted, explained and used?

In order to understand the present relevance of Thompson's theory in university education, we have identified the most widely diffused and adopted handbooks, theoretical essays, anthologies and collections of readings and we analyzed whether and how each of them refers to *Organizations in Action*. Subsequently, we have analyzed which parts of *Organizations in Action* are cited by the selected literature and how these citations and the related discussions are orthodox with respect to the original text.

Furthermore, since the theories of the greatest writers on organization (e.g. Weber, Taylor, Barnard, and, at least in part, Simon) are often described in partial ways, if not misrepresented, by the mainstream academic books, it is interesting to investigate whether Thompson is actually sharing the same fate. In other words, we will try to understand whether the spirit and the meanings of *Organizations in Action* are genuinely represented by our academic books.

Methodology

We selected the relevant literature by searching scientific search engines, Google Scholar, and also Google.com, Amazon.com, and Amazon.co.uk. We

searched for specific keywords (in various “and” and “or” combinations): handbook, organizational behavior, organizational design, organization theory. Furthermore, we selected theoretical books that have been written or updated after 1967 and are widely adopted (in whole or in part) in academic courses (in particular: Aldrich, 1979; Hannan, Freeman, 1989; March, 1988; Mintzberg, 1983; Perrow, 1986; Pfeffer, Salancik, 2003; Powell, DiMaggio, 1991; Simon, 1997; Weick, 1979; 1995; 2009; Williamson, 1985). As we performed our search only with reference to books aimed at the international debate, we focused on books written in English (both American and British English). We identified 102 books.

To check the relevance of this sample, we accessed syllabi from a set of randomly selected first and second level university courses (from US and European universities) with denominations related to Organizational behavior, Organizational design, and Organization theory. We then analyzed the reference lists published on the syllabi in order to verify that the cited books were on our list.

Evidently, our selection method is not based on techniques of statistical sampling and is exposed to biases, however, according to our inductive analysis, our list contains the most diffused literature, *i.e.* the books upon which future managers and future scholars base their learning processes. Hence, the books we selected appears to be consistent with our needs and purpose.

Then, we performed a careful analysis of the texts of each of the 102 books: first of all, we looked for citations to *Organizations in Action*. If citations were present, we read the corresponding part of the text and we took notes about how Thompson's theory was described. Finally, we gathered together the notes with respect to the specific topics treated and we tried to highlight trends and patterns.

Some evidence

Out of the 102 books analyzed, 60 deal more or less widely with Thompson's theory. This is an important evidence since it highlights the vitality

of the theory; anyway, as we will see in the following paragraph, a careful analysis of the citations testifies some critical issues. Table 1, in Appendix, shows the results in detail.

In aggregate terms, evidence from organizational behavior books seems very critical: in fact, 60% of them do not even cite Thompson. This situation is particularly problematic if we consider the growing popularity of the OB perspective in university courses, at the expense of the most traditional organizational design and organization theory courses. Therefore, the potential impact of this loss of interest is particularly dangerous due to the growing adoption of such literature.

Another general evidence is related to the great concentration of citations on very specific parts of *Organizations in Action*: uncertainty and tension between closed- and open-system theories, technology, interdependencies and coordination. These topics are all presented on the first part of the *Organizations in Action*, which is commonly considered "structuralist". If this is how Thompson is depicted by mainstream books, then it is quite normal that scholars of Organizational Behavior stay away from this author.

In the next paragraph, we will investigate, topic by topic, how Thompson's theory is cited and described.

Thompson through the lens of his successors

In the following, we discuss the most relevant topics of *Organizations in Action*, as represented by the literature we analyzed: the relationship between Thompson and contingency theory, the concept of technology, the typology of interdependence and coordination, and the tension between open- and closed-system views of the organization. Finally, we present the theoretical criticism to Thompson's theory, as emerging in the literature.

A founding father of contingency theory?

Before focusing on substantive topics, it is necessary to deal with a question that (implicitly) permeates all the contributions analyzed: to what

theoretical perspective Thompson belongs to? In general, the answer is unambiguous, institutionalized and not a matter of discussion: "Although he did not use the term, Thompson can be thought as one of the founding fathers of contingency theory. (...) Thompson emphasized that organizational structure and dynamics was heavily dependent upon the imperatives of technology, goals, environmental pressures, and problems of coordination" (Zald, 2003: ix). Perrow (1986: 178) supports this interpretation: "contingency theory (the 'technological school') was gathering strength and clarity in the early 1960s and hit with solid force in 1967 with three similar formulations by James Thompson, Paul Lawrence and Jay Lorsch, and my own piece".

Even Simon (1997), in his commentaries on the fourth edition of his masterpiece *Administrative Behavior*, considers Thompson as a champion of contingency theory.

Actually, concerning this topic, the only element of uncertainty would be whether to place Thompson among the authors who identify a technological determinism (*i.e.* technology determines organizational configurations) or among those who refer to the general environment as the main contingency variable.

According to Abell (2006: 104), "Thompson pointed to the interdependence between stages in the production process as a 'determining' factor". Cunliffe (2008: 44) highlights that "the technological imperative is evident in the work of three influential studies of technology done by Joan Woodward (1965) James Thompson (1967) and Charles Perrow (1967)", while Donaldson (1996: 2) adds that "Woodward (1965) and Thompson (1967) showed that the internal technology of the organization is a situational factor that determines the required organizational structure".

This interpretation is also supported by Miner (2006: 195); "in its concern with technological variables (usually manufacturing technology) it (the work of Thompson) is related to these theories that emphasize the technological imperative and thus the causal impact of technology on process and structure"; by Clegg *et al.* (1996: 60): "Thompson (1967) further argued that the

environment directly shaped the organizational structure, with different parts of the organizational structure being specialized to conform to the requirements of different parts of the environment"; and by Tosi (1984: 82): "according to Thompson, each organization will have a unique set of input and output relationships depending on the environment which it encounters and operates within".

Some scholars (e.g. Burton *et al.*, 2008; Christensen *et al.*, 2007; Clegg, 1990; Grandori, 2001; Miles, Snow, 2003; Mintzberg, 1983; Pugh, Hickson, 2007) also refer to the design of boundary-spanning units (Chapter 4 of *Organizations in Action*) for connecting Thompson's theory to the concept of differentiation which is typical of contingency theories. However, we cannot disregard the fact that Thompson applies this sort of differentiation just and only to boundary-spanning units, not to the whole organization.

Other scholars seem dubious about the relationship between Thompson and contingency theory. Poole and Van de Ven (2004: 119) place Thompson within the strategic choice perspective: "The strategic-choice view argues that firms have the ability to reshape their environment rather than simply being powerless recipients of environmental forces (Child, 1972; 1977; Miles and Snow, 1978; 1994; Thompson, 1967)". Miles and Snow (2003: 260-261) state that "following Thompson (1967), other theorists have recently disagreed with the view that organizational characteristics are fully preordinate by technological considerations or environmental conditions. [...] They have emphasized instead the importance of the decision makers who serve as the link between the organization and its environment. Although this neocontingency perspective has not been developed fully, it clearly rejects the environmental determinism implicit in most contingency theories of organization". Finally, Farazmand (2002: 31) contends that "to some theorists such as Katz and Kahn (1966; 1978), environment determines organizational structure and actions, while others like Thompson (1967) argue in favor of strategies that organizations should use to influence and change their environments to suit their goals".

Indeed, a terminology issue is apparent. In contingency theory, “a contingency is any variable that moderates the effect of an organizational characteristic on organizational performance” (Donaldson, 2001: 7). However, Thompson defines contingency according to a different perspective: “Some of the factors involved in organizational action become constraints, for some meaningful period of time they are not variables but fixed conditions to which the organization must adapt. Some of the factors become contingencies, which may or may not vary, but are not subject to arbitrary control by the organization. Organizational rationality therefore is some result of (a) constraints which the organization must face, (b) contingencies which the organization must meet, and (c) variables which the organization can control” (Thompson, 1967: 24).

Hence, according to Thompson, contingencies are the concrete expression of the uncertainty that threatens the organizational action. And, as we will see in the next paragraphs, organization has to cope with, limit, and (possibly) avoid contingencies in order to achieve a (bounded) rationality. In Thompson's view, contingencies are to organizational action what kryptonite is to Superman.

On the opposite, according to contingency theory, contingencies should be identified, recognized and accepted by the organization in order to achieve efficiency; this does not mean in any way the need for implementing strategies for limiting or avoiding contingencies the organization is submitted to: organization must adapt to contingencies.

Despite the adoption of the same term, semantics are completely different and not compatible.

Finally, it is worth noting that Thompson (1967: 1-2) clearly expresses its dissatisfaction with contingency theories: “(...) those organizations with similar technological and environmental problems should exhibit similar behavior; patterns should appear. But if our thesis is fruitful, we should also find that patterned variations in problems posed by technologies and environments result in systematic differences in organizational action”.

Next paragraphs will provide additional evidence that challenge the mainstream view of Thompson as one of the fathers of contingency theory.

Technology

Technology is one of the most cited topics of Thompson's theory and the discussion of the three varieties of technology appears to be one of the most critical elements for the interpretation of this author. Actually, the literature analyzed represents Thompson's variety as a typology or as a categorization (e.g. Cunliffe, 2008; Hatch, Cunliffe, 2013; Jones, 2013; Miles, Snow, 2003; Miner, 2006; Organ, Bateman, 1986; Schermeron *et al.*, 2010; Tosi, 1984; Wagner III, Hollenbeck, 2010): "Thompson claimed that all organizations could be classified into one of three technological categories: long-linked, mediating, and intensive" (Griffin, Moorhead, 2014: 464-465)

This clearly contrasts with the original text of Thompson, who writes (1967: 15): "A complete but simple typology of technologies which has found order in this variety would be quite helpful. Typologies are available for industrial production (Woodward, 1965) and for mental therapy (Hawkes, 1962) but are not general enough to deal with the range of technologies found in complex organizations. Lacking such a typology, we will simply identify three varieties which are (a) widespread in modern society and (b) sufficiently different to illustrate the propositions we wish to develop".

Thompson identifies a variety of technology, not a typology, and he clearly writes this. The difference is crucial since while a variety can be integrated and enlarged when new cases become evident, a typology must be exhaustive (it has to exhaust all possibilities) and its types must be mutually exclusive (non-overlapping).

In addition, a further evidence that Thompson defines technology in terms of variety comes from Chapter 8 (Thompson, 1967: 114-115), when he introduces a fourth variety: managerial technology (none of the books analyzed cite this fourth variety).

Some authors seem to be willing to (implicitly) overcome this problem by referring to a paper Thompson wrote with Bates (Thompson, Bates, 1957): in that paper, in fact, the two authors discuss the types of technology. The fact that in *Organizations in Action*, ten years after, Thompson has presented the technology in the form of variety (denying explicitly that it is a typology) cannot and should not go unnoticed. Most importantly, the reference to the paper by Thompson and Bates should be used very carefully, after reading two contributions written by two Thompson colleagues after his death. The first contribution highlights how Thompson reconsidered and modified his earlier writings in order to produce *Organizations in Action*: “The book took about 10 years I believe. During this time many of the brilliant pieces were created painstakingly as journal articles, though few if any appeared in the book in their original form. That was Jim – always seeking criticism and always perfecting earlier formulations as he advanced in carefully selected directions” (Demerath, 1974: 1). The second contribution specifies that, in Thompson’s view, *Organizations in Action* is to be considered as the sum of his theory on organizational action, the point of arrival of a long research activity: “One critical shift did occur in Jim’s career while at Indiana. Until that time, Jim profitably had devoted his research and writing almost exclusively to organizational phenomena. That work culminated in his most complete and original statement, *Organizations in Action*. [...] Having delivered that terse but rich work, and although he did write a few things later, he felt he had said about all he had to say about organizations” (Van Houten, 1974: 4).

There are therefore no reasons or *escamotage* to refer to Thompson’s technologies in terms of typology. Nevertheless, the mantra being conveyed by the literature is exactly that.

On the other hand, we cannot overlook problems related to the definition of technology. Most of the books analyzed do not define technology, they implicitly let us think to a reified conception (technology as system of techniques and tools).

Scott (2003b: 199-200) proposes an intermediate, reinterpreted definition: "Following James D. Thompson (1967), we refer to the arrangements developed to perform these central tasks - including the skills of personnel employed to carry them out - as the core technology of the organization.

Baligh (2006: 103) falls into the typology but, at least, proposes a non-reified definition of technology "Thompson's technologies are, in fact, decision processes made up of connected rule mappings, and connected transformations"

Actually, on Chapter 2, Rationality in organizations, Thompson defines technology as "beliefs about cause/effect relationships", as technical rationality (Thompson, 1967: 14). As Thompson points out (*ibid.*: 18), "technical rationality, as a system of cause/effect relationships which lead to a desired result, is an abstraction"; actually, he does not reify the concept of technology (as contingency theory scholars usually do).

Finally, according to Thompson, organizational action decides about both which technology to adopt, when to change it and how: "Questions of which technology to retain, which to expel, and which to adopt may not be daily matters for any complex organization, but they are potential problems for every organization in a modern society, and we see no reason to believe that they get solved spontaneously or via the closed logic of the rational model" (*ibid.*: 145)

Interdependence and coordination

The typology of interdependence is, together with technology, the most cited in the literature analyzed. Thompson introduces the typology of interdependence connected with a typology of coordination, in Chapter 5, Technology and structure. In this chapter, Thompson (*ibid.*: 54) states that "an organization is composed of interdependent parts" and "if structure affords numerous spheres of bounded rationality, it must also facilitate the coordinated action of those interdependent elements".

With respect to interdependence, the greatest part of citations links the typology of interdependence with the “typology” of technology: for example, Schermeron *et al.* (2010: 424) note that “James D. Thompson classified technologies based on the degree to which the technology could be specified and the degree of interdependence among the work activities with categories called intensive, mediating, and long-linked”, while Daft (2010: 277), in his popular handbook, notes that “Thompson proposed that pooled interdependence would exist in firms with what he called a mediating technology”.

This interpretation is not new, if immediately after the publication of *Organizations in Action*, Litwak (1968: 412) wrote: “He then shifts his analysis to the internal structure of the organization, pointing out that their technologies can also be classified in terms of the type of interdependence - pooled, sequential, and reciprocal”.

Other authors (*e.g.* Aldrich, 1979; Ancona *et al.*, 2009; Burton *et al.*, 2011; Colquitt *et al.*, 2015; Gay, Vikkelsø, 2017; George, Jones, 2012; Grote, 2009; Jones, 2013; Locke, 2009; Morgan, 2006; Tosi, 1984; Weick, 2009) extend this interpretation by referring to the concept of “task interdependence”, instead of using the term “interdependence”.

It is interesting to note that the concept of task interdependence finds its roots in classic socio-technical theory (Emery, Trist, 1960; Trist, Bamfort, 1951), and that, in the whole text of *Organizations in Action*, Thompson never use this term. Furthermore, in the whole Chapter 5, Thompson never cite the three varieties of technologies described in Chapter 2. In addition, “The types of interdependence form a Guttman-type scale” (Thompson, 1967: 55). This is never true for the variety of technologies.

Hatch and Cunliffe (2013: 148) clearly illustrate the consequence of linking types of technology to types of interdependence: “Following Woodward and Perrow’s emphasis on variability in the routineness of work, Thompson recognized that work processes associated with a technology vary in the extent to which they are interrelated. He called this variable task

interdependence to emphasize the issue of dependence on others for the accomplishment of tasks. Thompson related the task interdependence created by technology to different possible coordination mechanisms that could be designed into an organization's social structure. His work on task interdependence identified links between different forms of coordination and the mediating, long-linked, and intensive technologies framed by his typology".

Jones (2013: 277-278) considers task interdependence as a core concept of Thompson's perspective: "another view of technology, developed by James D. Thompson, focuses on the way in which task interdependence, the method uses to relate or sequence different tasks to one another, affects an organization's technology and structure".

As a matter of fact, contemporary literature transforms the variety of technologies into a typology, then connects this typology to the typology of interdependence and thus to the coordination types. Finally, since coordination complexity drives the structuration processes, Thompson's technological determinism becomes evident.

We would expect a lot of criticism for this approach, which is so unorthodox when compared to the text of Thompson. However, this is not the case. Some authors expressed their dissatisfaction with this interpretation, but they do not actually try to overcome it.

For instance, Grandori (2001: 440) recognize that Thompson did not explicitly connect technology and interdependence: "Thompson (1967) proposed two typologies that, although overlapping, are not clearly and explicitly linked: a typology of "technical systems" (long-linked, intensive, and intermediary technologies) and a typology of situations of interdependence: pooled, sequential and reciprocal". Perrow (1976: 719) emphasizes some problems when connecting pooled interdependence with mediating technology, but he did not go any further: "I have trouble with pooled interdependence and its counterpart, the mediating technology. Sequential interdependence and long-linked technologies are analogues - mechanical, repetitive, standardized, centralized, characterized by mass production.

Intensive interdependence and intensive technology are analogues - feedback, mutual adjustment, and non hierarchical. It is the ancient distinction of mechanistic and organic, routine and non routine, or in a different context, what he refers to as computational and inspirational decision strategies. But what should we do with pooled interdependence and mediating technologies? Pooled interdependence is evolutionarily prior to sequential and intensive interdependence, but there is no evolution from mediating technologies to long-linked technologies, though there is one from the latter to intensive technologies. [...] Actually, no contingency theorist, myself included, has done more than reproduce the familiar dichotomy of nonroutine and routine, except Joan Woodward, who did not stop with a unit-mass dichotomy, but added process. Her tri-part distinction still lies fallow, and no one seems to know what to do with it. Thompson's attempt to have three categories of technologies and of interdependence is in marked contrast to his reliance upon two-by-two classification schemes -there are no less than seven of these in this volume - and I do not think he succeeded. He might have done better by adding two more four-fold tables based on simple dichotomies: mechanistic-organic and production-service for one, and folk-urban and production-service for the other. But I confess I have lost my enchantment with this device".

Among the books analyzed, only Galbraith (2014: 10) recognizes that interdependence is not fully determined by technology, but it is a consequence of organizational decision-making processes: "Interdependence is a variable that can be changed and can lead to different amounts of coordination".

As for the discussion on the typology of coordination, it generally follows that of interdependence and it act as a bridge towards the process of departmentalization, which usually concludes with Thompson's discussion in many books. Some authors (*e.g.* Colquitt *et al.*, 2015; Mintzber, 1983; Grote, 2009) focus on Thompson's typology and then add to it additional types of coordination. Doubts remain about the typology thus obtained, especially with respect to the non-overlapping issue.

Open- and closed-systems: choice or compromise?

In the literature we analyzed, the adhesion of Thompson to the open-system perspective is undisputed.

Scholars generally agree on the fact Thompson considers the organization exposed to uncertainty and then an open system (*e.g.* Barling, Cooper, 2008; Clegg, 2010; Grote, 2009; Pfeffer, 1997; Scott, 2003b; Shafritz, Ott, 2010); Tompkins (2005: 244) goes further, stating that: "James D. Thompson's *Organizations in Action* also helped establish the dominance of the open systems perspective in the late 1960s".

In addition, our analysis shows that scholars agree on the fact that Thompson tries to find a synthesis between the organizational open system with its need for rationality: "Thompson indicates that the Simon-March-Cyert stream of study provides a way of overcoming the conflict between the two approaches. However, he also feels that even their approach is lacking in that it tends to omit some of the useful information from studies utilizing the older approaches. Consequently, Thompson attempts a synthesis of the closed and open system approach in his treatment of organizational behavior" (Tosi, 1984: 80). This synthesis is allowed, according to this interpretation, by the adoption of Parson's three categories of responsibility and control, as detailed by Scott (2003b: 112): "Thus, the problem that Thompson and the contingency theorists set for themselves may be stated like this: Given that an organization is open to the uncertainties of its environment, how can it function as a rational system? As hinted at in our review of Thompson's levels model, his principal answer to this question is that it can do so by creating some closed system compartments in critical parts of its structure".

However, this mainstream interpretation clashes with the methodological discussion proposed by Thompson, in particular on Chapter 1: "A serious and sustained elaboration of Barnard's work (Simon, 1957; March, Simon, 1958; Cyert, March, 1963) has produced a newer tradition which evades the closed- versus open-system dilemma" (Thompson, 1967: 8). In addition, Thompson refers to the organization as a problem-facing and problem-solving

phenomenon, adheres to Simon's theory of bounded rationality and clearly states: "These are highly significant notions, and it will become apparent that this book seeks to extend this newer tradition" (*ibid.*: 9).

Thompson also stresses his methodological posture in the final part of the book: "If complex organizations were simply natural systems, we might expect spontaneous processes to handle their problems. If complex organization were simply rational-model machines, they would require designers to initiate them, but their operation thereafter would be automatic. It is because the organization is not simply either, we suggest, that administration emerges as an identifiable and important process in modern societies" (*ibid.*: 144-145).

As a matter of fact, Thompson's research method is aimed at evading both the choice and the compromise between open- and closed-system views of the organization; his theory definitely embraces the "newer tradition" and focuses on organizational coping with uncertainty: "a newer tradition enables us to conceive of the organization as an open system, indeterminate and faced with uncertainty, but subject to criteria of rationality and hence needing certainty" (*ibid.*: 13), "Uncertainty appears as the fundamental problem for complex organizations, and coping with uncertainty, as the essence of the administrative process" (*ibid.*: 159).

Even the reference to Parsons' three levels of responsibility and control is to be considered not as an attempt to synthesize open- and closed- problems within an actual organization, but as analytical levels of organizational action (Maggi, 1988/1990: 10-11).

Critiques to Thompson's theory

The fourth cover of the 2003 paperback edition of *Organizations in Action* states that "the book successfully extends the scientific base upon which any emerging administrative theory should rest". However, many critiques focus on the methodological / scientific base of *Organizations in Action*.

In fact, besides its technological determinism (which we already confuted above), Thompson's theory is criticized because of its normative

approach, the non-scientific method, and the limited practical applicability. In addition, with respect to his theory on power-dependence relationships with environment, Thompson is considered (Hult, 2011; Miner, 2006; Poole, Van de Ven, 2004; Schoonhoven, Dobbin, 2010; Scott, 2003b) as a forerunner of resource-dependence theory (which is deemed to have developed a much more complete description of these phenomena).

In terms of methodology, "Thompson's primary approach to theory construction was the conceptual inventory - a series of parallel propositions, usually stated in somewhat abstract terms, conceptually derived rather than drawn from an extensive perusal of existing research. [...] The theoretical variables are not tightly interrelated logically, however, the propositions do not derive from a common set of postulates and assumptions, as it is the case with the most rigorous deductive theories. Rather, sets of propositions are developed to deal with various areas of major concern in the study of organizations" (Miner, 2006: 196).

In addition, Thompson's theory is considered "normative", for example, according to Perrow (1976: 720), "he was concerned not only with understanding them, but with providing guidelines to make them more effective". Miner (2006: 208) shares the same point of view - "To the extent organizations wish to be rational (under norms of rationality), Thompson's theory is normative and explains what to do in a wide range of areas to make areas to make an organization more effective" - but expresses also another criticism: "Potentially the propositions could be converted into guidelines for practice, but Thompson did not do that and the abstractness of the presentation in most cases would make it very difficult for someone else to do so" (Miner, 2006: 211), Furthermore, the book "is a striking example of how the conviction that knowledge must accumulate leads to an attempt at a closure of an intellectual field which, if taken seriously, could put an end to the discipline. [...] If Thompson were to be taken literally, there would be no need for organization theory after him" (Tsoukas, Knudsen, 2003: 241).

In general, the empirical applicability of *Organizations in Action* is considered very limited: "Thompson does not attempt to test his formulations empirically" (Tosi, 1984: 79). According to Miner (2006: 208), the problem is that "James Thompson was not a consultant to organizations [...], and he did not implement his ideas to determine how they worked...".

Even the scientific style of the book is contested: "Thompson did not seem to be eager to converse; his aim was to summarize all previous conversations" (Tsoukas, Knudsen, 2003: 242), in his text "the verbs remain in the gnomic present ('organizations tend to', 'organizations seek to identify'), that is, the tense used to express a general truth without implication of time [...] In brief, gnomic utterances are the opposite of narrative ones: they are situated neither in place nor in time. Indeed, the land and the epoch of Thompson's stories is called Under Norms of Rationality" (*ibid.*: 243), and finally "life cycle theories, organic system theories, and evolutionary metaphors abound in organization theory. The man who used them with greatest skill created a style that hardly can be called scientific" (*ibid.*: 244).

With respect to the alleged normative approach, it is worth noting that, in the whole book, Thompson never proposes any efficient behavior to be applied to achieve organizational goals. He just refers to "patterned variations" that are applied by organizational action while seeking to be boundedly rational. In other words, the organization, in its quest for limiting the contingencies to which it is exposed, usually behaves according to specific patterns; it is not a universal rule, it is just a behavioral pattern. This is also the reason for using the gnomic present.

Overall, it is better to let Thompson (1967: 163) respond to methodological critiques: "hopefully our propositions seem plausible and important, but it is unlikely that many will be treated as hypotheses for extensive testing, for in the process of necessary conceptual refinement, more specific and subtle hypotheses will be generated. Our hope and intention has not been to state eternal truths but to focus theoretical and empirical attention on organizational action".

Discussion

Our analysis shows a relevant concentration of citations on Chapter 1, 2, 5 and 6, however *Organizations in Action* is much more than this. Unfortunately, according to the usual pattern of recursive citations, other parts of the theory are unlikely to be re-discovered and re-discussed.

In the following, we present a synthetic inventory of concepts and topics that can be extremely useful in the current organizational debate.

First of all, contemporary literature omits the relevance of bounded rationality in the construction of Thompson's theory, even Simon, in his 1997 commentary to *Administrative Behavior*, forget to mention Thompson among the scholars who have developed his theory. All over the text, in fact, Thompson highlights the limits to the rationality of decision-making processes. We could affirm that bounded rationality is a cornerstone of organizational action.

Chapter 3, "Domains of organized action", contains other neglected but fundamental concepts which, *inter alia*, mark the difference between Thompson's theory and contingency theory. In Chapter 3, Thompson (1967: 25-29) states that the organization defines its "domain", *i.e.* the range of products, the target population and the additional services it is going to supply. The decision about what and how to do something implies the identification of the relevant technologies (as well as the identification of the technologies the organization is willing to control and the technologies it is going to "buy" outside its boundaries). Given the bounded rationality of human decision-making processes, organizational action is never able to preside over the entire matrix of technologies related to its domain. Therefore, definition of the domain necessarily involves the development of dependencies from other subjects (*i.e.* the subjects who preside over the technologies which are relevant for the organization but not managed by it). Then, Thompson introduces the concept of task environment as the set of entities with which the organizational action finds itself in conditions of interdependence (*e.g.* customers, suppliers, competitors for markets and resources, regulatory groups). The choice of domain is therefore an intentional act, and the task environment stems from

that decision. This conception of the environment as determined by organizational choices marks the difference between Thompson's theory and theories which consider the environment as an exogenous and pre-existing factor imposing the organizational adaptation. In any case, the task environment still has a fundamental importance because, on the one hand, it has to express a consensus (even implicitly) about the domain claimed by the organization and, on the other hand, because it is in conditions of interdependence with such organization. The consensus on the domain is essential for the actual development of organizational action. It expresses a set of expectations about what the organization will or will not do and is reflected in the agreement expressed by the subjects to enter into relationships with the organization. However, when an element of the task environment expresses the consensus on the domain claimed by the focal organization, this implies a change in its own domain (in analytical terms, the element of the task environment changes its domain to embrace the actions requested by the focal organization); so the element of the task environment, right through its consensus, develops dependence on the focal organization. A situation of mutual dependence (interdependence) is then established, with the organization and the elements of the task environment trying to use their power to impose constraints and contingencies to each other and simultaneously trying to reduce their exposure to the contingencies posed by the other.

Chapter 7, "Assessment of organization", presents a realistic theory for evaluating both the organization and its components. In this chapter, Thompson gives life to both the evaluator and the object of the evaluation. Both of them operate under conditions of bounded rationality; the evaluator develops strategies for assessing in terms of objective efficiency, while the object of the evaluation tries to proactively adapt and show good performance on the measures evaluated by the evaluator.

The Second Part of the book is almost completely disregarded by contemporary books. Hence, valuable bits of theory seem to be destined to

oblivion, while they could be extremely meaningful in particular with respect to topics related to organizational behavior.

We miss citations to Chapter 8, "The variable human", which explains the reasons why people are at the same time resources and problems: they are resources since they can, through their decision-making processes, manage, meet and overcome contingencies; they are problems since, in order to take decisions, they need freedom so their behavior becomes unforeseeable (and a possible source of contingencies). Furthermore, in Chapter 8, Thompson presents (basing on previous work by Barnard and Simon) his process-based theory of inducements and contributions and explains why people accept to work for the organization and why the organization keeps its staff.

In Chapter 9, "Discretion and its exercise", Thompson proposes a rich (actually richer than the one adopted by mainstream theories) conceptualization of the notion of discretion and explains how the organization can foster its actual exercise. In particular, this piece of theory would be of great benefit for scholars interested in the study of employee engagement.

Chapter 10, "The control of complex organizations", sheds light on the organizational decision-making processes and on the strategies for controlling, or at least influencing, them. This chapter strongly relies on Simon's theory of bounded rationality and considers the capability to influence decision premises in terms of goals and technology as the key variable driving control capabilities.

Finally, Chapter 11, "The administrative process", summarizes the discussion and introduces the process of co-alignment (of decision related to domain and task environment, decision related to technology, and decision related to the structuration process) as the basic administrative function.

As a matter of fact, it is quite evident that academic handbooks, as any other book, instead of presenting Thompson's theory, actually convey the points of view and the interpretations of their authors. Then, mistakes and misrepresentations are not to be considered as accidental, on the contrary they are intentional and instrumental to the theory of the authors. Overall, basing on the evidences emerging from our analysis, the references to Thompson's theory

are generally influenced by the mainstream interpretation grounded on contingency theory. Hopefully, our discussion has shown that a different interpretation, more respectful of Thompson's writings, is possible, and that this interpretation could enrich the current organizational debate.

Appendix

Table 1. Thompson's theory in academic books

Authors / Editors	Year	Title	References to Thompson's theory
Abell	2006	Organisation theory: an interdisciplinary approach	Technology, Interdependence, Structure
Aldrich	1979	Organizations and environments	Open system, Boundary spanning units, Interdependence, Coordination
Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, Westney	2009	Managing for the future: organizational behavior & processes	Interdependence, Coordination
Anderson, Ones, Sinangil, Viswesvaran	2001	Handbook of industrial, work and organizational psychology - Volume 2	Technology, Contingency theory
Baligh	2006	Organization structures: theory and design, analysis and prescription	Technology, Interdependence
Barling, Cooper	2008	The Sage handbook of organizational behavior. Volume I	Uncertainty
Böhm	2006	Repositioning organization theory: impossibilities and strategies	---
Brooks	2006	Organisational behaviour: individuals, groups, and organisation	---
Burton, Eriksen, Hakonsson, Knudsen, Snow	2008	Designing organizations: 21st century approaches	Boundary spanning units
Burton, Obel, DeSanctis	2011	Organizational design: a step-by-step approach	Interdependence, Coordination
Champoux	2010	Organizational behavior: integrating individuals, groups, and organizations	---
Child	1984	Organization: a guide to problems and practice	Coordination
Christensen, Lægveid, Roness, Røvik	2007	Organization theory and public sector. Instrument culture and myth	Boundary-spanning units, Control strategies
Clegg	1990	Modern organizations: organization studies in the postmodern world	Open system, Uncertainty
Clegg	2010	Sage directions in organization studies. Volume I	Uncertainty, Open system

Clegg, Hardy	1999	Studying organization: theory and method	Uncertainty, Protection technical core
Clegg, Hardy, Nord	1996	Handbook of organization studies	Uncertainty, Protection technical core
Colquitt, Lepine, Wesson	2015	Organizational behavior: improving performance and commitment in the workplace	Interdependence, Coordination
Cunliffe	2008	Organization theory	Technology, Interdependence, Coordination
Daft	2010	Organization theory and design	Technology, Interdependence, Coordination
Dinitzen, Jensen	2010	Organisational theory - a practical approach	---
Donaldson	1996	For positivist organization theory	Technology, Coordination
DuBrin	1978	Fundamentals of organizational behavior: an applied perspective	---
Farazmand	2002	Modern organizations. Theory and practice	Open system
Galbraith	2014	Designing organizations	Interdependence, Coordination, Structure
Gallos	2006	Organizational development	---
Gay, Vikkelsø	2017	For formal organizations. The past in the present and future of organization theory	Interdependence, Methodology
George, Jones	2012	Understanding and managing organizational behavior	Interdependence
Gibbons, Roberts	2013	The handbook of organizational economics	Coordination
Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly, Konopaske	2009	Organizations. Behavior, structure, processes	Minor citation
Golembiewski	2001	Handbook of organizational behavior	Contingency theory, Interdependence, Uncertainty
Grandori	2001	Organization and economic behavior	Methodology, Coordination
Grey, Willmott	2005	Critical management studies - A reader	---
Griffin, Moorhead	2014	Organizational behavior: managing people and organizations	Technology, Structure
Grote	2009	Management of uncertainty. Theory and application in the design of systems and organizations	Uncertainty, Parsons' levels, Interdependence,
Hannan, Freeman	1989	Organizational ecology	Task Environment, Technology, Protection technical core
Hassard	1993	Sociology and organization theory. Positivism, paradigms and	---

		postmodernity	
Hatch, Cunliffe	2013	Organization theory. Modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives	Technology, Interdependence, Coordination
Hellriegel, Slocum	2011	Organizational behavior	---
Hitt, Miller, Colella	2011	Organizational behavior	Minor citation
Hodgkinson, Starbuck	2008	The Oxford handbook of organizational decision making	Control strategies
Hult	2011	Boundary-spanning marketing organization: a theory and insights from 31 organization theories	Connection with resource-dependence theory
Ivancevich, Konopaske, Matteson	2014	Organizational behavior and management	Interdependence
Jackson, Carter	2007	Rethinking organisational behaviour: a poststructuralist framework	---
Jones	2013	Organizational theory, design, and change	Technology, Interdependence
Kinicki, Fugate	2014	Organizational behavior: a practical, problem-solving approach	---
Kitchin	2010	An introduction to organisational behaviour for managers and engineers	---
Kreitner, Kinicki	2013	Organizational behavior	---
Laudon, Laudon	2012	Management information systems: managing the digital firm	---
Linsetead	2004	Organization theory and postmodern thought	---
Locke	2009	Handbook of principles of organizational behavior	Interdependence, Coordination
Lussato	1976	A critical introduction to organization theory	---
Luthans	2011	Organizational behavior: an evidence-based approach	---
Lynch, Cruise	2006	Handbook of organizational theory and management: the philosophical approach	Coordination, Protection technical core
March	1988	Decisions and organizations	Technology, Assessment
McAuley, Duberley, Johnson	2007	Organizational theory. Challenges and perspectives	---
McShane, Von Glinow	2010	Organizational behavior: emerging knowledge and practice for real world	---
Miles	2012	Management and organization theory	Interdependence, Structure
Miles	2014	New directions in management and organization theory	Protection technical core
Miles, Snow	2003	Organizational strategy, structure, and process	Task environment, Technology
Miner	2006	Organizational behavior 2: essential theories of process and structure	Whole chapter dedicated to Thompson's theory

Mintzberg	1983	Structure in fives	Interdependence, Coordination, Structure
Morgan	2006	Images of organization	Minor citation
Mullins	2010	Management and organisational behaviour	---
Mumford	2012	Handbook of organizational creativity	---
Nelson, Cooper	2007	Positive organizational behavior. Accentuating the positive at work	---
Newstrom	2011	Organizational behavior. Human behavior at work	---
Nicholson	1998	The Blackwell encyclopedic dictionary of organizational behavior	Technology, Interdependence, Coordination, Boundary-spanning units, Dominant coalition
Organ, Bateman	1986	Organizational behavior. An applied psychological approach	Technology, Interdependence, Structure, Boundary-spanning units
Pålshaugen	1998	The end of organization theory? Language as a tool in action research and organizational development	---
Patel	2006	Organization and systems design	---
Pawar	2009	Theory building for hypothesis specification in organization studies	---
Perrow	1986	Complex organizations. A critical essay	Contingency theory
Pfeffer, Salancik	2003	The external control of organizations	Task environment, Power-dependence
Pfeffer	1997	New directions for organization theory	Control strategies
Picot, Reichwald, Wigand	2008	Information, organization and management	---
Poole, Van de Ven	2004	Handbook of organizational change and innovation	Connection with resource-dependence theory, Structure
Powell, DiMaggio	1991	The new institutionalism in organizational analysis	Technology
Pugh	2007	Organization theory: selected classic readings	---
Pugh, Hickson	2007	Great writers on organizations	Technology, Interdependence, Coordination, Assessment, Boundary-spanning units
Punnett	2015	International perspectives on organizational behavior and human resource management	---
Robbins, Judge	2014	Essentials of organizational behavior	---
Robbins, Judge	2017	Organizational behavior	---
Schermerhorn,	2010	Organizational behavior	Technology,

Hunt, Osborn, Uhl-Bien			Interdependence, Coordination, Dominant coalition
Schoonhoven, Dobbin	2010	Stanford's organization theory renaissance, 1970-2000	Uncertainty, Connection with resource-dependence theory,
Scott	2003	Organizations: rational, natural, and open systems	Open/closed systems, Parsons' levels, Domain, Task environment
Shafritz, Ott	2001	Classics of organization theory	Open system, Uncertainty, Technology, Dominant coalition, Chapter 1 and 2 reproduced
Simon	1997	Administrative behavior	Contingency theory
Stanford	2007	A guide to organisation design	---
Stroh, Northcraft, Neale	2002	Organizational behavior: a management challenge	Minor citation
Tirole	1994	The theory of industrial organization	---
Tompkins	2005	Organization theory and public management	Open systems, Technology, Connection with Resource-dependence theory,
Tosi	1984	Theories of organization	Whole chapter dedicated to Thompson's theory
Tsoukas, Knudsen	2003	The Oxford handbook of organization theory	Open-closed systems, Discussion about narrative style
Vibert	2004	Theories of macro-organizational behavior: a handbook of ideas and explanations	---
Wagner, Hollenbeck	2010	Organizational behavior: securing competitive advantage	Technology, Coordination
Weick	1979	The social psychology of organizing	Minor citation
Weick	1995	Sensemaking in organizations	---
Weick	2009	Making sense of the organization	Interdependence, Methodology
Westwood, Clegg	2003	Debating organization: point-counterpoint in organization studies	Minor citation
Williamson	1985	The economic institutions of capitalism. Firms, markets, relational contracting	Minor citation
Williamson	1995	Organization theory. From Chester Barnard to the present and beyond	Task environment, Structure

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ASQ: history and debates

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Introduction

Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ) occupies a peculiar place in the history of organizational studies. Founded by James Thompson in 1956, the journal since the beginning featured authors and contributions that strongly characterized this field and influenced generations of scholars. ASQ's reputation and influence is still evident today, even though the journal went through significant changes. In this contribution, we revisit ASQ's history and, consequently, at least in part, the evolution of organization studies, of which ASQ is one of the main protagonists. As an adequate account of such a rich and complex history would require much more space than what we can utilize here, we are going to focus on some specific topics. On the one hand, we will focus on Thompson's legacy as the founder of ASQ, especially in terms of his original vision for the journal and for the general field of studies. On the other hand, we will focus on how the debate about how the organizational field changed over time, and especially on the evolution of theory production. In order to do that, we will mostly utilize the editorials and some key reflections and debates proposed by ASQ's editors and other significant authors about the state of the journal and the field over the decades.

The structure of the contribution is the following. In the first paragraph, we will analyze in detail the first issue of the journal (published in 1956) and Thompson's editorial published in the fourth issue (Thompson *et al.*, 1957). The reason is that these early publications clearly show Thompson's approach to the foundation of the journal, hence his goals and vision about not only the journal itself, but more generally about the then emerging "Administrative Science". In the second paragraph we will illustrate the early years of ASQ's history, and especially the reflection proposed by Boulding about the initial contributions to

the journal and about the its possible future, as many of his reflections seem to be still relevant today. In the remaining paragraphs we will illustrate and discuss the evolution of *ASQ* and, to some extent, of organizational research as a whole. Each paragraph will cover about two decades of *ASQ*'s history.

The foundation of *ASQ*

The first issue of *ASQ* was published in June 1956. It clearly has a "foundational" nature, as it contains contributions aiming at clarifying the goals of the journal. These were quite ambitious goals right from the start, as they explicitly refer to the creation of a new "Administrative Science". The title of the journal itself reveals such intention. In his short but significant opening editorial, Thompson clearly states that the journal aims at becoming an important tool for the construction and the development of a "Science" devoted to the study of administrative phenomena. Even more clearly, Thompson emphasizes the relevance of a tight connection between theory and empirical evidence, and the significance of a continuous "re-appraisal" of knowledge.

We propose here a few brief reflections on such vision of an "Administrative Science" proposed by Thompson (1956a) in his short editorial.

On the one hand, one should not mistake the wish to create a field of study, or even a discipline, that aims at accumulating knowledge and making progress in the understanding of phenomena, with the idea that such science should only include contributions that are epistemologically homogeneous. On the contrary, as we will see shortly, Thompson himself emphasized the relevance of conceptual and theoretical variety.

On the other hand, the frequent use, by Thompson, of the word "Science" (and, specifically, "Administrative Science") may be juxtaposed to Taylor's "Scientific Management" which, at that time, largely dominated the organizational practice. One might hypothesize that Thompson felt necessary to challenge the existing idea of organizational "science" that Taylorism was proposing - strictly connected to the idea of carefully "measuring" every aspect of the organizational phenomena, and also (more importantly) to the possibility

of “extracting” the knowledge from the acting subjects and derive from it general, universal models. In other words, it seems that Thompson felt the urge of developing a “new” science of administration by widening the narrow conceptual and methodological boundaries that the so called “Scientific Management” had been successfully proposing up until then.

In the same short editorial Thompson highlights the relevance of the first article (authored by Litchfield, 1956) and the last one (authored by Thompson, 1956b, himself) as pillars upon which the journal and, more generally, the field of study, could and should be founded. For our goals, it seems very important to briefly summarize these two contributions. Let us start with Litchfield’s (1956).

In his article, Litchfield first proposes some critical reflections on the state of the art of the organizational studies at the time, then he illustrates the need for organizational theorization, and finally he provides some general indications for organizational science’s future pathway. According to Litchfield, the most important critical points are the following:

- An actual organizational theory is missing, and more specifically he warns about a widespread terminological confusion which hinders the progress of theory. Hence, it is necessary to progress towards a homogenization of meanings or even the creation of a shared “vocabulary” for the organizational studies
- Even when theoretical efforts are found, Litchfield claims that these are mostly narrow, context-specific theories. Instead, it is necessary to develop a more general theoretical effort, aimed at reconciling the understanding of general phenomena and specific contexts
- Organizational knowledge is too fragmented: administration should be conceived as a unified process, not as a mere aggregation of separate parts
- While administrative practices seem to be more established than theory, the latter is too rigid and incapable of producing change and innovation. Litchfield’s reference to Taylorism is implicit but quite obvious here, as well as

the idea that a well developed theory should also inform practice and help its improvement.

- Finally, Litchfield underscores that the existing “fragments” of organizational theory are difficult to be assessed in relation to empirical evidence, and not enough oriented towards debate and discussion between different points of view and interpretations

So, given this state of affairs, why do we need to generate new organizational theories? Litchfield identifies a few answers to such question. First, theory is necessary to provide a general framework in which the existing and future knowledge can be “located” and understood; second, theory is useful as a guide for empirical research (to identify knowledge gaps, to formulate new ideas and hypotheses, etc.); finally, theory is needed as a guide for the actual administrative behaviors, decisions and practices. To elaborate even further, Litchfield proposed some “major” propositions and few “minor” ones aimed at providing guidelines for a general framework of administrative theory. We are not commenting all of them here, but it seems useful to briefly comment a few of them:

- *The administrative process is a cycle of action which includes the following specific activities: A. Decision making B. Controlling C. Programming D. Reappraising E. Communicating*

It is interesting here to notice his focus on decision making, further developed in the “minor propositions”, which clearly refers to Simon’s view of the administrative process (Simon, 1947).

- *The administrative process functions in the areas of: A. Policy B. Resources C. Execution*

We think it is worthwhile underlining the reference to policy, explicitly understood by Litchfield as the process of goal formulation, as an essential part of the administrative process. This is also a reference the Simon’s view, which elevates the organizational knowledge from being merely instrumental to some predetermined goals (which is exactly what both the Tayloristic and

functionalistic logic propose) to a level in which it is concerned, first and foremost, to the definition of goals in organizational and social processes.

- *The administrative process is carried on in the context of a larger action system, the dimensions of which are: A. The administrative process B. The individual performing the administrative process C. The total enterprise within which the individual performs the process D. The ecology within which the individual and the enterprise function.*

Thompson (1956a), in his brief introductory editorial, explicitly mentions this distinction between what Litchfield calls “dimensions” of the organizational analysis, which seems to refer, indeed, to different analytical levels, certainly an important distinction in relation the theory building process.

The second foundational article in the first issue of *ASQ*, titled “*On building an administrative science*” was authored by James Thompson (1956b) himself. The focus is clearly methodological. The author argues that administration science will be able to develop in a way that is separated from practice only through solid methodological foundations. In this article, Thompson tries to identify some of the key elements of such foundations. Let us summarize them briefly.

First, Thompson argues that it will be necessary, for the newborn administrative science, that particular attention is devoted to relationships – between concepts and between the elements of the studied phenomena. It is again clear, in our view, Thompson’s critique to the Tayloristic approach which conceived the organizational reality as a sum of separable, objectified parts. In other words, Thompson seems to warn about the inherent complexity of administrative phenomena because of their social nature, and he hopes that knowledge will develop starting from a non-mechanical view of the social reality.

Second, Thompson emphasizes the need to produce abstract concepts. He seems to suggest that measuring reality is simply not enough to advance knowledge. Similarly, it is not enough, or maybe not even possible, to extrapolate a “one best way” based on a merely descriptive act. His call for abstraction clearly refers to theorizing as an interpretative exercise, which is an

act of understanding that goes beyond description and measurement. Instead, it is necessary to carefully consider the point of view of the acting subjects as protagonists of the social phenomena, and also the point of view of the researchers themselves.

Finally, according to Thompson, it will be important to develop operational definitions. Theorizing and abstract concepts are crucial elements, but it is also necessary to grasp the connection between theory and reality. This is, in our interpretation, the meaning of Thompson's call for operational definition: not necessarily the idea that every concept has to be mechanically linked to some form of exact measurement, but instead the idea that every concept and every theory should find a clear correspondence to the reality that they wish to interpret and explain.

In the subsequent section, Thompson proposes a critique on the state of art of organizational knowledge, similar to what Litchfield proposed, but with a focus on methodological aspects. He argues that the vast majority of the existing organizational knowledge is lore, characterized by many assumptions more or less implicit and completely unwarranted. So, given the current situation, what are Thompson's methodological suggestions for the future administrative science? In short, it is necessary to:

- Operationalize concepts (in the sense that we described above)
- Develop theory and concepts that are specific to the field, not just ideas that are generated in different disciplines and then merely adapted
- Develop logical frameworks that connect previously developed concepts in a coherent way
- Increase the efforts on empirical research, especially research aimed at finding disconfirmatory evidence in relation to theories
- Increase the efforts not just towards research that appears to be immediately "useful", related to what is happening now, but also related to "what if" questions, as this is the approach that may lead to new interpretations, new ideas and, ultimately, innovation.

The early years and Boulding's analysis

The early issues of ASQ highlight the vivacity of the field and the variety of contributions. We find significant theoretical papers (e.g., two papers by Parsons, very important for the functionalist heritage, Thompson's and Bates' article of 1957 which anticipates some of the topics that Thompson will lay out in his main publication, *Organizations in Action*, in 1967), as well as several other empirical papers. These are interesting years, as the journal reveals the intellectual energy of the times. Indeed, the field seems to quickly begin a reflection on itself, on theorizing and researching, and on future directions as well. The first author to bring a significant contribution in such reflection is Kenneth Boulding. In 1958 he published an article titled "Evidences for an Administrative Science: A Review of the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Volume 1 and 2". It is very interesting not only because he attempts a first general reflection on the field and, more specifically, on ASQ, but also because many of his ideas may seem today almost like "prophecies", as they anticipate several issues and worries that, over the course of several decades, will become more and more obvious and current. We propose here a brief summary and a commentary.

Boulding starts by noticing the recent development of specialized fields in the applied social sciences. He argues that, while being born out of specific disciplines, these fields need to get ideas and concepts from all disciplines of social sciences, not only from the ones they derived from. The same kind of development is happening for the administrative science - a term that, according to the author, is well chosen to encompass the organizational phenomena, even though there are already other good, viable terminological alternatives, such as "Organization Theory". Administrative Science separates itself from Operation Research and Management Science (two journals with these names were recently founded, just like ASQ) because of a more direct orientation to traditional social sciences, a less "mathematical" approach and a clearer concern for the application of social sciences theories and methods to the problems of organizations.

After these premises, Boulding attempts a summary of what emerged in the early years of ASQ, by identifying 4 categories to which the various articles could be referred to, while at the same time warning the readers that the classification is indeed arbitrary, and the goal is nothing but providing a general starting point for a wider reflection about the current situation of the field and its possible future directions. The 4 categories are the following: 1) *Theory and Philosophy*, including those contributions with a clear theoretical or even philosophical character, that is, general orderly reflections without the conceptual rigor of actual “theories”; 2) *Methodology and Programmatic*, that is, the contributions about research methodology or describing research programs for the future; 3) *History and Description*, that is, mostly qualitative papers which help the reader to familiarize with the organizational variety of the real world and, for this reason, do not necessarily propose or verify hypotheses. In order to underline its relevance, Boulding utilizes the metaphor of a journey: a student of organization who never, at least vicariously, “traveled” in banks, hospitals, enterprises, research labs, factories etc., is missing something very important. A journey which cannot be considered “science” in a narrow sense, but thanks to it researchers will be better at selecting problems and phenomena worth studying; 4) *Research*, that is, empirical contributions utilizing more precise methods, not just quantitative ones, which imply the formulation and testing of hypotheses. The most fruitful cases, according to Boulding, are the ones in which hypotheses are not confirmed. Research where hypotheses are confirmed are often just an “elaborate glimpse of the obvious” (Boulding, 1958: 6).

The identification of these 4 categories, however debatable, is an interesting exercise in itself, even for researchers of the 21st century: the relevance of theory and even of “philosophy”, for a field that Boulding himself defines as “applied”; the relevance of the qualitative “journey” for the development of knowledge and “science”; the clear distinction between methodological rigor and the quantitative character of analytical techniques; the invitation to pay attention to disconfirmatory evidence. All these are messages that surely sound very significant today, as the direction taken lately by the

field seems quite different, sometimes completely opposite, of what Boulding was suggesting.

The author utilizes these 4 categories in order to verify the number of contributions within the early issues of *ASQ* in each category. While it is true that there is just a limited number of issues, some interesting considerations emerge nonetheless. On the one hand, Boulding notices that in volume II there's a significant increase of "Research" (cat. 4) papers, and a decrease in "Methodology" (cat. 2) and "History" (cat. 3) papers in relation to volume I. Obviously nothing can be said about any general "trend", but Boulding warns about the dangers of neglecting the methodological and the qualitative / descriptive contributions. Again, his warning still seems very relevant today.

Another danger highlighted by Boulding is related to the need to maintain the interdisciplinary character of the journal, and of the field in general. The author emphasizes the need to keep a high level of debate and discussion, which he sees as declining. Indeed, Boulding shows that in those years there had been not enough of the clarification and extension of knowledge which is only possible through a dialectic dialogue between different points of view. As a comparison, he observes the intense debate that characterized economics in the 20s and the 30s, which lead to significant theoretical innovation and to the "Keynesian revolution".

Another interesting aspect concerns the insufficient critical effort in relation to methodology aspects that, according to Boulding, characterized the early years of *ASQ* and, more generally, social sciences. The danger is to develop the "rituals" of science rather than its qualities, and to a-critically apply methods that could be useful in certain contexts but inappropriate in others. This is also connected the problem of quantitative *vs.* qualitative research. According to Boulding, qualitative studies are essential for the development of knowledge. What distinguishes social systems from physical systems is their richness and the number of "special cases". Generalizations, he insists, are just pathways in a complex "forest" of individual trees, each one a "species" in itself. The social scientists losing this sense of uniqueness and individuality of

every case will commit a huge mistake, especially if they believe that their “faceless” generalizations correspond to the rich variety of a social world made of individual human beings. This doesn’t mean, Boulding says, that we shouldn’t attempt at proposing generalizations. It just means that we shouldn’t “believe” them. In other words, the excess of quantitative methods might lead researchers to become so absorbed in their data and analysis to forget completely the reality from which such data were extracted from. The danger, concludes Boulding, is data fixation, the obsession for mathematics, the substitution of thought with statistics.

Overall, it seems that Boulding proposed a very prophetic message, still very valuable today. The dangers he foresaw in those early years became, over time, more and more real. Indeed, his analysis not only help us understand the early history of *ASQ*, but also anticipates some of the most crucial and problematic elements of the following years.

The 60s - 70s, and Daft’s analysis

In the two subsequent decades we observe the development of approaches that emerged in the 50s (we refer specifically to the functionalist sociology) and the birth of new approaches that had a significant impact in *ASQ*’s history, and the history of the field of study. We find not only authors coming from “traditional” disciplines (sociology, psychology, social-psychology, anthropology, political sciences) but also authors from “new” disciplines, such as management and administration. *ASQ*’s history clearly reflects these trends. Classic functionalist contributions such as Etzioni (1960), Blau (1960), Blau *et al.* (1976) and Scott (1965; Comstock, Scott, 1977) are found, as well as a significant number of “comparative organizational analysis” papers, so that in 1960 a special issue about this subject was published. *ASQ* also published a great number of papers following the situational approach, especially from the Aston school. Another emerging area in this period concerns the so called “behavioral science”, mostly populated by social-psychologists. In *ASQ*, this trend is clearly present in many papers focusing on

topics such as motivation, perception, leadership, teamwork, role conflicts, control, organizational change and others, an area that today we know as “Organizational Behavior”. Some other contributions worth mentioning appearing in ASQ that seem to oppose the dominant systemic / functionalistic view can be placed in the area of symbolic interactionism (Weick, 1969) and in the Simonian tradition.

A general reflection about the state of the journal and the research field during these decades can be proposed starting from a paper, published in ASQ (1980, vol. 25, n. 4), called “The Evolution of Organization Analysis in ASQ, 1959-1979”, authored by Richard Daft, the founder (in 1990) of *Organization Science*, together with Arie Lewin (Daft, Lewin, 1990).

The questions that Daft asks are similar to the ones that Boulding asked years before him. What is the state of the field of study? What are the theoretical bases of organizational research? What research techniques should be adopted in the future in order to produce significant new knowledge?

To answer these questions, Daft undertakes an analysis of articles published on ASQ between 1959 and 1979, choosing a full volume of ASQ every 5 years and omitting the first three issues of the journal.

In order to perform such analysis, Daft does not utilize the ideas and categories proposed by Thompson, Litchfield or Boulding, but two other general criteria: 1) the kind of language used by the author (*the research language*), and 2) the level of conceptual complexity adopted by the authors to examine the phenomenon under observation (*the research model*).

Obviously, all papers contain verbal language. However, Daft (1980: 629) argue that for every article it is possible to identify a *primary language*, that is, the language “used to summarize and transmit the author’s data and findings”. Based on this criterion, articles are classified by Daft at different levels of variety of the primary language, starting from: low variety, typical of mathematical or linear statistics; medium variety, typical of studies that utilize indicators or categories, are based on large samples and communicate results through the use of percentages, frequencies and cross tabulation; medium-high

variety, typical of studies that are based on in-depth interviews, report quotes or describe case studies; high variety, typical of studies utilizing non-verbal expressions (images, illustrations or other artistic forms).

Daft's second criterion refers to the conceptual framework utilized by the researchers. Daft classifies the papers by borrowing the scale that Boulding utilized in 1956 to classify systems' complexity. Starting from von Bertalanffy's "General Systems Theory" (1951), described as a new approach for the unity of sciences, Boulding tries to refine such theory by constructing a sort of systems classification, valid for all sciences, which should improve one's ability to grasp and represent the complexity of the real world. Boulding classifies systems into 8 levels, ordered according to an increasing level of complexity in a Gutmann-type scale in which the most complex system (represented by "social organizations") includes all the less complex ones.

Daft applies these two classification criteria to his sample of 119 papers published in *ASQ*, between 1959 and 1979. The results are the following:

- Articles published in 1959 seem to be aimed at exploring complex aspects of organizations, mostly through case studies and qualitative techniques.
- In the years between 1960 and 1969 a significant change is observed. Published articles tend to adopt more simplified views of organization (consistently with the growing research's interest on such topics as comparative analysis of organizational structures or the effects of structure or leader behavior on participants), a communication form characterized by low variety languages (high utilization of linear statistics, surveys and quantitative techniques) and results illustrated through correlations or frequency tables.
- In the following decade (1970-1979) it is confirmed a tendency towards more simple, low variety languages, but more sophisticated analysis begin to be used (multi-variate statistic, regressions, factor analysis, etc.). On the other hand, the level of complexity seems to increase, as more complex organizational phenomena appear more often than in the previous decade.

Referring to such results, Daft suggests that the increased use of statistics represent an important and necessary phase in the evolution of organizational

research. It is important because it shows that in the organizational field a notion of “science” is gradually developing. It is also necessary because, according to the author, the field’s development requires an effort of mapping, defining and measuring the characteristics of the observed phenomena. Daft (1980: 631) also explores the issue about whether a correlation exists between language variety and research model complexity: “Do simple languages cause simple models, or vice versa, or are they two independent variables?”. He suggests that, on the one hand, language may influence the choice of phenomena to be studied (as already proposed by Zadeh in 1973); on the other hand, the desire to carry out comparative analysis induces researchers to analyze just some specific organizational variables, those that are more easily measured, and to utilize low variety languages.

This leads Daft to face a final question about which trend will characterize organizational research in the next 10 years.

Daft seems reasonably certain that the observed trends will continue, especially because of the better rigor and precision that statistical techniques ensure. He also expects a further increase in the exploration of more complex problems and “higher-level properties of organizations” (*ibid.*: 632). However, these two trends appear to contradict each other, according to Daft, as the study of organizational complexity seems to require to focus on intangible variables, related to the symbolic and emotional spheres of human being, which is not easily carried out through statistical, quantitative techniques. Thus, Daft foresees a danger for the field, and he proposes a solution to avoid it. The danger is that using low variety languages may lead to over-simplifying the study of complex organizational phenomena, which may lead researchers to “interpret the texture of organizations in a way similar to interpret Shakespearean plays exclusively by words counts and ratios” (*ibid.*: 632). Hence, his invitation to increase the use of qualitative techniques, which are better suited for the more complex aspects of the organizational world. He also highlights the significance of *ASQ*’s special issue, published in 1979, about qualitative research (Van Maanen, 1979).

We propose now a brief commentary on Daft's analysis and, more generally, on this period of *ASQ*'s history. First and foremost, one should ask the reason why Daft did not consider those papers that, in the early years of *ASQ*, attempted similar analysis. It is possible that Daft considered the years 60-70 as a completely new phase in the development of organizational research, evolving gradually from a "pre-science" stage towards a more "scientific" status, so that new analysis criteria were needed. A signal in such direction could be the exclusion from his sample of all papers published in the first three years, which was justified by Daft on the basis that they "might not reflect typical submission procedures or selection practice" (*ibid.*: 625). However, two additional considerations might strengthen our interpretation.

The first one refers to Daft's classification of papers based on their conceptual model. As we have seen, Daft regroups all the different conceptual models under the same systemic vision, even though at the different levels identified by Boulding (1956). Through this exercise, Daft indeed refuses to recognize the variety of conceptual approaches and "pushes" all of them within the same systemic view. Also, he seems to have no doubt about which would be the "best model" for the development of the field, that is the "complex system" model. So, his implicit message seems to be quite distant from the re-appraisal principle suggested by Thompson in his foundational article and in his introduction to *Organizations in Action*.

Another consideration concerns Daft's reflection about the different research techniques. On the one hand, he argues that it would be inefficient, for the progress of the field, that scholars would only utilize quantitative techniques, and he suggests that qualitative ones should be widely utilized as well, especially when the goal is to understand the most complex organizational phenomena. On the other hand, he seems to attribute the status of "scientific method" only to quantitative techniques because of their alleged superior rigor and precision. Indeed, he sees in a positive way the fact that, in these two decades, the quantitative articles published in *ASQ* increased significantly, and he associates such increase to a sort of gradual development

of a notion of “science”. Logically, one should conclude that qualitative techniques are not “scientific”. It seems to us that, independently from the possible outcomes of a debate (or even its usefulness) about the “scientific” attribute of different research methods, Daft’s different messages do not seem to be easily reconcilable.

The 80s - 90s and the emerging worries for the neglected heritage

The decades ‘80-‘90 are characterized for a further solidification of research approaches developed in the previous years, but also for the appearance of new theoretical approaches, which will become dominant in more recent years. The editorial history of ASQ clearly shows these evolutions through the publication of articles that will become milestones for the development of such approaches.

We chose to divide this paragraph in four sections corresponding to four different editorships, as we found significant differences in terms of vision, themes and editorial styles.

1980-1985: Karl Weick’ editorship

Karl Weick was the editor of ASQ between 1976 and 1985. Under his leadership, like his successor John Freeman openly recognized, ASQ acquires much more solid foundations, not only in organizational terms (the Editorial Board is strengthened, the role of Associate Editor is introduced, the administration of the journal is improved), but also in substantial and reputational terms: “Karl has left me with a journal that is generally regarded as the premier specialist in social science research on organizations” (Freeman, *News and Notes*, 1985: 589). The most important change concerns the *Notice to Contributors*, which appears for the first time in 1983 in the section Back Matter of ASQ (vol. 28, n. 1: 162). This document knows a radical transformation from being a mere list of formal requirement for authors to become a sort of “statement of philosophy for potential contributors”, as Weick himself declared (*News and Notes*, 1985: 423). This is not just a “small success”, as Weick

humbly described it, but something that deeply influenced the editorial policy of ASQ for years to come. It is worthwhile summarize such notes.

Weick begins *Notice to Contributors* from the sentence that, starting from the very first issue of ASQ, is visible in ASQ's logo: *Dedicated to advancing the understanding of administration through empirical investigation and theoretical analysis*. It seems that Weick tries to recuperate the founders' vision, as he extrapolates from such sentence the three essential criteria upon which the editorial decisions should be based. When required to assess an article for its potential publication, every editor will have to decide about whether the text: (1) advances understanding, (2) addresses administration, (3) has mutual relevance for empirical investigation and theoretical analysis.

Also in following section Weick recuperates the indications that we have emphasized in the foundational contributions by Thompson and Litchfield. More specifically, the relevance of theory for the advancement of knowledge and practice is quite clear: "Theory is how we move to further research and improved practice. If manuscripts contain no theory, their value is suspect" (Weick, 1983: 162). Weick also underlines the need of balancing theory and empirical research: "Ungrounded theory, however, is no more helpful than are atheoretical data. We are receptive to multiple forms of grounding but not to a complete avoidance of grounding" (*ibidem*).

In the remainder of the document, Weick proposes a sort of "manifesto" which, besides providing editorial indications to authors, reviewers and editors, becomes the document that illustrates the intellectual vision of the journal to all stakeholders, including readers. The value of this document as a sort of summary of "values" of which ASQ aims to be the carrier is also witnessed by the many citations that the document received in the context of debates about the production of organizational theory in the 90s, which we will discuss in this paragraph.

1985-1993: John Freeman's editorship

John Freeman replaces Karl Weick as editor of ASQ in 1985. He will remain in this role until 1993. The difference between the two in terms of epistemological and theoretical approach is well known, but also a difference in the editorial style can be noticed.

In his open letter at the beginning of his mandate (News and Notes, vol. 30, n. 4, 1985), Freeman writes that his editorship will be far less complex than the one of his predecessor because the most relevant problems in the management of journal have been solved, and what he “inherited” is a “a strong journal backed by a strong organization” (Freeman, 1985: 589). Then, Freeman reassures ASQ’s readers by saying that they will not find significant changes in the editorial policy and that “The editorial statement appearing at the end of each issue [*Notice to Contributors*” n.d.t] will not be changed in the near future, and I expect to abide by it” (*ibid.*: 589). However, he does state that some changes will happen, and they will mostly concern “the subtle evolution of knowledge and research practice in the field” (*ibidem*). According to Freeman, ASQ’s position as a “premier specialist in social science” requires for him to take on the “responsibility to reflect the diversity of our audience's interests. The trick will be to combine broad taste with high standards. This is our challenge. We intend to meet it” (*ibidem*).

Thus, Freeman’s intention seems to make room for new theoretical and methodological perspectives. Indeed, a few new approaches, between the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, were emerging, which, as Gerald Davis stated (2010), were going to “dominate” organization theory in the next 30 years. More specifically: the transaction cost economics approach (Williamson, 1975), agency theory (Jensen and Meckling, 1976), new institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), population ecology (Hannan and Freeman, 1977), and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). According to Davis and Cobb (2010: 22) “...all of these approaches except agency theory evolved in part from a common ancestor, Thompson’s (1967) masterful synthesis *Organizations in Action*”. This is a

significant and unusual tribute, as Thompson's heritage is not recognized as often as it should (Maggi, 1988/1990).

A bird's-eye view of articles published during Freeman's editorship seem to confirm the intention of rendering *ASQ* a receptacle of new theoretical development. Scholars of the population ecology approach such as Amburgey, Barnett, Baum, Carrol, Miner publish on *ASQ* during these years. The journal also published contributions that show a dialogue and the possibility of synergies between population ecology and new institutionalism, and between organization theory and economics, such as Baum and Oliver (1991) and Baum and Mezias (1992). Another example is the Special Issues titled *Technology, Organization, Innovation*, edited by Tushman and Nelson, published in 1990, which includes significant contributions on the bi-directional relationship between technological change and organization – for example the very influential article by Cohen and Levinthal (1990), “Absorptive Capacity: A New Perspective on Learning and Innovation”.

As an editor, Freeman writes only one editorial, in 1986, in the 30th anniversary of the journal, dedicated to the problem of data quality in organizational research (“Data quality and the development of organizational science: an editorial essay”, *ASQ*, 1986, vol. 31, n. 2: 298-303). In this article, Freeman (1986: 298) asserts that in the face of a significant theoretical and methodological development of organizational research in the last decades, “the quality of data on which organizational knowledge is built has not improved at nearly the same pace.” He denounces that the low quality of data might compromise the possibility of organizational research to satisfy the goal of generalizing results and create problems to scholars aiming at high scientific standards: “Most of the literature is still based on small samples of opportunity. Measurement continues to be plagued by lack of comparability across studies. And we are unable to make legitimate generalizations about how organizations work, when they change, or the consequences of organizing in one way as opposed to another. This is a pitiful state of affairs for any group of scholars laying claim to scientific standards” (*ibid.*: 298). He then proposes to build a

data base, funded by the Federal Government, based on a representative sample of American organizations, which would bring great benefits to scholars, students and policy makers. He also describes the inherent problems and difficulties of such an endeavor, among them the choice of sampling criteria, unit of analysis, the identification of variables to measure and how to operationalize them. The main problem, according to Freeman, is the lack of consensus among scholars on the above mentioned issues. Thus, it seems utopian to imagine that such database would allow to answer all research questions. The diversity of approaches, intrinsic in the organizational field, implies that it would be necessary to reach some compromises by utilizing a logic according to which “more is better”.

Thus, Freeman seems to recognize the relevance of having different, competing approaches. However, while in 1979 he argued about the relevance of qualitative approaches, as he also promoted a special issue on qualitative methodologies, in 1986 Freeman calls instead for a national data base of quantitative data, arguing that “the availability of careful measures on large numbers of organizations would stimulate new theory... And it can provide the basis on which more sophisticated measurement can develop” (*ibid.*: 299).

1993-1997: Stephen Barley's editorship

Inside of the News and Notes (1993, vol. 39, n. 4: 704: 708) we find both the farewell letter of John Freeman as outgoing editor of *ASQ* and the letter of the incoming editor, Stephen Barley. Freeman (1993: 704) leaves the role with the dry, pragmatic style with which he started his mandate: “Since I did not assume the editorship with an agenda of change either for the journal or for the field, I look back over the years and can discern no great accomplishment. [...] Rather, I look back over a stream of papers that have moved organizational research forward, hoping I did not get in the way too much”.

On the other hand, Barley emphasizes that he will to make some significant changes in the editorial style which seem to connect with *ASQ*'s foundational principles. He recalls the role of organizational research, one of

witnessing, representing and explaining the socio-economic changes. Just like at the beginning of the 20th century the organizational studies were born to explain the deep transformation of the Industrial Revolution, a similar task awaits the field in explaining the significant changes of the post-fordist society in the 90s. He writes (Barley, 1993: 704-705): “The devolution of large bureaucracies into smaller, more specialized organizations as well as the emergence of new ways of organizing through networks, alliances, and information technologies. Rhetoric of control appear to be changing, and the occupational structure of society itself seems to be shifting beneath our feet”. He continues by underlining the role that *ASQ* can play in developing the field of organizational studies by maintaining its commitment to the intellectual vision that Karl Weick gave to the journal, summarized in his *Notice to Contributors*.

A final, important statement by Barley concerns his commitment to increase the interdisciplinarity of the journal and the field. Interdisciplinarity constitutes for Barley a tradition and a richness that the journal must reflect and maintain by publishing contributions from those disciplines that characterized the organizational field since its beginning. We may interpret this message as the need to adjust the disciplinary balance of the journal, as an increasing number of article from the management field was becoming dominant: “The editorial team views *ASQ* as an interdisciplinary journal that reflects the increasingly synthetic nature of our field. [...] For this reason, we view *ASQ* as a suitable home for the work of anthropologists, economists, managerial theorists, psychologists, sociologists, and those from other disciplines who pursue research in, on, or around organizations and their effects on our lives” (*ibid.*: 705).

During his mandate, Barley introduces several changes, each one illustrated in a specific editorial, aimed at implementing his vision for the journal. In chronological order, the most important innovations are the following:

- The extension of the editorial board in order to better represent the different perspectives in the community of organizational scholars (Front Matter, 1995a);
- The establishment of the ASQ Award for Scholarly Contribution, a yearly award given to the author(s) of the paper with the most impact on the field (Front Matter, 1995b);
- The creation of an ASQ listserv, a sort of blog (well before blogs even existed) where authors and readers are invited to publish feedbacks on the articles published by ASQ (Front Matter, 1995b);
- The implementation of a new editorial formula called "ASQ Forum" to stimulate the debate on "substantive and provocative" topics (Front Matter, 1995c)
- The celebration of the 40th anniversary of ASQ through a special issue containing nine articles written by senior, authoritative scholars (Front Matter, 1996)

Especially the latter initiatives show Barley's interest and commitment to trigger the discussion about the evolution of the field and to encourage the community to publish theoretical articles, as he invited scholars to consider ASQ "as an outlet for their theoretical work" (Front Matter, 1995c).

A focus on the ASQ Forum 1995-1996

The ASQ Forum 1995-1996 comprises six speculative articles about the state of art of theoretical production in social sciences and, more specifically, in the organizational studies. It is worth noticing Barley's unusual initiative of the ASQ Forum, instead of the usual editorials. We can speculate that the editor viewed the Forum "format" as more effective in order to trigger the discussion within the community of organizational scholar about key issues concerning the entire field. The editors' concern, indeed, is that the journal is receiving a decreasing number of theoretical articles, so the intention is to re-ignite the discussion within the community about the important of theory as "primary vehicle by which ideas are disciplined and developed" (Barley, Front Matter, 1995c). With these papers ASQ enters this debate, initiated by *Academy of*

Management Review in 1989 with the publication of a Special Issue on “Theory building”, which has been continued since then with contributions in all major organizational journals.

While it is not possible here to summarize the details of such debate, we can try to briefly describe some key issues, with a specific reference to the ASQ forums.

The first ASQ Forum, published in 1995 (vol. 40, n. 3: 371-397), includes two papers by members of ASQ’s editorial board, Robert Sutton and Barry Staw, titled “What Theory is Not”, followed by the comments by Karl Weick “What Theory is Not, Theorizing is ” and Paul DiMaggio “Comments on What Theory is Not”.

Sutton and Staw (1995: 371) start with the argument that the entire ASQ community (authors, editors, reviewers, readers) agrees that the papers published in the journal should contain “strong organizational theory” and, to prove the point, they refer the introduction of the *Notice to Contributors* which states that “If manuscripts contain no theory, their value is suspect.”

Based on their experience as editors, authors claim that one of the most important reasons why many articles are rejected is their insufficient level of theorization. Thus, a way to help researchers would be to explain clearly what theory is and what criteria can be used to distinguish “strong or weak theory”. However, authors warn that there is no clear consensus in the academic community on this subject (they refer, for example, to the special issue published in 1989 on the *Academy of Management Review*), which is confusing for researchers. Even more obstacles are generated by the lack of consensus about what is the “best” perspective, among many, to be adopted in order to study organizational phenomena, and also the number of “internal conflicts and contradictions” that are inherent in the process of theory building, so that organizational scholars, just like other social scientists, have to trade off “between generality, simplicity and accuracy” as Weick (1979) suggested.

Thus, given these difficulties about defining what (good) theory is, instead Sutton and Staw try to follow an “easier” route by trying to highlight

what theory is *not*. They argue that there are five parts of most papers (references, data, concepts and variables, diagrams, hypotheses) which, while important ingredients, are mistakenly used by authors as substitutes of the conceptual arguments. There is an implicit consensus on this among reviewers and editors. Hence, it would be useful for researchers to provide some “signposts” indicating five “wrong ways” that research should not follow.

For our goals, it is interesting to notice that Sutton and Staw seem to fall into the same cognitive trap that, at the beginning of their contribution, they tried to avoid, which is to ground their advice on their specific vision of theory. For example, when they describe why diagrams are not theory, they end up stating what good theory is, according to their view – which is exactly what they declared they did not want to do: “...while boxes and arrows can add order to a conception by explicitly delineating patterns and causal connections, they rarely explain why the proposed connections will be observed. Some verbal explication is almost always necessary. [...] Text about the reasons why a phenomenon occurs, or why it unfolds in a particular manner, is difficult to replace by references to a diagram. [...] Good theory is often representational and verbal” (Sutton, Staw, 1995: 376).

On the other hand, the same authors admit they are basing their advice on a “prejudice”, that is, on their own concept of theory, and they conclude that it would be naïve to think that “few signposts will create a rush of new theory in organizational research” (*ibid.*: 383).

In the second part of paper the authors take on a more “political” posture about the current state of theory production in the organizational field. According to the authors, there are “structural” reasons for the limited number of papers with a theoretical contribution. More specifically, they mention two factors: a) the way journals are managed and b) the way young researchers are trained and educated.

About the first point, authors claim that the editorial policies in different journals account for the diversity of points of view about the meaning and value of “theory”. At one end of the spectrum, there are journals such as *Journal*

of *Applied Psychology* and *Personnel Psychology* which seem to be mostly interested in the rigor of research methods and theory testing techniques rather than the originality of the hypotheses and the conceptual strength of the paper. At the other extreme there are journals such as *Research in Organizational Behavior* which consider theory building as the main criteria for their paper assessment. In the middle, there are journals like *ASQ*, *AMJ* and *OS* which try to create a bridge between theory testing and theory building, as they declare the goal to publish papers that are both based on solid empirical research while, at the same time, include significant theoretical advancement. To publish in these journals, researchers are asked to generate imaginative and creative acts, while being at the same time precise, rigorous and systematic, thereby committing to a process of theory building that Weick (1989) called “disciplined imagination”. However, it is not easy to find authors that are fully prepared in both theory testing and theory building. The reason, according to Sutton and Staw, lies in the kind of education received during the doctoral programs, which are mostly focused on data collecting and analytical tools rather than theory building.

Since it is so difficult to receive papers that contain both strong theory and methodology, journals are obliged to trade them off. Indeed, it is easier for editors and reviewers “to agree on a carefully crafted empirical piece that has little or no theory than it is for them to go along with a weak test of a new theoretical idea” (Sutton, Staw, 1995: 382). Hence their final recommendation, specifically oriented towards referees, to pursue a better balance between the assessment of empirical and theoretical elements. In the specific case of quantitative papers, authors recommend to decrease the request to operationalize and test everything that is described in the theoretical section, while in the case of qualitative they suggest to emphasize the use of qualitative data not only to illustrate new ideas or concepts, but also to test existing theories.

Weick and DiMaggio replicate to Sutton and Staw in interesting ways.

DiMaggio adds even more reasons to the difficulties related to produce “good theory”. One is connected to the multidimensionality of theory “goodness”, which should be evaluated on the basis of three different ways of conceiving theory: one is theory as production of laws and generalizations on a certain phenomenon (*covering-law*); a second is theory as formulation of new, inspiring ideas, often based on paradoxes (*enlightenment*); third, theory as narration of a social phenomenon capable of explaining the conditions of certain happenings and the relationship between variables (*process approach*). The best theories are often “hybrid”, as they combine the three different approaches. However, since each approach is oriented towards different goals and based on different values, in order to combine them the researcher has to make difficult choices and compromises between competing or even incompatible values.

Another issue, according to DiMaggio, is that theory construction is a cooperative process between author and reader, a social construction process that often goes beyond facts. In the short term, a good theory may be reduced to a few slogans if read by a number of non-expert readers. In the long term, even unstructured or ambiguous theories may be seen as masterpieces or milestones if they encounter famous commentators who talk about them. Hence, whether a theory becomes influential is also a matter of sheer luck.

Weick focuses on the idea that the five parts of a paper mentioned by Sutton and Staw do not represent theory. According to Weick, the authors’ mistake is to reason about theory as it was a “product” of the action of theoretical elaboration, rather than a process of “theorizing”. Weick’s reasoning is the following. First, Weick asserts that rarely a product of academic research is recognized like a full-blown theory. Every theoretical contribution is usually an “approximation” of a theory, as it does not fully possess the features of generality, accuracy and simplicity that should characterize a “strong” theory. Such approximations, as substitutes for “strong theory”, may take the form of the five parts discussed by Sutton and Staw. So, how to assess whether these “substitutes” deserve to be published? We need to look at the theorizing

process, to its quality, and to reason in a means-goals fashion. The process is constituted by a series of ongoing activities such as building abstracts, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, formulating ideas. These activities generate some “emergent” products (references, data, list of variables, list of hypotheses) which summarize the researcher’s progress and indicate the general direction. The quality of the theorizing process may vary a lot, from a “lazy” theorizing in which people try to graft theory onto stark sets of data, to “intense struggles” in which people intentionally inch toward stronger theories.

Thus, the issue of the five parts, according to Weick, cannot be proposed in terms of “non theory” as opposed to theory, but rather as means-ends in the process of theorizing. In other words, it is necessary to understand if these “substitutes” for theory are considered by the researcher as the “end” to be published or an intermediate product within the context of an interim struggle towards the achievement of an ambitious goal. In the first case, their use as a substitute for theory should be rejected as the outcome of a weak theoretical construction; in the second case, product and process should be examined carefully in order to evaluate the possibility for the author to revise and resubmit. A signal for the reviewers should arrive directly from the authors, who should be required to articulate and document clearly the before and after of this theorizing effort, to illustrate the connections between past and future research and to describe the contribution that the intermediate product may provide to the subsequent theoretical developments

The second *ASQ* Forum was published in 1996 (vol. 41, n. 1: 146-179), opened by the paper of Robert N. Stern and Stephen R. Barley, titled “Organizations and Social Systems: Organization Theory’s Neglected Mandate”, followed by the comments of Scott (1996) and Blau (1996).

Stern and Barley remind the readers that in the very first issue of the journal its three fundamental mandates were clearly indicated by the founders: a) the analysis of processes and structures of organizations; b) the study of the relationships between organizations and their environment; c) the analysis of

the impact of organizations on the wider social system in which they are located.

Authors argue that was Parsons' (1956) contribution, in the first issue of *ASQ*, to mostly emphasize the need to adopt a "social system oriented" perspective. However, the reference to multiple analytical levels and the need to integrate them was also underlined by Thompson and Litchfield. Stern and Barley's thesis is that organizational scholars failed to achieve the "third mandate" by neglecting to develop the "macro" level of analysis.

The lack of studies on the implications of organizational action on society represents not only a missed opportunity for organizational scholars, which left an open field for economists and jurists, but mostly a failure in exercising an intellectual stewardship which finds its roots in the works of Weber, Durkheim and Marx. Authors identify four main causes that represent barriers for the development of such themes.

- The difficulty to define the boundaries of the unit of analysis: in the 50s and the 60s, scholars interested in a macro perspective found the local communities as adequate units of analysis for studying the organizational action. In the 90s the increased size of enterprises, their global scale, the emergence of international financial markets makes it difficult to define the boundaries of the social systems upon which the organizational action has an impact on.

- The features of the social milieu in which the organizational studies are carried out. Since the 80s, Business Schools represented a possible and even more frequent "home" for organizational scholars looking for academic positions and resources, away from Sociology departments. This represented an opportunity for the development of field of study but at the same time also an influence on the choice of research areas and themes. Indeed, organizational research gradually moved from studying public organizations to private enterprises, and subjects have been more and more oriented towards topics of efficiency and effectiveness, while abandoning systemic issues, which are considered in Business Schools as "externalities".

- The quest for scientific legitimation. In order to acquire legitimation, organizational theory gradually moved towards deductive research models based on hypothesis testing. This generated a paradox: a social construction of a negative correlation between the width of the problem to face and the academic credibility of the researcher. To increase their reputation, researchers decreased their focus to specific aspects, on which it was easier to find abundant data. The consequence is that the papers with a more narrow focus were more likely to receive positive evaluations. Stern and Barney conclude that this was a “perfect” formula to ensure, in the long term, the irrelevance of social research.
- The social construction of academic careers. Young researchers have to publish in order to get tenure, and in order to do so they have to respect the standards of scientific publications. In a system of incentives built around the principle of “publish or perish” it becomes very unlikely that a young researcher would choose a “macro” subject, where data are not easily available and, even in cases where data are accessible, competences of historical analysis are needed but not provided in doctoral programs.

To invert this negative trend, Stern and Barley suggest to eliminate these barriers, especially intervening on the incentives and the reviewing policies. Faculties need to change their career pathways and criteria, the “publish or perish” principle should be revised, the publication of books (instead of articles) should be encouraged. On the other hand, journals should revise their assessment policies, should accept theory-focused papers as well as papers that extend the analytical perspective to macro analysis, should promote special issues that push a better understanding of the role that organizations play in society.

Scott (1996) replies to Stern and Barley by arguing that the authors’ thesis cannot be considered valid for the whole organizational field. While it is true that the “third mandate” has been neglected by organizational journals, the same cannot be said for the wider set of social science journals. Articles such as those wished for by Stern and Barley are indeed published in journals such as *American Journal of Sociology* or *American Sociological Review*, or in more

specialized journals devoted to, respectively, educational, medical, or economic topics.

1996: *The 40th anniversary of ASQ*

In 1996, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of ASQ, Barley decided to ask a number of eminent organizational scholars to write a paper for the occasion: Michel Crozier, Fred Fiedler, David Hickson, Hal Leavitt, Jim March, Lyman Porter, Philip Selznick, Ed Schein, Karl Weick, and Mayer Zald. The outcome is something that, as Barley stated (Front Matter, 1996) it contains “no regressions, no methods, and no theory sections, yet plenty of provocative ideas and even a few revelations”.

Of the ten contributions, here we would like to briefly summarize Zald’s and Weick’s, as both reflect by referring to James Thompson’s heritage.

Mayer Zald, a colleague of Thompson at Venderbilt in 1968, curated the second edition of *Organizations in Action*, in 2003. His contribution (Zald, 1996), titled “More Fragmentation? Unfinished Business in Linking the Social Sciences and the Humanities”, start by asking what Thompson would think about the current state of administrative science. However, after a short reminder of Thompson’s indications for the journal, Zald does not follow up in his contribution. In Weick’s (1996) “Drop Your Tools: an Allegory for Organizational Studies”, instead, Thompson’s heritage actually represent a framework not only to face the challenges that the organizational studies are facing, but also an indication about how to find a way to relaunch and renew the field. Weick utilizes, as a metaphor, the famous example of 27 firemen who died, in two episodes in 1949 and 1994, because they failed to leave behind their heavy equipment, stating that organizational scholars find themselves in similar dangerous situations, as they need to abandon their “heavy tools” in order to “survive”. There are indeed several threats that may marginalize the organizational studies. Weick (1996: 309) describes three of them: the risk that enterprises will substitute universities as knowledge creation institutions; the risk that economists will replace the theoretical behavioral models proposed by

organizational scholars with even more simplified mathematical formulas; the risk that business firms will increasingly ignore those components of change programs that provide good data about the worth of the intervention.

How can organizational scholars face these threats? Weick argues that the solution is to seriously follow the indications that Thompson provided in the first issue of *ASQ*, as they still represent the foundational values for organizational studies: paying attention to the relationships between phenomena; utilizing abstract concepts that help to generalize and go beyond the specificity of concrete events; finding operationalizations of concepts so that it is possible to bridge these with experience; choosing the criteria through which it is possible to assess the effects of organizational actions.

Thus, Weick claims that if we go back and engage in building general and explicit theories, may represent a counter-move to attribute value to academic research and leave to business enterprises the production of context-specific knowledge. Also, analyzing relationships in a careful way and bridging induction and deduction may represent an answer to the competition brought by economists. Finally, helping enterprises to reflect on the reasons and goals upon which change is based may be a way to give more relevance to the role of organizational scholars.

Weick also warns that we should abandon all the “obsessions” that characterized the recent evolution of the field (*e.g.*, the obsession of time series of data, for certain theoretical approaches, for concept formulation, for assuming a micro or macro perspective). The difficulty about abandoning these “obsessions” is related to the same problem of identity that the firemen had with their heavy equipment, as it is hard to abandon something to which one’s identity is strongly attached. However, Weick argues that, contrary to the firemen, organizational scholar have the benefit of the foundational “values” proposed by Thompson, which represent a sort of “platform” for a renewal of the field.

Overall, if we look globally at the two last decades of the past century, increasing worries for the future of the journal and the organizational field

seem to emerge clearly. They concern: the choice of the research topics (heavily influenced by the Business Schools), the decrease of papers with significant theoretical contribution, the weakening of the discipline as “witness” of the social changes, an increasing unbalance towards theory testing instead of theory building.

The solutions that eminent authors suggest seem to be oriented towards two main directions. On the one hand, they suggest a radical change in the academic incentive systems and in the refereeing policies of journals. On the other hand, they also suggest to go back to the traditional values laid out by the founders, and specifically the principles proposed by Thompson in his original article.

2000 – Today: the rise of the impact factor

The years after 2000, both for *ASQ* and, more generally, for the organizational studies, can be summarized in the following way. On the one hand, we observe a continuation of the same trends that started in the two previous decades, both in terms of the dominant perspectives and in terms of methodological approaches. On the other hand the same worries that some eminent scholars pointed out in the previous years are not addressed – quite the contrary, it seems that the same concerns increase and become more widespread. If anything, those concerns become more precise and concrete. In this paragraph we will focus on a few contributions that help us pin-pointing such concerns. A useful starting point is Palmer’s article of 2006, published for the celebration of the 50th anniversary of *ASQ*. It is particularly significant as Palmer was the editor of *ASQ* between 2002 and 2008. In such paper he proposed a wide and detailed reflection on the state of organizational studies, and *ASQ* in particular. He describes seven typical “controversies” around about the organizational field, and also he proposes his own interpretation of them. Here we will summarize a few that are more pertinent to our goals.

A first controversy identified by Palmer concerns the relationship between research and practice. On the one hand, there are authors who claim

that research is too abstract, too detached from real world problems. In this sense, organizational research wandered too far from the goals of the founders, which was to maintain the focus on the “administrative process”. On the other hand, other authors argue that research reflects too closely the point of view (and the interests) of the business world. This has consequences on the choice of research topics (*e.g.*, Hinings and Greenwood in 2002 denounce a lack of interest for subjects related to power dynamics), on the choice of the level of analysis (*e.g.*, too much focus on the micro level and not enough on larger scale levels), on the kind of organizations that are studied (*e.g.*, too much focus on business organizations) and on the variables that are analyzed (*e.g.*, too much focus on performance indicators).

A second controversy concerns the production of theory and the original ambition of *ASQ*, which is to contribute to the construction of general theories on organizational phenomena. This idea has been sharply criticized by some authors. Davis and Marquis (2005) argue that such ambition is nothing but “naive scientism” because organizations, as objects of study, are not “timeless objects” but, on the contrary, they are social tools for which change is inherent. Thus, according to these authors, the explanatory power of “old” theories is seriously compromised because the organizational world has changed dramatically. Thus, they propose that the organizational studies should instead identify “social mechanisms” representing the base for “middle range explanations” (not predictions) of organizational phenomena. Other scholars (typically those with a non-positivistic posture) go even further, claiming that organizational research should limit itself to a mere description of phenomena. As we have seen previously, Boulding argued about the relevance of descriptive studies, even though he did not suggest that this should be the only useful approach to the development of organizational knowledge.

A third controversy (strictly related to the previous one) concerns the so-called “variety of paradigms”. Palmer once again starts from the founders of *ASQ*, Thompson and Litchfield, as he emphasizes their original vision for the journal, one that could contribute to a “cumulative” progress of knowledge.

This is the object of the controversy. On the one hand, some authors (Pfeffer - 1993; 1995 - is one of them) see the variety of theoretical orientations as an obstacle to the accumulation of knowledge. Others, on the contrary, see the dominance of few approaches as a sort of “academic totalitarianism” while they celebrate the conceptual variety as an enrichment, a better way to develop the field, which does not necessarily contradicts the ambition of ASQ founders for a process of knowledge accumulation. However, Palmer observes that, according to his analysis, ASQ did not encourage enough variety of contributions.

The last point is also strictly connected to another controversy, concerning the research methods and techniques. Palmer focus specifically on qualitative *vs.* quantitative techniques, and inductive *vs.* deductive methods. Again, the controversy is about the usefulness of a variety of techniques and methods. Palmer’s conclusion is that ASQ, as well as the majority of journals, are more and more dominated by what he calls “non-systematic deductive methods”, typically accompanied by quantitative techniques.

There are other controversies that Palmer describes (*e.g.* anglo-centrism, the relationship with other fields of study). Overall, his position is that these are *not* real controversies, although they are often narrated and experienced as such by most scholars. Instead, these should be considered as choices that can and must live together, because they often strengthen each other. For example, Palmer claims that it is not just possible, but also desirable, to have at the same time general theories and context-specific theories. Similarly, it is possible and desirable to have a variety of conceptualizations and approaches without compromising a process of knowledge accumulation within each approach or perspective. Finally, he argues that the distinction between inductive and deductive methods, and their connection with qualitative / quantitative techniques, is misleading, as there are very relevant synergies and complementarities between them that must be pursued.

Notwithstanding Palmer’s attempt to reinterpret and re-propose each “controversy” in positive, constructive ways, in recent years the worries about the direction taken by the organizational research did not decrease, quite the

contrary. Once again *ASQ* is leading the debate, and some significant authors contributed to it. An essay by Davis (*ASQ*'s editor between 2011 and 2016) published in 2015, and the replies by Barley and Weick in 2016 appear to be particularly interesting. We summarize here this exchange.

Davis' (2015) article asks a question that evokes a sort of existential crisis for the field: "what is organizational research is for?" According to the author, the huge development (in terms of sheer number of articles and journals) of organizational and managerial research does not necessarily reflect its "success". More and more problems emerged over time, and even more are bound to emerge in the next few years. So, how to evaluate the quality of research? What does it mean, for the development of the field, the incoming era of "big data"? How do we face, in theoretical terms, the issue of the radical transformation of organizations, from the classic "forms" (such as the bureaucratic form) to "new" forms? Organizational literature, Davis claims, increasingly looks like a self-referential process, where the main goal seems to be its own replication. The main problem is that the assessment of publication emphasizes "novelty" rather than "truth". Davis argues that journals publish what appears to be interesting, counter-intuitive, "new" or "novel" (and one can get to such "novelty" just through clever statistical manipulations, either consciously or not) while what is actually "true", what would actually contribute to the progress of knowledge, becomes neglected. Starbuck's article of 2016, published during *ASQ*'s 60th anniversary, is particularly critical and detailed about the mistakes and the manipulation in the use of statistics for research. According to Davis, the consequence – or maybe the root of all this – is that research assessment is not based on its ability to answer fundamental questions (as it should happen in a "healthy" scientific process) but on its so called "impact", measured as number of citations. The two aspects – nature of contributions and their assessment – influence each other in a vicious cycle: what is "new" and "provocative" has better chances of being cited, independently from its "truth" and its contribution to the process of actual knowledge accumulation. This trend, according to Davis, does not seem likely

to slow down or change any time soon, even though the dangers, the biases and the limits are quite obvious to most scholars. On the contrary, it is plausible that the emerging phenomenon called “big data”, which will provide social scientists with unprecedented amount of data, will likely worsen even more the scenario.

The overall picture, according to Davis, is quite discouraging. In the final part of his article he tries to answer the existential question from which he started: what is organizational research for, and what its constituency should be? Davis’ answer stems from the observation that today scholars are repeatedly asked to do research that has “managerial relevance”. However, Davis reminds us that Thompson, in 1956, warned that “the pressure for immediately applicable results must be reduced” (Thompson, 1956: 102). The research that ASQ aims to publish “must go beyond description and must be reflected against theory” (*ibidem*). According to Davis, Thompson’s was not a call for managerial irrelevance; he was staking a claim for understanding our new organizational world. Thus, the “mission” that Thompson pointed out in 1956 about the need to understand the organizational world seem to be betrayed by the new primacy of novelty over truth. And while it may be argued that the enormous growth of large corporations in the last decades generated an increasing need for research on management, one might also observe that management has deeply changed over the years. Davis argues that the emphasis now is on financial aspects, while artificial intelligence and information technology are quickly decreasing the pervasiveness, and maybe even the relevance, of traditional managerial decision making. If this is true, then Davis suggests that the answer to his question is that the constituency of the organizational research should not be the managers, but society as a whole. According to Davis, the message proposed by Thompson in 1956 is still current and should be reconsidered carefully: organizational research, today more than ever, needs to emphasize “the combination of inductive and deductive methods, the use of the tools of basic social science, the benefits of an

interdisciplinary orientation (which must surely include connections with information science), and the importance of theory” (Davis, 2015: 186).

Stephen Barley was invited to reply to Davis in occasion of the 60th anniversary of *ASQ*. On the one hand, he shares Davis’ concerns (Barley, 2016). Interestingly, he suggests that, for the same reasons that Davis exposed, the organizational research is not able to have a voice about the most relevant modern social issues: inequality, poverty, terrorism, élites, environment, privacy. Organizational research has even a hard time understanding the most recent organizational transformations, such as the “gig economy”, the “sharing economy”, the business networks, the cooperative processes – even though, Barley suggests, the decline of the classic bureaucratic form is not so clear or obvious.

Barley’s diagnosis is mostly centered on the academic incentives to publication, and on the refereeing processes, which together create the perverted effects described by Davis. Also, Barley suggests that largely books, not articles, brought about the most interesting theoretical perspectives. Maybe we should reconsider the advantages of books over articles, together with the incentive systems. The flexibility and the scope of reflections that the “book form” permits would probably allow to better address questions that are really worthwhile answering. More specifically, it would be important to understand how organizations, which occupy such a relevant space in today’s world, influence social changes in terms of lawmaking, government, family structures, environmental and climate changes, democracy and society in general.

Another interesting reply to Davis’ reflection comes from Karl Weick (2016). He mostly focuses on a specific aspect in Davis’ argument, which is the idea that “it is difficult to point to many areas of settled science when it comes to organizations” (Davis, 2015: 180). The fact that a “settled science” is lacking, and that this constitutes a significant problem for the organizational field, is the main reason of Weick’s disagreement in relation to Davis’ position. Organizational research, Weick claims, cannot and should not aspire to become a “settled science”, because the activity of social research is based on

comprehension, hence it depends on its constraints and on its interpretative processes, which are unavoidably connected to the subjectivity of researchers. The ideas of “neutrality” and “objectivity” upon which a vision of a social science that “settles” is based, is illusory. The goals of organizational research should be not to “settle”, but to build an interpretative “capacity” rather than to solve problems. Maybe, the author suggests, we are still in a phase where we are trying to build meanings about the present experience rather than actually advancing our theories.

To conclude, the last 15 years of *ASQ*’s history (and the history of the organizational field, in general) seem to show two trends that, on the surface, seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, some worrying phenomena seem to increase, such as research fragmentation, decrease or even complete ceasing of significant, new theory production, homologation of methods and approaches, and decrease in relevance in relation to the big organizational, economic, social and political issues. On the other hand, the awareness and the discomfort of many scholars facing these trends also seems to increase, since one can observe that in those cases in which scholars are called to reflect upon the field’s state of the art, most voices seem to be almost unanimous in pointing out the dangers, the contradictions, the biases and the problems that we described above. In other words, there seems to be a tension between a deep dissatisfaction for the current state of affairs, and the difficulty in finding viable, practical solutions to the problems.

Conclusions

ASQ’s history deeply influenced the evolution of the organizational thought. It is a particularly rich history, and in a single article it is not possible to even get close to a precise and complete account of it. We just outlined some moments, in such history, that seemed to us crucial or at least interesting, in which some very significant protagonists of such history, like the founders, the editors and other eminent scholars, discussed the state of the art of the journal and, more or less directly, the state of the field. To conclude, we would like to

point out some aspects that, in this narration, we believed that emerged with particular strength.

First, it seems important to notice that the epistemological posture of each scholar influence not only, as it is obvious, his / her research approach, but also his / her interpretation of the state of research process itself, the situation of the research community, his / her position in the (real or apparent) controversies, his / her way of setting goals and desirable theoretical trajectories. In other words, we should never forget that the debate *about* research is somewhat similar and connected to the debate *within* research.

Second, if we reflect on the role of theory production, and its evolution over time, it seems that one might observe an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, it seems clear that, over the decades, the production of “general”, innovative theories declined quite rapidly, especially in the last three decades. One would be hard pressed to point out the emergence of new, recent major “schools of thought”, characterized by the richness and influence of those that emerged before the 90s. At the same time, one could argue that theory production, in a much smaller sense, is more present now than ever, in all major journals, including *ASQ*. In almost every single published paper it is paramount that the author provides some sort of “theoretical contribution”. The problem is that such theory production is so fragmented, so minuscule, so marginal (and, in the worst cases, so suspiciously connected to very specific data or to cleverly crafted statistical techniques), that in most cases it becomes irrelevant. As Davis said, novelty seems to prevail over truth. Statistical acrobatics prevail over thought. Theory production seems to be everywhere and, for this reason, it is actually nowhere.

Finally, Thompson’s legacy (we refer here mostly to Thompson’s role as founder of *ASQ*) seems to be at the same time forgotten, even betrayed, and yet still very current and relevant. It is obviously betrayed, if we observe the huge distance between the biases about the current state of organizational research that Davis and many others pointed out, and Thompson’s goals and vision for *ASQ* and the future of the field. However, Thompson’s legacy also seems to be

very meaningful today, at least in the way some eminent scholars think about possible solutions to those biases and problems. As we illustrated above, several scholars refer to that vision, to those goals, to those indications provided by Thompson in his role as the visionary founder of ASQ, as general guidelines to what a radical, positive change in the organizational field should look like. We strongly support this idea. We think that going back to the roots, for the organizational field, might be the only way to regain its relevance in a highly “inter-connected”, highly “social”, highly “organized” world that desperately needs, today more than ever before, real progress in the ability to produce relevant organizational knowledge.

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Organization Science: recent theories and research

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Introduction

This study includes the findings of a bibliographic search carried out in the *Organization Science* journal, founded by Richard Daft and Arie Lewin in 1990. The analysis covered the period from January 1st, 2000 to December 31st, 2016. It was aimed at pursuing two different goals: on the one hand, to understand if the work by James D. Thompson still represents a central reference among organization studies and, on the other, to assess the degree of novelty of the organizational theories that were built in the reference period, when compared to the existing perspectives.

The analysis was carried out on a sample of articles published in the above-mentioned time period. These were selected when the terms “organization theory” or “organizational theory” were present within the title, the abstract, the key-words, and the text. Selections classified as “Research Article” and “Perspective” were analyzed, while papers published in the “special issues” were excluded. The final sample comprised 228 papers. For each of them, data was collected concerning the authors’ affiliation, the type of research (theoretical *vs.* empirical), the methods adopted (qualitative *vs.* quantitative, mixed, etc.), the theoretical school of reference, and where it was made explicit by the authors.

Organization Science in the 2000s: radiography of a journal

The analysis of the 228 papers that were published in the sections “research article” and “perspective”, extracted from *Organization Science* and consistent with the criteria that were set out in the previous paragraph, allowed us to shed light on the main features of the journal’s scientific production over the time period considered.

At first, one can observe a high variety in terms of research topics, methods, and theoretical perspectives. There are no privileged topics, except within each single “special issue”; likewise, there is neither any marked orientation to a particular type of analysis, nor an absolutely dominant theory. This characteristic feature of the journal seems to be the result of an editorial policy consciously oriented “to [...] embracing multiple disciplinary perspectives and methods” (Daft, Lewin, 1990: 7-8). This policy is supported by the choice to co-opt into the *editorial board* scholars from different theoretical perspectives and research traditions, and by the opportunity for the authors to indicate at least one reviewer, all to prevent “a single mindset or point of view” (Daft, Lewin, 1990: 7).

As regards the content of research that was published, it is possible to distinguish three sub-periods: in the early 2000s articles focusing on the macro-themes of organizational behavior, organization design, and the tradeoff between strategy and organization choices prevail. In the second half of the first decade these themes become progressively less predominant as there is a wider diffusion of studies dealing with organizational change and networks. The last five years show research on organizational behavior again in a dominant position, side by side with studies on change processes. It is striking how little weight has been given to research on work organization throughout the entire time period considered. However, this field of study has recently been revived by contributions on some topics that are typically transversal to managerial disciplines, such as knowledge management and learning.

As concerns the type of research conducted, studies along the continuum from fully theoretical to fully empirical are present throughout the entire period. Empirical research with some theoretical implications prevails in a marked way, while theoretical contributions have concentrated in some “special issues”, concerning above all emerging themes, where the need to build a solid theoretical background is felt most keenly.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used, while “mixed methods” have seldom been applied. The second part of the timeframe shows a

growing prevalence of quantitative analysis tools, especially “cross-sectional” ones, yet their dominant position never completely marginalizes qualitative analysis.

The theoretical matrix is rarely made explicit in the papers, thus confirming that organization theory is drifting towards a “problem-driven” approach that Davis and Marquis (2005: 334) depict as “theoretically agnostic”. Over a quarter of the articles that have been analyzed are hardly attributable to any theoretical perspective; however, if we also consider the articles of uncertain attribution, they amount to nearly one third of the total sample.

When the theoretical placement of the contributions is made explicit or clearly recognizable, bounded rationality and neo-institutional perspectives are rewarded. A good number of papers can be traced back to the contingency theory and to evolutionary and ecological perspectives; moreover, contributions that state their adherence to the structuralist approach occupy a significant place. Two other perspectives are also frequent: the “network theory” and the set of those that can be defined “knowledge theories” (knowledge-based view, resource-based view) and “learning theories” (organizational learning, learning organization). However, these last domains cannot be regarded as theoretical perspectives in which we can recognize a shared and readily identifiable core of assertions. It is in fact a kind of “galaxy” of theories that develop around the observation of aggregating processes among firms and processes of knowledge management and learning. All the main theoretical strands, except for the “critical” approach, are represented throughout the time period.

It may be surprising to note that the contingency perspective, because of its numerous articulations, the character of mainstream theory consolidated over time, and its rooting in dissemination manuals, does not show an even more frequent reference. Browsing the articles, one can still assume that many authors, who do not explicitly state their belonging to one or the other school of thought, are not truly “stateless”, but unconsciously adhere to adaptation logics which, by their very nature, are related to the contingency perspective.

Quotes and uses of Thompson's work

James D. Thompson is cited in the bibliography of 61 of the 228 reviewed articles, that is, in just over a quarter of the total. In itself, this figure says little or nothing, and it can afford the most disparate interpretations. It is a considerable number, if we recall that the journal was born in 1990, that is, 17 years after the premature death of the author of *Organizations in Action*, and therefore cannot boast a direct collaboration. On the contrary, it is a paltry number, if we consider that in the online presentation of *Organization Science* it is stated that the journal is "widely recognized as one of the top journals in the fields of strategy, management, and organization theory". The timing distribution of Thompson's quotes shows no particular trend; the oscillations from one year to another, sometimes marked, can be traced back both to the number of articles selected for each year and to the presence of special issues whose contents deal with domains and subjects of study more or less favorable to the transposition of the author's thinking.

For those who believe Thompson's contribution to be of utmost importance in the context of organizational theories, the relatively low frequency with which *Organizations in Action* is invoked cannot be considered a cause of great satisfaction. This is perhaps all the more true if we consider the variety of themes touched by Thompson in his reflection - from rationality to uncertainty, from technical interdependencies to coordination and control processes, from the evaluation of efficiency and adequacy to the relationship between incentives and contributions - we could reasonably expect a more widespread reference to his theory. In fact, *Organizations in action* lends itself to being cited by authors who deal with organization design as well as by scholars of organization behavior, thanks to the transversal nature of Thompson's theoretical construction (Maggi, 1988/1990: 2) and to the stated intention of the author to pursue an interdisciplinary vision of organizational action (Thompson, 1967: vii-ix).

Many of the references concern the concepts of interdependence and coordination. Interdependence is sometimes referred to technological varieties,

or it is regarded as a phenomenon that gives rise to some coordination needs. The intention of the authors can be to present the taxonomy of one or the other, as well as to highlight the possible forms of coordination, and finally to link one with the other. In the latter case, it is not always underlined that the use of coordination forms for interdependence resolution is thought by Thompson in a cumulative logic, and not as a bi-univocal correspondence. Still in the topic of coordination, the criteria for grouping positions and organizational units into higher-level units - hence to coordination actions involving particular design choices - are recalled only sporadically.

Quite frequent is also the reference to the concepts of “boundary spanning roles” and “buffer units”, within contributions dealing with the theme of uncertainty coping. This particular issue is recalled with a certain frequency; yet, most scholars solely consider the structural solutions that allow, alternatively, to directly expose the technical core to the sources of uncertainty present in the task environment, or to favor its absorption, protecting it by the action of what we can call “structural dampers”. However, there is no reference to the question of exercise of discretion, which is equally relevant in supporting the organizational action aimed at coping with uncertainty.

The control and regulation of decision-making processes is the subject of more sporadic remarks, which do not always indicate a clear transposition of the ideas expressed by Thompson in his main work. Finally, only in rare cases are the concepts related to the complexity of the administrative process resumed: co-alignment, double role of the hierarchy, balance between certainty and flexibility.

Therefore, it is the whole of the second part of *Organizations in Action* that is underestimated or completely overlooked by authors who include this work in their bibliographic references. However, the significance of this “vacuum” is not uniform. In fact, it is one thing to observe the shortage of references to concepts used by Thompson, but for which we are debtors to other illustrious scholars of organization theory: in the first place the “decision-making premises” or the relationship between “incentives and contributions”, topics

related to Herbert Simon (1947) and Chester Barnard (1938) respectively, as well as references to the management of coalitions and organizational goals, attributable *in primis* to March and Cyert (1963), and it is another thing entirely to note the lack of interest, if not a real disinterest, in theoretical issues about which Thompson can be considered the initiator, or in concepts he originally crafted or reworked (among these, the “motivation to discretion”, the “preferences on the results”, the “desirability standards”, and the “knowledge of cause-effect relations”).

Let us turn for a moment to the issue of the exercise of discretionary power. The reasons underlying the choice to privilege this topic are two-fold. First, there is the conviction that its incorporation into organizational studies could contribute to revitalizing the debate on work organization, which appeared to be withering, at least in *Organization Science*. Second, there is the awareness of the dense pattern of relationships that arise between this fundamental action process, the choices about organization design, and control processes.

Here, Thompson’s contribution to organizational theory appears to be fundamental, thanks to the distinction between *attributed* discretion and *exercised* discretion. He identifies some possible conditions that “enable” the transition from the possibility of exercise to the actual exercise, emphasizing how this misalignment represents a further limitation of the mainstream approach to organizational design. Positivist theories, in fact, focus only on the degree of discretion attributed in the design, while it is disinterested in the consequences of identifying more or less wide discretionary areas. Discretion is therefore a topic of potential interest for those who propose contributions to organizational design, especially at the micro level, as well as for organizational behavior scholars. On the whole, as we have seen, many of the studies in the *Organization Science* journal that were analyzed can be traced back to these macro-themes. Moreover, to observe that one of the key-issues for understanding concrete organizational dynamics is actually ignored in the scientific debate of one of the major journals, leaves us perplexed.

Thompson is cited by authors who recognize themselves in the most varied theoretical perspectives, perhaps thanks to the variety of issues and concepts he deals with, which cover much of the debate in organizational theory. However, contingency theory is the most recurring theoretical reference in the contributions cited by the author of *Organizations in Action*, followed by the perspective of bounded rationality. There are also many scholars of the neo-institutionalist school, those who recognize themselves in the agency theory, those related to the resources/knowledge perspectives, as well as to the “network theory”.

In some of the contributions that were examined, Thompson’s reading as a situationalist scholar is explicit, and it does not leave a shadow of a doubt. For example, there are those who refer to a contingent approach to organizational design, or to the alignment of the structure to environmental conditions or, finally, to the relationship between managerial decisions and environmental contingencies. In other articles Thompson’s citation is associated with that of scholars that are unanimously recognized as the “founding fathers” of the situational perspective (Davis, Marquis, 2005; Guthrie, Datta, 2008). Beyond these cases, however, the absolute preponderance of the references to the association between forms of interdependence and co-ordination – placed in the wider frame of the relationship between technology and structure - still makes us think of a circumscribed view of his work. From this, the authors extracted the concepts that are linked to the situational perspective (Barki, Pinsonneault, 2005; Siggelkow, Rivkin, 2005; Volberda *et al.*, 2012).

It may be worth noting that scholars who interpret Thompson’s thought in such a perspective are not necessarily associated with contingency theory. Indeed some of them cite *Organizations in Action* in reference to process aspects rather than in terms of a deterministic relationship between technology and structure, or between interdependencies and coordination (as is the case with Cardinal *et al.*, 2011). On the contrary, it is not difficult to find an interpretation of Thompson’s thought that is flattened on contingentist positions in contributions that do not clarify their theoretical placement: it could almost be

said that a certain “theoretical confusion” leads to not being able to discern Thompson’s originality of thought with respect to the situational approach, causing a more or less conscious adherence to the mainstream vision.

An equally important aspect concerns the “weight” of Thompson’s citations in defining the theoretical basis on which the article is constructed. From the reading of the articles, it appears that the references to the author of *Organizations in Action* are marginal, when not merely a “courtesy”. Only 7 of the 61 citations in the selected articles can be considered fairly or very relevant for building the theoretical basis of the research. Curiously, there is a high concentration of these articles (5 out of 7) between 2003 and 2006, while the remaining two are in 2008 and 2011.

Two of them, in particular, deserve to be mentioned. The first (Smith, Tushman, 2005) is perhaps the only one among those analyzed that invokes the contradiction between certainty and flexibility; it argues that this intrinsic tension in organizational action has been largely disregarded, remaining on the margins of the theoretical debate. According to the authors, Thompson’s message, along with Barnard’s (1938), should once again take a leading role in organizational analysis; this would have a positive impact on the understanding of complex systems.

The second article (Aguilera *et al.*, 2008) focuses on analyzing the role of interdependencies between the firm and its environment in determining the effectiveness of different corporate governance practices. More than the generic call to adopt an open system approach in the study of governance practices, it is interesting to note the reference to the concept of variability in the interdependencies between the organization and its environment. Taking variability as a key-concept would allow the authors to better address the problems highlighted by agency and stakeholder theories in the study of governance systems.

Aside from the presence or absence of a reference to Thompson, as the last point in the analysis, it seemed interesting to try to discern whether there were articles that appear to be influenced by his thought. To this end, we

propose to re-open the question of discretion; we obviously limit ourselves to considering those articles where the topic of discretionary behavior occupies a prominent place. The four articles selected with this criterion point to three different situations.

In the contributions of Simons (2002) and Farh *et al.*, (2004) there are no grounds to think about a possible misalignment between attributed discretion (designed) and actually exercised discretion (acted). In the first article, the concept of “discretionary service behavior” is explicitly linked to the theory of psychological contract and the analysis is centered on the alignment between what managers say and what they really do. In the second instead, discretionary behavior is associated with the concept of “extra-role behavior” and, consequently, with the studies on so-called “organizational citizenship”.

On the contrary, in the article by Perrone *et al.* (2003), developed in the sphere of “role theory”, the authors implicitly make a distinction between “role autonomy” and “discretionary behavior”, without however focusing on the question of any discrepancy between discretionary scope and its concrete exercise. Thompson is cited in this article, but only for a generic quote on the concept of interdependence, while his reflection on discretion does not receive the due attention.

Finally, the way in which Gibbons and Henderson (2012) deal with the question of discretionary behavior - starting from the example of the “andon cord” (Toyota Production System) - highlights some traits in common with Thompson, who is not mentioned, however. Certainly, it is difficult to see if the reading of *Organizations in Action* has inspired the authors of the article, or whether they have autonomously developed such convergent reflections.

The small number of articles on one topic, discretionary power, which, although relevant, does not fully reflect the wealth of Thompson’s thought, suggests that we should proceed with great caution in drawing any definitive conclusions. Here we limit ourselves to hypothesizing that the author of *Organizations in Action* is likely to have influenced organizational studies more than the number of citations tells us. However, there can be no doubt that his

name is mainly associated with ideas and concepts that, over time, have benefited from the light reflected by the “mirrors” of contingency theory. This “homologation” process may have resulted in lesser visibility, if not the complete vanishing of some of his more original ideas.

New theory: reality or illusion?

The issue of the development of organizational theory is at the center of some contributions that have emerged in recent years in international scientific literature. Ultimately, the reflections of the authors who have been involved in evaluating the “state of health” of organization studies reveal a *chiaroscuro* picture, with accents ranging from untold pessimism to an accentuated optimism. The prospects for development of the field of study are not questioned: there is a substantial convergence regarding the opportunities for the expansion and enrichment of organization studies. On the contrary, the assessments regarding the progress of the theoretical advances observed in the recent past are diametrically opposed.

For example, Davis (2010: 2) argues that in the face of the huge increase in the availability of data and information for research purposes, “it is not obvious that organization theory has become more precise, more general, or more accurate as a result”. He argues that “this is due to three difficulties that additional data cannot fully resolve: a) researchers lack experimental control, limiting their ability to draw causal inferences, and are largely inattentive to the standards for valid quasi-experimental design; b) organizations are more appropriately construed as tools rather than as natural objects susceptible to “laws”; and c) the regularities underlying organizational dynamics change over time such that empirical generalizations that are true during one period may be false in a different period.” Starting from the assumption that organizational theory can be considered an autonomous field of social sciences only from the almost contemporary foundation of *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1956) and *Academy of Management Journal* (1958), Davis believes that “the theoretical flowering of organization theory’s first two decades was arguably followed by

three decades of muted theoretical progress or even stagnation [...] organizational research can sometimes appear like a living museum of the 1970s". According to the author, the current state of organizational theory is therefore a "theoretical stalemate". Davis attributes this condition to a sort of misunderstanding ("misapprehension") regarding the topics studied. "The problem with organization theory is not that it is imprecise or not general enough - it is that the field has applied the wrong standards of progress" (Davis, 2010: 4).

A diametrically opposed reading is offered by Lounsbury and Beckman (2015: 288), who argue that "organization theory is extremely vibrant and highlights several areas where there are flourishing and generative developments". They indicate five theoretical domains in which "exciting recent developments" are observed: institutional logics, categorization (organizational populations' ecology perspective), networks, behavioral theory and finally, what the authors define "practice theories", to indicate the contributions characterized by an approach that emphasizes the "co-constitutive" aspects of structure and action and the idea of "situated action". Moreover, according to the authors, the progressive greater internationalization of organizational theory constitutes a further important signal of dynamism in theory, as the "demographic dynamics" of organizational studies "can infuse the field with new perspectives, new viewpoints, and a focus on new problems (or at least a focus on problems from a different perspective)" (*ibid.*: 291-292).

The picture emerging from the analysis of the 228 articles published in *Organization Science* is such that it does not totally contradict either of the two previously mentioned research efforts. Almost 80% of the authors state that their research contributes to the advancement of organizational theory; however, this should be considered as raw data.

An evaluation from the outside, though spoiled by individual perceptual elements, suggests placing the selected articles along the incremental-radical continuum. On the basis of this criterion, we believe that we can recognize the absolute prevalence of contributions that are supposed to give an incremental

value to the advancement of organizational theory, as well as very few studies that may aim to become new landmarks for this field of study.

It also seems obvious how some theoretical perspectives actually show greater vivacity. Among these, as can easily be understood, we mention the neo-institutionalist approach, the resource- and competence-based theories, as well as the bounded rationality school. This is also thanks to the journal's editorial board's choice to devote an ample special issue to the legacy of the thought of Cyert and March (1963), for the 40th anniversary of the publication of *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*.

What can be recognized as a widespread incremental character of theoretical production seems to somehow contradict both the Editorial Statement of the journal, which expresses the hope of sending out "manuscripts that break new ground rather than ones that make incremental contributions", and the original intentions of the founders. In fact, with the new journal, they have proposed to "begin to break out of the normal science straitjacket", as the title of their first editorial asserts (Daft, Lewin, 1990). However, it remains to be understood whether the idea of new theory, or significant progress at the theoretical level, is the same as what is welcomed in this study. For our part, we believe that any new theory is recognizable for some traits of discontinuity with the existing perspectives, and therefore is not interpretable as a result of a process of "pullulation" from previous theories.

In some articles, perhaps more than "incremental" production of theory it seems more appropriate to speak of "marginal" innovation, essentially aimed at improving the interpretative capacity of contexts and dynamics characterized by high complexity. In other articles, the incremental character of theory production is outlined by the attempt to build connections between different pathways of research, a "bridge" between theories whose epistemologies are not irreconcilable (see *e.g.*: Brusoni, Prencipe, 2006; Levinthal, Rerup, 2006). The search for such connections is encouraged by the journal itself, as effectively evidenced by the choice of cover: the image of a bridge as a symbol of encounter between different disciplines and research traditions (Argote, 2014).

Without wishing to deny or diminish the value of this effort, we believe that the solicitation itself towards the integration of different theoretical perspectives can be interpreted as a sign of awareness of a certain drying up of the ability to produce radically new theory by organization scholars.

The perception that radically innovative contributions on a theoretical level are extremely rare in the time period under review finds comfort in quotation statistics, reported in the editorial for 25 years from the founding of *Organization Science*, written by editors-in-chief who led the journal. In fact, only one of the ten most mentioned articles, among those published between 1990 and 2014 (Zollo, Winter, 2002) falls within the period we examined. This was despite the fact that the journal was initially published quarterly, and then became bimonthly as of 1995, and that the number of articles published in one year grew over time, up to 90 in some of the last few years. While it is not correct to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the number of citations and the article's relevance in terms of theoretical advancement, we believe that the number of citations represents a surrogate indicator which is to be considered.

Ultimately, the analysis conducted on *Organization Science* has allowed us to gather more than one clue leading us to assert that the generating process of organization theories has weakened over time. Since the beginning of the new millennium, there seems to be no trace of that propulsive force which, from the 1970s to the end of the last century, had led to the formation and development of numerous schools of thought and research traditions. Those are the very same schools that still continue to represent the main reference points in organizational research.

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The sociological view and organization theory

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Introduction: journals and methods

The aim of our contribution is to present a review, albeit partial, of the prevailing sociological approaches and topics concerning organization theory. We focused on two of the main American journals of sociology: the *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS, the official journal of the American Sociological Association) and the *American Sociological Review* (ASR). These sources are obviously biased both because we didn't consider important European sociological journals, and because many sociological contributions can be found in other core journals specifically devoted to organizations, such as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Organization Science*, etc.

Nevertheless, we chose these two because, albeit generalist, they have published articles that have become milestones for organization theory. To cite the most renowned: the articles of Meyer and Rowan (Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony, AJS, 1977, 83, 2); Hannan and Freeman (The Population Ecology of Organizations, AJS, 1977, 82, 5; Structural Inertia and Organizational-Change, ASR, 1984, 49, 2); Williamson (The Economics of Organization - The Transaction Cost Approach, AJS, 1981, 87, 3); DiMaggio and Powell (The Iron Cage Revisited - Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields, ASR, 1983, 48, 2); Granovetter (The Strength of Weak Ties, AJS, 1973, 78). Thompson himself published two articles in AJS, one in 1956 (Authority and Power in "Identical" Organizations) and one in 1962 (Organizations and Output Transactions).

We focused our analysis on articles published between 2000 to 2015. We used Jstor advanced research by typing in the exact phrases "organization theory" or "organizational theory". This criterion has many limitations: the

most serious one is that articles concerning organizational theory without explicitly naming it would be excluded. The search didn't show, for example, some relevant theoretical articles on network theory, such as Burt's (2004) well known paper on structural holes, which is a classic work on the study of networks, but also the articles of Podolny (2001) and Uzzi and Spiro (2005) on small world theory. Similarly, some articles on categorization and organizational identity (Zuckerman, 2003; Rao *et al.*, 2005), or on performance feedback theory (DiPrete *et al.*, 2010) didn't come out. This drawback is not of little relevance, considering that Lounsbury and Beckman (2015) cite the above mentioned papers as the very proof of the vitality of organizational theory. Another limitation stems from the time span that may imply relevant exclusions, as in the case of Kamps and Pólos' article (1999) concerning Thompson's *Organizations in Actions*.

We found only 33 articles corresponding to our criteria in AJS, and we had to exclude five of them because they did not deal with organizational issues (three of them deal with social organization theory, one is about the spread of sociological ideas among the general public and beyond disciplinary boundaries and the last is a commentary on adaptive models in sociology). In ASR we found 49 articles responding to our criteria. However we excluded 10 of them: in some cases they dealt with topics (labor market, social capital) adopting the perspective of economic sociology without any reference to organizational dimensions and approach; other articles concern typical sociological issues, such as gender, racial discrimination or immigration. As we will show below, in our selection there are interesting pieces of work which deal with the relationship between these social phenomena and organizations. However, in the contributions excluded from our analysis there was no connection with organizations, organizational concepts and theories.

For the analysis of the selected articles we used a template considering authors' affiliation, main subjects, methodology, approach, references to Thompson's work. In the following paragraphs we will present a qualitative description of prevailing approaches and topics (§ 2), before discussing the

cross fertilization between general sociological theory and organization studies (§ 3) and the neglected connections with Thompson (§ 4). As concerns the methodology, all 67 examined articles, except three, are based on empirical research. There is a predominance of quantitative analysis, with a large majority of studies based on longitudinal analysis (45 articles), followed by single and multiple case studies (16). The case studies usually employ mixed techniques, often matching quantitative and qualitative analysis. Among qualitative methods, documentary analysis prevails especially in tracing historical cases; only three articles are based on ethnographic studies.

Prevailing approaches and topics

The large majority of articles, in both journals, adopt the population ecology or the new institutionalist approaches. This is particularly evident in AJS, where most authors are based in North America (while ASR gives more space to authors based in Europe and Asia) and belong to research teams, such as the one from Stanford University, who use these theoretical frameworks.

Population ecology theory is used to analyze competitive change, tied to dependence on the resources needed for survival, and institutional change, connected with the need for legitimacy. Organizational forms investigated range from banks or handcrafted beer producers, to trade unions, cooperatives or lobbying organizations.

Several papers develop the recent research stream on identity differentiation and categorization as means of social legitimization to understand the emergence and the survival of a specific organizational form. For example, Carroll and Swaminathan's article (2000) on handcrafted beer producers presents a development of the "resource partitioning model" which emphasizes the role played by cultural factors and organizational identity in some sectors. Boone *et al.* (2002) adopt a similar model to explain the evolution of the Dutch daily newspaper industry from 1868 to 1994, showing the importance of the political, cultural and religious variables. The resource partitioning model shifts from being a methodological tool to becoming the

main focus of the analysis in the Negro *et al.*'s (2014) essay, which develops the model focusing on previously neglected aspects such as the dynamic underlying the partitioning process and the conditions of market partitioning.

Ruef's piece (2000) on the emergence of new organizational forms in the American health care sector and that of Walker's (2009) on the growth of the grassroots lobbying firms in the US politics can be also placed in the population ecology framework. The former integrates traditional explanations, related to the aggregate density and size of organizations with similar identities, taking into account the identity positioning of the new organizational forms with respect to existing form identities in the community. In so doing they show cross-form legitimation and competition processes. Analyzing data on firm founding events from 1972 to 2002, Walker's article (2009) suggests that, first, the increasing formal organization of civil society has supported the emergence of grassroots lobbying organizations, but later subsequent development of these organizations restricted civic participation while augmenting the voice of private interests in the political and legislative system. In this way, the author uses the population ecology approach to come to pessimistic conclusions on grassroots participation which in some ways seem to echo Philip Selznick's (1949) classic study on TVA.

In our selection there are two contributions by one of the founders of population ecology, Michael Hannan. One, written with Hsu and Koçak (2009), analyzes the effects of market specialization explaining why products spanning multiple categories suffer social and economic disadvantages. The authors develop a theoretical framework by matching the audience-side and the producer-side perspectives, which are traditionally separated. The other contribution by Hannan, together with Baron and Burton (2001), deals with a central theme of the ecological approach, that is the disruptive effect of change. In particular, it focuses on one underpinning mechanism: when employment models and blueprints change, most senior employees prefer to leave the organization - an explanation consistent with the neo-institutionalist notion of cultural imprinting - and the turnover impacts negatively on performances.

The concept of imprinting is also developed by Greve and Rao (2012) who reverse the causal direction originally proposed by Stinchcombe (1965), suggesting that organizations may be the source of imprinting over the environment. The institution of new organizational forms, such as the non-profit organization, do indeed imprint the community with models for action and competences that the community can employ afterwards in different domains.

Among the articles attributable to the population ecology approach, there are also attempts to use it to explain human resource management strategies adopted by organizations: Phillips (2001) connects the likelihood of career mobility with the place the organization occupies in its ecological niche. Doing so, he explains the paradox of why organizations with less chance of survival because of their minor contractual power are those in which promotions are more likely to occur.

In conclusion, with reference to the contributions within population ecology, it's worth emphasizing the development of further theoretical assumptions beyond the initial linkage between density, competitive pressure and institutional legitimacy, on the one hand, and birth rates and mortality rates, on the other. Within this trend, the papers ascribable to this approach tend to highlight the convergences with the neo-institutionalist approach.

Neo-institutionalism is the other well-represented approach, presenting some interesting developments compared to the founding and pre-2000 contributions. First, there is a greater focus on what Friedland and Alford (1991) had already identified as one of the constitutive attributes of neo-institutionalism, that is a "non-functionalist conception of society as a potentially contradictory interinstitutional system" (*ibid.*: 240). In this wake, for example, Sutton (2000) proposes an explanation of the variation in incarceration rates in terms of fluid relations, conflicts and contradictions between institutional fields (military expenditure, welfare and labor market).

Second, "there has been particular attention paid to the development of micro-foundations to bridge more macro structural institutional research to

more situated process studies” (Lounsbury, Beckman, 2015: 294). Turco (2012), for instance, critically reflects on a central theme of neo-institutionalism, that is the process of decoupling. He shows, through a specific case study (an organization offering support and services for new mothers), the possible resistance of the employee towards organizational decoupling required for successful commercialization. On the other hand, Barman (2007) analyzes the influence of macro-institutional factors on gift behaviors at micro level, focusing on how the composition of the organizational field in which both fundraisers and the donors are embedded influences their strategies.

Recoupling, instead of decoupling, is the subject of an article by Hallett (2010), which deliberately recalls the classical work by Meyer and Rowan (1977), asking what happens when a rationalized myth, such as accountability within schools, becomes incarnate and tightly (and not loosely) connected with organizational practices. Moreover he analyzes how and under what conditions the recoupling occurs and its consequences. According to the author, recoupling provides a good example of macro-micro link: “environmental conditions promote recoupling, but recoupling unfolds at micro level, possibly leading to epistemic distress and partisan meaning construction” (Hallett, 2010: 69). Therefore, the findings that emerged from this ethnographic study increase the understanding of the micro-sociological foundations of institutional theory.

Several articles explore the relationship between law and organizations, with particular reference to the “managerialization of the law” (Edelman *et al.*, 2001), that is the process whereby legal principles, as soon as they cross organizational boundaries, are reinterpreted according to managerial logics. This is what is happening, according to the authors, within the rhetoric of diversity management and equal opportunity. To account for this phenomenon, they combine the managerial models literature with the organizational literature deriving from neo-institutionalism. On a similar line of thought, Kelly (2003) provides a review of the institutional theory of law and organizations, highlighting the agency role of actors (in particular, firms’ consultants) in

interpreting and re-constructing the law (she brings the example of the diverse diffusion of two family friendly measures).

Sociologists are particularly interested in investigating how laws and regulations concerning typical sociological issues, such as gender or racial discrimination and segregation, affect organizations and, conversely, how organizations may determine social transformations. We will develop this point in more detail in the next section.

Two contributions focus on organizational field theory, both suggesting different approaches compared to the mainstream literature, which concentrates on the interactions within a particular field. Evans and Kay (2008) argue that in some cases it is useful to study the overlaps between different fields; they test their hypothesis by analyzing the strategic behavior of environmental activists and their ability to exploit their position in the structure of these field overlaps. Wilde *et al.* (2010) examine how variation in the type of organizational field predicts firm leaders' action, by using data from the Vatican Secret Archive, referred to the bishops taking part to the Second Vatican Council, who came from more than 100 countries. According to the authors, while "most studies testing the [new institutional] theory examine a population of firms within one organizational field", providing "useful insights into how firm characteristics predict various organizational outcome [...] such studies cannot examine the effects of the broader organizational field. We hold firm constant [...] and examine how variation in organizational fields (supplied by the more than 100 countries in our analysis), in particular how stable and structured they are, predict firm leaders' actions" (Wilde *et al.*, 2010: 587). Therefore, this study would represent a unique test of new institutionalist theory.

Alternative approaches to organizational ecology and new institutional theory are residual in AJS and of minor importance in ASR. In the wake of network theory, Wang and Soule (2011) analyze how networks among SMOs that collaborate in protests develop organizational learning and the spread of protest tactics. Mizruchi and Brewster Stearns (2001) examine the role of social

networks in bank decision-making, suggesting that bankers are faced with the strategic paradox: their tendency to rely on those they trust in conditions of uncertainty, within dense networks of relations, makes deals more difficult to be closed successfully. Network theory is also used by Keister (2001) to analyze the role of inter-firm relations during the economic transition to a market economy in China, while Lee (2007) adopts this approach to measure the degree of centrality, and therefore the role, played by unions within networks of actors which ensure governance of the political and economic system in industrialized democracies.

Few articles drawing on a constructivist approach deal with organizational behavior. Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) adopt a micro interactionist and constructivist perspective to the study of civic action. They “show how patterned scene styles shape it [civic action] and reveal patterns of action in complex organizations that may span institutional sectors”. Gray and Silbey (2014), drawing on the notion of organizations as networks of subjects with distinct roles, different distribution of authority and expertise, study organizational governance and regulatory compliance. In particular, they focus on safety practices and develop a typology of different interpretations of the regulator (ally, threat or obstacle) depending on the expertise, authority and continuity of the relationship between the organizational member and the regulator himself. A “social constructivist view of financial market behavior” is chosen by Zajac and Westphal (2004) in their study of stock markets. However the authors seem to embed their study within the field of institutional theory, suggesting that the market reaction to a particular corporate practice is not only a function of its inherent efficiency, but depends also on the prevailing institutional logic within the market and on the degree of institutionalization of this practice.

Adopting the above mentioned selection criteria, we found only one article using the framing and sense-making approach: Fiss and Hirsch (2005) trace the emergence of the globalization discourse and concept by a qualitative and quantitative analysis of newspaper articles and corporate press releases.

Doing this, they are able to show how structural factors, such as the increasing internationalization of the US economy and private interests of the main actors involved, shaped the discursive processes and affected the way the concept of globalization was framed and emerged in its current meaning.

Finally, we found articles on the leadership characteristics within civic associations and social movements (Ganz, 2000; Baggetta *et al.*, 2013) and critical contributions to the human capital model highlighting that the investment in human capital is a social product more than the outcome of an individual decision.

It is worth noting the total absence of essays dedicated to public administration and public service organizations within our article selection (an essay on bureaucracies in developing countries, published by McDonnell on ASR, was found extending the research to 2017). We identified several contributions on third sector organizations, such as cooperatives, civic associations, voluntary organizations which show the increasing interest of sociologists for not-for-profit organizations, along with the private for-profit ones. This result may partially be due to the limits of our research, which we have mentioned at the beginning of this contribution, as we could verify by extending our selection using other criteria. But even doing so the broad picture is not altered. A possible explanation lies in the tendency, by sociologists working on public administration and public services, to publish in sociological or, more often, interdisciplinary journals which are specialized in the public sector (*i.e. Public Administration*) or in specific topics concerning also the public sector according to their research interests (*i.e. employment and industrial relations, welfare and social policy*), rather than to publish on general sociological journals like the ones we selected.

This consolidated trend might be the consequence of a loss of interest in public sector organizations by most important sociological journals, which could reflect a certain marginality of sociological theory, compared to other fields of study, in the analysis of public administration phenomena and in its ability to provide analytical tools to deal with its problems.

In this situation, the choice carried out by sociologists of publishing mainly on interdisciplinary journals might be due to their need to enter the debate on the current transformations within public administration with scholars by other disciplines, such as management and law, which provided the prevailing theories underlying public sector reforms in the last thirty years.

Matching sociological and organizational theory

An important contribution to the organizational studies carried out by both journals is the use and elaboration of some topics and concepts typical of general sociological theory to advance our understanding of organizational phenomena. Conversely, a second step in this research process is the study of how organizations may determine social changes in the broader social system.

The clearest example of this perspective is the analysis of the relationship between social movements and organizations, which is fruitfully performed matching sociological literature on social movements and organizational approaches such as the population ecology or the new institutionalism (see also Minkoff, 1997). Social movements are considered as a constituent part of the external organizational environment or, in terms of the new institutionalist theory, of an organizational field, infused with beliefs and values, which acts as a source of institutional pressures. Moreover, as argued by Lounsbury and Beckman (2015: 294) “some research draws on the social movement literature to understand how actors usher new logics into fields”, directly or indirectly promoting relevant changes in these fields and in organizations included in them.

Klaus Weber *et al.* (2009) show how anti-genetic movements affected organizational decision-making in the case of German pharmaceutical firms during the 1980s. Haveman *et al.* (2007) match social movement literature and organizational theory to explain how the Progressive movement helped the bureaucratization of the thrift industry in the early twentieth century in California. Schneiberg *et al.* (2008) illustrate how social movements have historically promoted diversity and alternative organizational forms by

analyzing the relationships between the rise of popular anti-corporate movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the emergence of cooperatives in the US economy. In contrast, in an interesting work on the Southern plantation system, Ruef (2004) identifies the role that social movement may play in order to foster the disappearance of organizational forms. The author develops the micro-macro link by recognizing the agency of workers as well as ecological dynamics in order to explain the observed phenomena.

Negro *et al.* (2013) show how the activation of anti-discriminatory policies is related to the increase and the diversification in forms of commercial organizations linked to certain social movements (specifically the gay and lesbian ones). The explanation provided is that commercial organizations address a wider audience thus signaling the similarity with other groups and favoring the legitimization among the outside public. While many of above mentioned contributions focus on the ability of social movements to affect organizational dynamics and behavior, in this article Negro *et al.* (2013) intend to demonstrate the effects of organizations on the institutional environment which, according to the authors, were originally neglected by ecologists and neo-institutionalists: “the key idea suggests that diverse set of organizational actors can influence broad societal outcomes by shaping systems of values and belief” (*ibid.*: 796).

Ingram and Rao (2004) investigate the role of social movements in the institutionalization of (and the opposition to) new forms of organization, with particular reference to the case of the law against the chains of large distribution. In another article written by the two authors with Yue (Ingram *et al.*, 2010), the focus is on the strategic action of those who are the target of social protest (citing the case of Walmart). The essay has several merits: it draws attention to the geographical dimension of dissent and therefore to the geography of legitimacy, and goes beyond an assumption of population ecology - that prototype members of a given category are more protected from

the risk of being delegitimized - while claiming, at the same time, their strategic capability.

The Walmart case is analyzed in a subsequent article published in ASR by the same authors (Rao *et al.*, 2011), which emphasizes the importance of both regulation (in this case labor law) and social protests, with their geographical differences among US States, in affecting and partially driving organizational choices concerning market and site locations. Martin (2008), instead, focuses on institutionalization and deinstitutionalization within social movements, dealing specifically with unions.

Beyond social movement studies, the analysis of social transformations induced by organizations is central to the interesting article by Stovel and Savage (2006) who analyze the impact of organizational change - in the specific mergers and consequent geographical mobility of employees - on class mobility and social stratification. This article, which partially resembles that by Haveman *et al.* (2007) is remarkable because it integrates the explanation of the emergence of bureaucratic forms based on their technical superiority (connected to the growing size of organizations), with a neo-institutional approach that emphasizes how the external environment and conflicts between cultural practices in an attempt to obtaining legitimation affect change in organizational practices. In particular, the essay looks at the dynamics between particular dimensional crises (those related to acquisitions) and innovations in employment with the diffusion of geographical mobility of workers. Finally, organizational theory and, in particular, the concept of institutionalization are deliberately used by Mora (2014), in order to understand the process of categorization and institutionalization of ethnical minorities during immigration processes.

Other research areas showing a combination between general sociological and organizational studies are diversity management and human resource management. Typical sociological issues such as those related to gender, racial or sexual discrimination or to equal opportunity matters are dealt with and elaborated within organizational contexts, showing the relationships

between social problems and organizational phenomena. As to diversity management, while Herring (2009) supports the idea that a diverse workforce in terms of gender or ethnical groups is beneficial for business by carrying out a quantitative analysis based on data from US National Organizations Survey, Dobbin *et al.* (2011) highlight that differences among US corporations in adopting diversity management programs may often be better explained by organizational factors (such as corporate culture or the high share of women managers), than by external pressures, as suggested by institutional theory.

Sociological literature and organizational studies are matched to investigate whether HRM practices still reflect or are affected by gender or racial discrimination. For example Reskin and McBrier (2000) show how formalizing personnel practices led to a decrease in the men's share of management jobs because it reduces the role of sex-based ascription criteria in staffing managerial jobs. Skaggs (2008) studies which factors contribute to improve gender equity in managerial roles; analyzing the supermarket sector, she shows how coercive pressures (specifically employment discrimination litigation and political orientation of federal courts) and normative ones (rather than mimetic processes) influence strategic action with respect to gender equality. As in other cases, there is an attempt to combine two streams of organizational theory: new institutionalism and strategic choice.

Many contributions analyze the impact of law and regulation against discrimination on hiring and recruitment practices as well as on career mobility, showing that the beneficial effects of new regulations should not be taken for granted as they may not be homogenous among different organizational contexts. On this respect Edelman *et al.* (2011) develop the concept of legal hndogeneity: "a powerful process through which institutionalized organizational structures influence the judiciary concepts of compliance with antidiscrimination law". The hypothesis is that some structural features of workplaces influence judges' perception over whether or not to apply protection against discrimination.

In their longitudinal analysis of the impact of the 1964 Civil Rights Act on employment discrimination and segregation on the basis of race, ethnicity or sex, Tomaskovic-Dewey *et al.* (2006) find that all kinds of segregation declined until 1980, while after that time only sex segregation continued to decline. In a similar way, Hirsh (2009) examines the effects brought by discrimination charges introduced by new regulation in promoting desegregation by sex and race from 1990 to 2002 within a sample of US organizations. Her conclusion is that regulation only indirectly promotes organizational desegregation which, instead, primarily depends on organizational factors. This is especially true in the case of racial minorities, while legal regulation and enforcement seem to be more effective to prevent gender segregation.

The neglect of Thompson's work

Among the selected articles Thompson is quoted only in five cases, three on *AJS* (Ingram *et al.*, 2010; Eliasoph, Lichterman, 2003; Barman 2007) and two on *ASR* (Rao *et al.* 2011; Baggetta *et al.*, 2013). In Baggetta *et al.* (2013) Thompson is simply mentioned as an author who analyzed cooperative strategies and practices while Barman (2007) cites him when referring to co-optation. Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003), while observing that participants activate different scenes for different parts of the organization, refer to Thompson's contribution over this theme in relation to complex organizations.

In the two above mentioned articles written by Ingram, Yue and Rao (Ingram *et al.*, 2010; Rao *et al.*, 2011), reference is made to Thompson's canonical proposition on domain consensus ("Exchange agreements rest on prior consensus on the domain of an organization – a set of expectations about what the organization will and will not do" (Ingram *et al.*, 2010: 56) in order to explain how the protests of social movements against the opening of Walmart stores send signals to executives about domain consensus. Moreover, in the article published on *ASR* in 2011 the authors "unpack" the concept of domain consensus, imagining "a triad, with the state at the top and corporations and activists on the base. One of the dyadic links, that between activists and the

state, is already the focus of extensive attention in the social movement literature. Our findings extend the understanding of the other two links: states and corporations, and corporations and activists” (Rao *et al.*, 2011: 380).

The low number of references to Thompson is quite surprising if we consider that in many cases the proposed analyses are implicitly drawn on his work, in particular as concerns his proposition 2.4: “Under norms of rationality, organizations seek to anticipate and adapt to environmental changes which cannot be buffered or leveled” (Thompson, 1967: 21). To cite some examples, in the above-mentioned articles on Walmart (Ingram *et al.*, 2010; Rao *et al.*, 2011), the idea that new store proposals are a “test-for protest” – that is as a measure to reduce uncertainty - represents an evident attempt to anticipate an element of environmental uncertainty that would be otherwise unavoidable. Again, the organizational strategy of buffering institutional pressures exerted by the environment or the inability to buffer them are at the core of Sauder and Nelson Espeland’s (2009) neo-institutionalist analysis of the effect of rankings on law schools, but Thompson has never been quoted or recalled.

The neglect of Thompson’s work is even more surprising if we consider that in an interesting article published in AJS in 1999, Kamps and Pólos (1999) propose a logical formalization of the underlying argumentation structure for Thompson’s propositions. In so doing, they highlight the points of contact with alternative approaches such as ecological and neo-institutionalist ones, especially in today’s variants where some original positions have been smoothed. As concerns the connection with organizational ecology, Kamps and Pólos note that Thompson’s rational adaptation theory doesn’t imply that organizations can totally control their environments and that intentions and outcomes are in perfect harmony. On the other hand, population ecologists are “acknowledging that organizational changes of some kinds occur frequently and that organizations sometimes even manage to make radical changes in strategies and structures” (Hannan and Freeman, 1984: 149). Kamps and Pólos cite some works that propose how to reconcile adaptation and evolutionary selection perspectives: Tushman and Romanelli (1985); Levinthal (1991);

Amburgey *et al.* (1993). On this issue, it is worth noting that Maggi (1988/1990), in the introduction to the Italian edition of *Organizations in Action*, has already underlined that the alleged “new theories”, which arose after this masterwork, actually developed one part or another of Thompson’s mosaic. In particular, the debt of population ecology towards his work was clearly recalled.

As for the points of contact with new institutional theory, Kamps and Pólos (1999) emphasize that negotiating is in Thompson an implicit way for reducing environmental uncertainty, thus showing possible links with recent theoretical developments on legalization (*supra*): “We proved corollary 4 [Complex organizations negotiate environmental constraints in their controlled environment for their technical core], stating that organizations attempt to reduce constraints in the environment, which corresponds to the findings reported in institutional theory (Edelman, 1992; Sutton *et al.*, 1994; Sutton, Dobbin, 1996)” (Kamps, Pólos, 1999: 1805).

We tried to figure out why Thomson’s work has been substantially neglected in the articles scrutinized. A possible, relatively common interpretation would be that the changes which occurred in the very nature of present day organizations challenge the assumptions made by Thompson, and require an effort to re-interpret his work and to identify the “new questions” it raises. For example, according to Hargadon (2003) not only the problem of buffering the technical core has been revisited by the lean production model, but the “core” of organizations has changed as well. The source of the competitive advantage may stem nowadays from the networks in which the organization is embedded, while the boundaries of the organization have become more blurred. As a consequence, sociological articles on organizations are increasingly interested in the relationship between organizations and their environment, looking more at the outside than within.

At the same time, as we have already said, some of Thompson’s original ideas have undergone a sort of incorporation by theories and approaches, such as new-institutionalism and population ecology, that historically followed his contribution and that, as we have seen, seem to be the prevailing organizational

approaches in the journals we examined. Therefore, we might make the hypothesis that these theories have so assimilated and absorbed some concepts elaborated by Thompson, that they do not feel the need of recalling them, taking them for granted.

Finally, some peculiarities of the sociological discipline may have contributed to the lack of references to Thompson. We refer to the high fragmentation among the sub-disciplines and the different “schools” within each sub-discipline. For example Thompson’s considerations on occupations in contexts characterized by intensive technologies have been hardly recalled by the sociology of professions, because of the separateness of this sub-discipline from the sociology of organizations.

Conclusion

There is a growing debate on the state of organization theory. Pessimistic positions (Davis, 2010; Suddaby *et al.*, 2011) provocatively point out that, after the vivacity of the 60s and 70s, a phase of “existential crisis” (Barley, 2016) and “depression” (Hatch, 2010) has followed. Authors underline the discrepancy between the increasing sophistication of methodology, made possible by the availability of big datasets, and the minor theoretical progress that “takes the form of qualifications or modest modifications” (Davis, 2010) within the 70s-era “paradigms”. What is prevailing, according to this view, is a sort of “statistical fetishism” (*ibidem*) due to the necessity to rely on longitudinal analysis of large samples, using many control variables, in order to publish in high-ranking journals. Notwithstanding the pessimism of his analysis, Davis (2010) concludes suggesting a re-orientation of organizational theory towards major issues without the claim of being general, predictive or precise. He also proposes to focus on historically conditioned social mechanisms that provide “an intermediate level of analysis between pure description and story-telling, on the one hand, and universal social laws, on the other”. A re-orientation is recommended also by Barley (2016) who welcomes the exit of organizational theory from business schools, hoping that it would, rather, be able to develop in

an integrated way with schools of engineering and public policy. Hatch (2010) expresses concern, instead, for the exclusion of organizational theory from business schools that she connects with the dissolution of the very idea of organization as a concrete entity (meso level of analysis), in favor of prevailing explanations that look at the micro level (single agents or working groups) or at the macro dimension (the institutional environment). This is linked to changes in the subject of study: large bureaucratic organizations are less and less “stable and bounded (but permeable)” (Davis, 2006), while alternative ways of organizing (sharing economy, networks, cooperatives, etc.) are emerging.

On an opposite stance, more positive views emphasize, instead, the vitality of some areas of research characterized by a process of cumulative knowledge (Corbett *et al.*, 2014; Lounsbury, Beckman, 2015). In defense of the good health of organizational theory, Lounsbury and Beckman (2015) point out the dissemination of new theoretical orientations: institutional logics, categorization, networks, performance feedback theory and practice theory.

Both pessimistic and optimistic positions converge over the dominance of the neo-institutional theory and population ecology (Davis, 2010) but, again, with different perspectives. While critics consider it a demonstration of lack of renewal in this field, the latter emphasize that both the new institutional theory and the ecology of populations have developed significantly from the original model of the 1970s.

As concerns our findings, they seem to partially support the second claim as the selected articles demonstrate both interesting developments within the prevailing theoretical approaches and organizational transformations (*e.g.* networks), but also the hybridization with other sociological branches. Moreover, they confirm Scott’s (1996) reply to Stern and Barley (1996), in defense of the permanence of the original agenda on the analysis of relevant social issues among sociological journals. Many of the articles previously discussed deal indeed with the connections between broader societal processes and organizational theory, considering the implications of organizational action on society and vice versa. This is the case of the research area on gender and

diversity and of the vibrant field which integrates social movement theory and organizational theory highlighting similar underlying mechanisms (network diffusion, ecological processes, resource mobilization, etc.) (Ruef, 2005). As Scott (1996: 166) argued, many scholars we analyzed “rather than retreating in defeat [...] have systematically elevated their level of analysis” not considering the individual organization or a population of organizations but the organizational field (as in the case of the research on healthcare).

Finally, it is worth noting that in many cases the long-time perspective is emphasized and it may be a chance of responding to the call for the integration of history in organization studies (Wadhwani, Bucheli, 2013). Some consider the re-emergence of history in organizational theory as an “historic turn” as both neo-institutionalism, evolutionary theory and actor-network theory have adopted historical assumptions and arguments. On the other hand, skeptics contest that this integration is occurring as not all longitudinal analysis are grounded on historical reasoning and may be based, on the contrary, on ahistorical assumptions when they simply consider a set of events in the timeline and view history as a “repository of ready-made data” (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014). Nevertheless, Suddaby *et al.* (2013) underline that with the overcoming of the functionalist assumptions that have dominated the neo-institutional research a (re)turn to “historical institutionalism” is possible and would allow to “bring actors back into institutional theory, and provide a more nuanced way to understand entrepreneurship and embedded agency” (Wadhwani, Bucheli, 2013: 12). Likewise, Lippmann and Aldrich (2013) see in evolutionary theory the possibility of integrating historical reasoning into mainstream organizational theory. It seems to us that the historical perspective, which views “actors and actions as temporally situated” (*ibid.*: 9), could regain momentum in organization theory. This may be in contrast with the tendency in managerial education, notwithstanding the call for more history in management education (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014). However, as argued by Wadhwani and Bucheli (2013) it is in line with a broader interest across the

social sciences and in mainstream intellectual discourse; moreover, it's a way for organization theory to resist the "mermaids" of managerial fads.

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The psychological view and organization theory

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Introduction

In this contribution we propose a reflection on the relevance of Thompson's work to modern times, from the perspective of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP). Our aim is also to call for a renewed approach to the development of organizational theory in the WOP field.

We have organized our contribution as follows.

First of all, we specify the perspective from which we consider Thompson's contribution, with reference to WOP. Then, the examination of the relationship between Thompson's work and psychology is developed according to two lines of study: the first sought to identify in Thompson's contribution influences and traces of the psychological culture of his time; the second focused on the highlighting of anticipations and clues, echoes of which are found in subsequent theoretical frameworks in WOP. Finally, we consider the presence of Thompson in the recent literature (2000-2016) through the examination of the citations to Thompson in two journals: *Organization Studies* and *Human Relations*.

Preliminary remarks

The inevitable bias implied in the exercise proposed requires clarification of the orientation that guided our work.

On this matter, we feel there are two things we should emphasize: the first concerns the viewpoint of WOP we adopted; the second concerns the criteria that give organizational psychology knowledge its theoretical connotation.

As regards the first issue, the approach we start out from sees organizations as social contexts in which the efficacy and efficiency of production processes are closely connected to the subjectivity of the individuals, to the concreteness and reliability of their actions, to the cultures they possess and to their ability to attribute meaning to the events and problems encountered. Referring to the title of the book by Thompson (1967), *Organizations in Action*, we consider organizations as the ever-changing result of the dynamic and “situated” combination of structural aspects, technologies, fields of action, exercise of power, coordination and interdependence, organizational design and task environment; in agreement with Thompson who interprets the structural variability of complex organizations as the overall result of “attempts to solve the problems of concerted action under different conditions, especially conditions of technological and environmental constraints and contingencies” (Thompson, 1967: 74). We emphasize the shift from organization to organizing, to detect the forms and methods of the social construction of meanings and of the processes of change and transformative learning (Scaratti, Ivaldi, 2015). The attention to the “problems” of concerted action refers back to the need to “reconcile two contentions” (Thompson, 1967: 20), concerning the logic of closed *vs.* open system, in accordance with a view of extending the “newer tradition” (*ibid.*: 9) based on accepting the principle of bounded rationality, of organizational treatment of uncertainty (*ibidem*), of the conception of complex organizations “as open systems, hence indeterminate and faced with uncertainty, but at the same time as subject to criteria of rationality and hence needing determinateness and certainty” (*ibid.*: 10).

The second point we should emphasize in order to frame our contribution concerns what is considered “theory” in the WOP field. Our view legitimizes the existence of a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, as it is possible to pursue knowledge in distinct ways, and, therefore, to attribute certain properties and relationships to the universe of objects considered. The various theoretical perspectives may be legitimized and expressed in dialogue, against the recognition of a monism of principles

(plausibility of assertions / intersubjectivity; generalizability / transferability) and of a variety of empirical documentation, applications and procedures, which are imposed by the specificity of the contexts.

This plurality of perspectives seems to be little acknowledged in the mainstream of current WOP, at least according to a recent debate about “What is a good theory in organizational psychology?” that took place in the pages of *Organizational Psychology Review*, an official journal of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP).

In reading the contributions to this debate, what emerges is the perception of a “crisis” in psychological organization theory, qualified in terms of both concept and substance. In the first case, it is recognized that “there is a great deal of confusion about what constitutes good theory” (Wiesenfeld, Brockner, 2012: 172) and is acknowledged that “there are few issues in the field that have generated more confusion and disagreement among scholars than ‘what constitutes theory’” (Ferris *et al.*, 2012). In the second case, complaint is made of the under-theorized character of the field of study (Knippenberg, 2011), the fragmentation of the discipline (Pillutla, Thau, 2013) (which can even be irrelevant) due to the proliferation of short-term theoretical proposals, since “the organizational science is full of theoretical models that do not build on one another” (Pillutla, Thau, 2013: 187).

In the debate, the reasons behind the weakness and inconsistency of the most recent theoretical reflection are extensively considered; among them, great responsibility is given to the constraints linked to the need for publication. However, conceptual clarification of what the peculiarity of the psychological contribution to knowledge of organization should be, seems to be of secondary importance. First of all, the theory definitions – where present – have a general character, and may refer to any field of inquiry. Thus, it is stated that a theory must be explanatory; it cannot be confined to a description, but must expound on the causal relationships between the variables or the concepts under consideration. Consequently, a (good) theory increases the knowledge of a given phenomenon, allowing it to be understood in a new light with respect to

the previous explanations. In addition, a theory must be able to be verified, soliciting further research lines and also providing practical guidance for dealing with organizational problems “in the field” (Knippenberg, 2011; Ferris *et al.*, 2012; Shalley, 2012). From the forum, there is a substantial (and undisputed) adherence to a positivist epistemology, which is explicitly referred to by some authors (*e.g.* Pillutla, Thau, 2013).

Regarding the specificity of the psychological approach to explain organizational phenomena, the references do not go beyond a generic statement that psychological organization theory deals with the “psychological and behavioural processes through which phenomena relevant to the behaviour of people at work come about” (Knippenberg, 2011: 4) or that it concerns the “understanding of human behaviour” (Shalley, 2012: 263). Other references are more precise, proposing themes and areas of organizational life that are of particular interest to psychology; some are more consolidated, such as, the topic of hierarchy and power, the study of conflict, and the processes of decision-making (Wiesenfeld, Brockner, 2012); others are worthy of greater attention and investigation, such as the topic of “time” (Sonnentag, 2012). In other cases, a number of prominent psychological theories for organizational science is listed. It is a long list, which includes broad theories (such as attribution theory, reinforcement theory, social cognitive theory, conservation of resource theory, etc.) and more targeted theories related to specific phenomena, such as goal setting theory or the job characteristics model (Schaubroeck, 2013: 90).

However, this list, albeit extensive and detailed, can be seen as a confirmation of the “crisis” of the theory mentioned at the beginning. Indeed, it can be seen as a representation of the fragmentation of theories in WOP and of the absence of systematic and unitary perspectives about organizational phenomena.

Given this picture, reflecting on Thompson’s contribution can still provide for WOP starting points and suggestions for developing a conceptual framework that responds to this “integrative” need.

In dialogue with Thompson: psychology in *Organizations in Action*

We started examining Thompson's references to psychological concepts, as they can be found in his major work. Recognizing psychology references in Thompson's work is first justified because he himself indicated psychology as one of the basic social sciences whose concepts he referred to in developing the new organizational science; although, from the beginning, he claimed to make a "liberal" use of them, expanding and limiting their analytical and argumentative scope to adapt them to the needs of the study of organizations, for which, however, ad hoc concepts need to be developed. In fact, Thompson compared languages, conceptual constructs, different disciplinary perspectives in an interdisciplinary enterprise to understand the complex "object" under investigation, namely: the organization.

Drawing on contemporary psychological theories, Thompson appeared to be more sensitive to the innovative or unorthodox perspectives than to the prevalent mainstream. At the time he was working (the 1950s and 1960s, after the Second World War), Skinner-type behaviourism still dominated the discipline in the United States, although it was beginning to be challenged by the new cognitivist perspective. In *Organizations in action*, however, there are no explicit references to the behaviourist tradition. Perhaps some references to the "spirit of the time" can be found in the attention to the study of behaviour (in the preface, Thompson (1967: ix) wrote: "My focus is on the behaviour of organization", or to the interpretation of the decision to participate in an organization and the dynamics of the relationships of individuals with the organizations, in terms of inducements and contributions, as well as to the emphasis on the need for control. But we certainly cannot say that behaviourism was his reference psychology, quite the opposite. In fact, Thompson appeared to be closer to the new theories developed in "contrasting continuity" with behaviourism, characterized by the return to giving value to mental processes for the explanation of individual and collective behaviour, with particular emphasis on decision-making processes, problem-solving, and beliefs. He was much more interested in theories that explained individual

behaviour according to complex interpretation of the individual-environment relationship which, by no means, could be reduced to the stimulus-response relationship.

Mention of these theoretical references was made in two “strategic places” in his work, and were in the form of an explicit recognition of “intellectual debt”.

The first reference was to Herbert Simon, at the beginning of the book, in the chapter on strategies for studying organizations; this is the foundational chapter, where Thompson expressed his epistemological options and his theoretical choices. Thompson mentioned *Administrative Behavior* (Simon, 1947) and *Models of Man* (Simon, 1957), and other texts written by Simon together with James G. March, *Organisations* (March, Simon, 1958); and he spoke of them in terms of “a newer tradition”. These bibliographic sources concerned Simon’s early production, where he outlined the perspective of bounded rationality. As is well known, the call to Simon’s tradition is what enabled Thompson to overcome the impasse between closed-system *vs.* open-system strategies for studying organizations, leading him to conceptualize the organization as “a problem-facing and problem-solving phenomenon” (Thompson, 1967: 9). However, the way Simon’s concepts are used by Thompson can be seen as an example of the “liberal” and metaphorical approach in referring to other discipline theoretical constructs that we mentioned earlier. Although conceiving organization as courses of decision and action makes it possible to “hold together” the actor and the system (or, rather, to overcome the contrast between the two perspectives) it is, in Thompson’s words, the organization that decides, chooses, acts. This is a conscious simplification and abstraction, which are justified by the aim of the work, that is to develop a science of organization. In this way, however, we are facing a “disembodied” psychology, which is far from its empirical references. At this point, there is a difference with Simon, whose approach to the study of social contexts always sought to “keep theory and models adhering to empirically observable conduct” (Romano, 1997: 31).

“Men in flesh and bone” return to the foreground in the second part of Thompson’s book, where it is stated the necessity to “consider behaviour of people in and around organizations if we are to understand the behaviour of organizations” (Thompson, 1967: 99).

As, in the first part, the intellectual debt to Simon and his associates was declared, at the beginning of this second part it is mentioned Kurt Lewin (and his collection of writings published in 1935 under the title *A dynamic theory of personality*). Lewin is one of Thompson’s reference for the conceptual scheme that guided his reflection about the behaviour of people in organizations. This reflection was developed in a similar vein to that used for studying the “organizational abstraction”, which was considered in the first part. Indeed, the explanation of people’s behaviour in organizations is focused on the relationship between the individual, with his aspirations and beliefs, and the environment, with its constraints and opportunities. People’s organizational behaviour was initially considered from the point of view of the bargaining between contributions and inducements, in the context of reciprocal limits set by the meeting of individual aspirations and environmental constraints. Then the topic of discretion is considered: how it is exercised, and how it can be controlled by the organization in order to channel it for governance of the organizational processes; this leads to address the issues of motivation, relational dynamics, definition of goals, formation of groups, conflict.

In this scenario, explicit reference to Lewin appears interesting and meaningful. Lewin proposed an approach that provided a guarantee of scientific rigor, linked to the use of the experimental method, while at the same time providing practical guidance to address pragmatic problems; this is one aspect that Thompson, who was intent on developing a science of organization, must have been sensitive to. On this matter, the studies and theories about groups, about the dynamics that characterize them, about social influence could be an interesting reference. In particular, the constructs of “field” and “psychological environment” used by Lewin have significant parallels with some concepts used by Thompson, such as those of “task environment” and

“domain consensus”; in both cases the emphasis is on the inadequacy of considering the individual (or organization) separately from the environment in which he operates, an environment that is not “objectively” given but is defined by what is significant for the person (or the organization).

In dialogue with Thompson: Thompson’s influence on psychology

With respect to the second path of dialogue we have undertaken with Thompson, a direct reading of his work suggests a double emphasis. The first concerns the recognition of some critical points that we can trace in Thompson’s text, and which are still fertile ground for debate at multiple levels in WOP; the second focuses on some fundamental Thompson’s themes that find broad and detailed resonance in a number of more recent theoretical approaches following his thinking.

Some points concern limits that Thompson himself mentioned, such as the reference to American organizations, linked to a certain temporal circumstance that implies particular dimensions and forms of expression (Thompson, 1967: viii). Another crucial point, which runs through the whole of Thompson’s text, concerns his epistemology which, on the one hand, is based on the assertion that “no useful theory can rest on the assumption that everything is unique’ (*ibid.*: vii); on the other hand, it cannot avoid acknowledging the complexity of variations, the idiographic variability of individual contexts and concrete non-mechanically repeatable scenarios, although recurring in typical forms. In Thompson’s reflection, there is always the pressure to combine the particular and the general, different logic and strategies (closed and open), reduction and acceptance of complexity; examples are the references to the “synthetic organization” (*ibid.*: 52), to “managerial technology” (*ibid.*: 114-115), to the handling of “constraints” and “contingencies” (*ibid.*: 78), as well as the recognition that coordinating decision processes may fail to mesh (*ibid.*: 79).

As a summary of the critical points that Thompson’s thought brought up, we can refer to the following passage of his text: “the organization is spared the

impossible task of dealing with *random* discrepancies between what it needs and what exists" (*ibid.*: 103). Paradoxically, we could say that the issues that Thompson's argument makes and anticipates, at least in accordance with our interpretative lenses, are generated precisely by the reversal of the sentence quoted: it is by dealing with the random discrepancies, jams, errors, the unexpected, that organizations move to pursue concerted actions, dealing with various constraints and contingencies.

Following this line of interpretation, we can identify some fundamental themes that Thompson included in his effort to produce a coherent theory, which also proved to be an embryonic anticipation of some subsequent theoretical developments that refer to current organizational scenarios. We cannot expect to provide a correct exegesis of Thompson's text, or to identify, in linear and direct terms, links between Thompson's thought and subsequent theoretical frameworks. With our reading, we intend to contribute to highlighting the ideas and suggestions that the "conceptual inventory" proposed by Thompson makes available.

The procedural view

A first theme stems from the reference to synthetic organizations, which "emerge without the benefit of planning or blueprints" (*ibid.*: 53) to handle situations of extreme uncertainty and to overcome the effects of natural disasters. In this, we find a powerful anticipation of the recognition of the factors of unpredictability, variability, precariousness and dynamism that characterize current organizations.

Chapter 6, which is dedicated to the relationship between organizational rationality and structure and the comparison between it and the aspects of the stability / mutability and homogeneity / heterogeneity of the task environment, seems to anticipate, by a number of decades, our contemporary context which is undergoing great changes, where the fourth industrial revolution (Schwab, 2016) introduces deep, radical, rapid transformations of the technological and scientific world that are drastically modifying our ways of

producing, consuming, and participating. The procedural, non-reified nature of the organization, which tends to assume the paradox that combines the search for flexibility with the reduction of uncertainty (Thompson, 1967: 148), adapts well to situations where the roles of the worker and the organization of work itself change, requiring new and unprecedented skills and a different flexibility. Likewise, the considerations on the variability of the task environment shed light on a contradiction that the technological transformations in progress increasingly highlight. On the one hand, working in situations characterized by market stability and possible anticipation of demand and needs leads to conditions and processes that are characterized by greater structuring and possible proceduralization. The introduction of robotic devices and increasingly refined technical equipment leads to the reproducibility and standardization of operations and configurations, although the requirements of control and prevention / management of errors and accidents arise. On the other hand, constant scientific and technological innovation and the dynamics of globalization challenge the traditional organizational set-ups, increasing uncertainty together with the need to modify existing equilibria, to adapt continually the acquired procedures and routines, to quickly learn new solutions to new problems and equally quickly translate them into practices.

Fitting into such a continuum is a great challenge for both organizational designs and the relationship between individuals and organizations. The contemporary configuration of the work processes requires organizational architectures that deal differently with the differentiation and integrative processes which characterise every organizational structuring. Current scenarios call for attention to widespread learning processes, characterized by the high circulation of available knowledge and the non-hierarchization of decisions: the dispersion of these makes it possible to increase the level of participation of each organizing player in the overall good running. This in turn calls for new values that reward the possibility of learning from mistakes, which are used as a source of interpretation and of critical exercise in the ordinary working processes. Another value is the representation of one's work

as physiologically characterized by high levels of disorder and emergency, associated with the structural uncertainty that characterizes environments affected by rapid transformations, evolutions and changes.

This results in a changed relationship between the individuals and the organization, marked by having to deal with situations where the sudden arrival of the unexpected, of urgency, is a daily, and not exceptional experience. Sometimes this sudden arrival occurs in dramatic and catastrophic forms (accidents in nuclear power plants, earthquakes, fires, terrorist acts, ...), causing the need to increase the resilience threshold to deal with such situations. More often, these situations occur in the daily working life, where errors, inconveniences, deviations from what is expected, arise as something unforeseen that has to be faced and managed. In addition to resilience, what is necessary in this case is an ability to anticipate events, which is linked to a careful reading of what is happening, including weak and seemingly irrelevant, but abductively significant signals. These clues (reports, observations, evidence, indications of what is happening) are largely evident to anyone who is 'in the field', to the line operators who, every day, deal with production and organization procedures.

The attention that Thompson paid to these dimensions of complexity, variability and unpredictability, provided an anchor to concepts subsequently studied by the literature of WOP, and which constitute theoretical frameworks that are nowadays consolidated and in use (*e.g.* sense-making, loose-coupling, enactment, organizational mindfulness - see: Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, 2007).

The perimeter of the action

A second theme concerns the implied aspects related to the use of terms (action, to act, activities, acts, practices, ...) that can be treated as synonyms but refer to different, though often converging, theoretical foundations. Throughout his text, Thompson scattered suggestions and indications that were potentially related to these references: he spoke of rising costs in communication and

decision-making processes, in the face of increasing complexity and ambiguity (Thompson, 1967: 62; 135); of constraints and contingencies that the organization does not control and of critical aspects related to interdependence (Chapter 6); of individuals who “know or soon learn whether the experience, skill, or knowledge acquired [...] is useful” (*ibid.*: 104); of opportunities to learn skills for other, better jobs (*ibid.*: 107). One can certainly argue about the view of the problem of careers and of the action spheres presented by jobs (*ibid.*: 108-110), which is affected by a temporally connoted and definitely different context from the current working relationship scenarios. However, in these references, it is also possible to perceive an implicit opening to tacit and distributed systems of assigning meaning to the real. Speaking of tacit and implicit knowledge and of work experience as a peculiar organizational learning framework refers to both theoretical constructs, such as communities of practice (Wenger, 1988), and organizational theories oriented to practice-based research (Gherardi, 2006; 2009), to workplace studies (Luff *et al.*, 2000; Hutchins, 1995; Engeström, 2015), to the legacy of tacit and embedded knowledge relating to practical knowledge and knowledge repositories stored in habitus, routines, artifacts, objects and technologies (Scharzki *et al.*, 2001; Hendry, 2006; Hatch, Cunliffe, 2006; Feldman, Orlikowski, 2011). In these, the emphasis is on the situated, distributed, social aspects of knowledge, which are learned through participation in activities and related joint construction processes. From this point of view, it is important to remember a point that we consider being crucial, that was previously discussed by Dario Romano (2006); this point relates to the exploration of the distinctions / connections, differences / convergences between organizing and organized action. From a dynamic and procedural perspective, the experience of the subject in a working and organizational situation takes the form of “organized acting”, in relation to which he activates (“acting”) contexts that allow him to interpret what is happening within a framework (“organized”) of meanings and structures of sense (technical, managerial, institutional) that form a kind of available “silent organization”.

Following this expression suggested by Dario Romano, another theme to be resumed and examined concerns the conceptual perimeter attributed to the use of terms associated with the theory of action. One example may be useful to highlight the need for further critical reflection: in activity theory (Engeström, 2015), one of the theoretical approaches that can be ascribed to practice-based theory (Feldman, Orlikowski, 2011), the basic idea is that human beings are involved, on a daily basis, in multiple activity systems. These activities are focused and directed by an object that confers general sense and specific meaning on them. Thus, for example, in healthcare the object should be the treatment of diseases; in education, the object should be student learning. The object evolves over time according to historically determined configurations and is also mediated, in its identification, by rules, roles, tools, division of work, and languages in use. In this approach, the dynamic and modifiable system of activity becomes the unit of analysis, as it is a collective dimension, oriented to an object, mediated by cultures and artifacts. Within such collective activities, we can identify individual actions (tasks that nurses or doctors have to perform; lessons that teachers have to prepare or teach), which in turn can be traced back to sequences of actions (selecting and preparing appropriate material; identifying and managing appropriate resources). In this perspective, complex organizations are activity systems, with internal divisions, that are interrelated with other activity systems. Assuming this theoretical view means addressing the complexity of internal and external relationships and understanding how activity systems are generated, what transformations are undergone, and how they operate in different spatial and temporal contexts.

Acting can be interpreted on the basis of practical knowledge, of operating cultures, of widespread rules and routines, which constitute a fabric that can influence courses of action and orient identity.

The question of meaning: between discretion and assumption of ambiguity

The third theme starts from a reference by Thompson to Elliot Jaques (Thompson, 1967: 118), the author of a well-known contribution, published in

1970: *Work, creativity, and social justice*, that explored from a psychological viewpoint the relationship between discretion and constraints in organized work. Thompson's work preceded that of Jaques, and this justifies the overall negative connotation that he, at least implicitly, attributed to the construct of discretion (see propositions 9.1 and 9.2 of the chapter on discretion and its exercise) with respect to Jaques's more detailed formulation in 1970. It is above all at the organizational boundaries, which are exposed to the heterogeneity and mutability of the task environment, that the exercise of discretion is required in order to deal with contingencies and to increase the opportunity for learning through experience and for visibility (*ibid.*: 111).

Recognition of this opportunity allows a connection with Jaques's construct of discretion, which places the relationship between individuals and organization within a constant dynamic between constraints / limitations and opening up of possibilities for subjective interpretation of roles and organizational tasks, with associated and varied emotional and affective aspects.

We can retrace these variables to personal and collective aspects, in which attitudes, dispositions and mentalities, widespread cultures, conversations, languages, the use artifacts that characterize everyday life and the production and reproduction of systems of work activity, in which people are involved, are expressed. Let's think, for example, of how the current socioeconomic and production system requires people to pass from execution to an entrepreneurial spirit, from passivity to taking on responsibility, from indifference to dedication, from the avoidance of problems to investing in them. What is at stake is the working, professional, and organizational cultures present in the contexts, which are greatly prompted by these scenarios, which, on the other hand, present aspects of uncertainty, precariousness, possible instrumentalization, which are often associated with the presence of the unexpected, with its characteristics of unpredictability, ambiguity, temporariness and instability. Faced with these incumbent variations induced by pressures and circumstances of various kinds, the plurality of subjects

involved, individual and collective, produces interpretations and representations, manifests availabilities and inertias, undergoes and / or reacts, is activated and starts, thereby triggering response, adaptation, and transactional movements that are more or less functional for the needs demanded by the changed scenario. The dynamic described is manifested through threatening (when they are not dramatic) experiences, since it introduces the oscillation between conditions (with a different degree of effectiveness *vs.* potentiality) of greater freedom (opportunity for choice, mobility, emphasis on quality and differentiation / personalization of the products / services offered) and situations of growing uncertainty and precariousness (institutional and individual, accompanied by a widespread condition of social insecurity).

Hence, there are possible phenomena of disengagement, closure, disenchantment, opportunism and perfunctory behavior. In these cases, there is a formal respect for the rules, a pragmatic and opaque mode of operation, as a result of which individuals remain inactive in the face of problems of organization and of the work, or they complain about it.

The demand is not so much to reduce but to expand the discretion associated with nomadic work experiences, which entail horizontal and vertical mobility and require that both detailed and complex problems are faced, and that skills are developed to manage the relational density of the activity systems. Exposure to ambivalence generates the need to access new meanings associated with a job, taking on the challenge of simultaneously having to guarantee effectiveness and efficiencies, working in conditions, at least in part, of chaos and ordinary emergency, relating to a variety of levels.

The (non) influence of Thompson and his marginal position in the psychological literature on organization

We have tried to show that, in Thompson's work, there are themes, approaches and perspectives that are important for contemporary WOP. However, it is easy to recognize that in the mainstream literature, reference to

Thompson is, in fact, limited, if not absent; for example, in the debate on the organizational theory in psychology we referred to earlier, no mention is made of the American scholar. His role in the most recent organizational literature is certainly acknowledged, as evidenced by Scott's emblematic (among many possible) mention, which identifies *Organizations in action* as "one of the half-dozen most influential books on organizations written in the twentieth century" (Scott, 2003: xv). The question is to understand whether this reference is a "vital" acknowledgment, or one that is just "due" to a noble father, who is no longer "relevant".

We have tried to address this issue in the limited scope of only two journals - *Organization Studies* and *Human Relations* - chosen for their attention to the psychological aspects of the organizational phenomenon.

For both journals, of all the research articles published in the period 2000-2016, those that had a greater theoretical value were considered, using the expression "organization theory or organizational theory" as the search string for their selection; then, the references to Thompson we found in them were examined considering the context where they occurred, so to determine their function or meaning.

We start considering Thompson's citations in *Organization Studies* which, we remind, is published in collaboration with EGOS, the European Group for Organizational Studies and can be considered among the most important European journals in the field, whose aim - as we can read in the journal's description - is "to promote the understanding of organizations, organizing and the organized, and the social relevance of that understanding".

A first, purely quantitative analysis already provides some interesting information; of the 364 articles identified, only 26 mention Thompson, for a total of 57 references, all except one, to *Organizations in action*. The temporal distribution of the articles citing Thompson doesn't show any significant pattern. There is a concentration of articles in the central years of the decade (2005-2006), where we find 11 (4 in 2005 and 7 in 2006) out of the total articles referring to Thompson. However, this follows from the higher number of

research articles selected during those years, so it doesn't reveal a particular focus on the work of the American scholar in that period.

The marginality of Thompson, evident in the scarcity of the references that concern him, finds confirmation when we turn to the ways he is cited.

First of all, the articles where Thompson is quoted are very heterogeneous, with regard to the topics discussed, the methodology (qualitative and quantitative) and even the typology (theoretical and empirical). As an example, Thompson is mentioned in a historical paper by Weitz and Shenhav (2000) where it is examined the rise of discourse on uncertainty in management during the period 1879-1932; he is quoted in two theoretical studies addressing the topic of organization design (Dougherty, 2008; Grandori, Furnari, 2008); he is even cited in a "psychological" research paper which investigates the effects of organizational characteristics on nurses' job satisfaction and well-being (Tummers *et al.*, 2006).

In the great majority of cases Thompson's citations are merely formal; that is, he is often referred to in a very generic way, as a "historical anchor" or as an author - among others - who used a specific concept or construct. Some examples are the following: "Understanding organizations within the context of larger systems has a venerable history in management and organization theory (Emery, Trist, 1965; Thompson, 1967)" (Wittneben *et al.*, 2012: 1439); "Coordination was originally thought of as an organizational design problem: one of matching formal coordination mechanisms (*e.g.*, plans, rules, hierarchies, etc.) with levels of interdependence (*e.g.*, pooled, sequential and reciprocal) (Thompson, 1967) among organizational departments or actors needing to align their activities" (Gkeredakis, 2014: 1474); "The power of an organization is a measure of the extent to which it can control responses and reduce its dependencies on other for resources (Provan *et al.*, 1980; Thompson, 1967)" (McKay, 2001: 629); "Organizations must always find ways of coping with scarcity, uncertainty, and risk (Thompson 1967)" (Heugens *et al.*, 2006: 400).

In these articles Thompson is quoted - we can say - *en passant* and the content of the article doesn't expand on his theory. Indeed, Thompson is mainly

cited either at the beginning of the articles, in the introductory section, or at the end, during the discussion of the results, or in the final remarks of a theoretical paper, but in a very rapid manner.

Occurrences where Thompson is mentioned in a more substantial way are very few. An example is an article by Heugens (2005) who proposes a neo-Weberian theory of the firm aiming at integrating the “why” and “how” perspectives on the issues. In that case, when discussing the ways organization members adjust their behaviors to one another, Thompson’s theorization on coordination and interdependence is assumed. This is the case even in an article by Hecker (2012) on “collective knowledge” where the author talks about complementary knowledge and cognitive interdependence. Another example refers to an article by Dieleman and Boddewyn (2012) who discuss a case to address the issue of the management of political ties by business groups; here Thompson is used when discussing the protection of the organization’s central tasks from external interference through organization structuring. In any case, these can be considered exceptions.

As far as Thompson’s theoretical constructs that are recalled in the 26 articles (even in the superficial way mentioned above) are concerned, the majority refers to interdependence and coordination, followed by structure, the protection of the technical core, the relationships with the environment and, less frequently, uncertainty. Single articles refer to power, routine and even the managerial paradox. It is interesting to note that Thompson is unanimously considered a founding father of contingency theory (Weitz, Shenhav, 2000; Bechky, 2006; Scott, 2006; Tummers *et al.*, 2006; Grandori, Furnari, 2008) but he is referred to even in the context of resource dependency theory (McKay, 2001).

The picture emerging from the analysis of Thompson’s citations in *Organization Studies* in the time frame 2000-2016 is that in no case does Thompson appear to be the starting point for proposing a “new” organizational theory.

There is only one exception, which really seems to confirm the rule. It is a paper by Monty Lynn (2005) devoted to organizational buffering, where the

author reviews three buffering paradigms and attempts to synthesize a model which weaves the three perspectives together. In this case, Thompson's original theory on buffering is really "used" and becomes a starting point for discussing (critically) the forms of buffering in the contemporary organizational settings. Indeed in this article we find one-third of the total references to Thompson (19 out of 57) which appear in the literature considered.

When we turn our attention to *Human Relations*, the picture doesn't seem to change in a relevant manner. This is clear if we consider the number of articles quoting Thompson: of the 45 articles identified using the search string, only 5 specifically refer to Thompson's work.

As regards the "quality" of Thompson's references, they seem to be a little more extensive and relevant for the contents addressed in the articles, as compared to what happens in *Organization Studies*.

Grandori (2001) refers to Thompson by quoting his previous work of 1956 on ASQ as one of the conceptual frameworks in order to develop an integrated organization science. The author claims for a more micro level of analysis, in order to reduce the use of too much complex concepts and better define the research questions, seeking for innovative and relevant issues. Focusing on the renewal of organization design, Grandori highlights a little advance in design methodology, due to less applied and more "positive" sciences of economics, sociology and psychology, suggesting to abandon the practice of methodological ostracism and to develop a generative approach to organizational design (*ibid*: 43-44).

Løwendahl *et al.* (2001) analyze the process of value creation and knowledge development for professional service firms (PSFs). They rely on Thompson's contribution, pointing out how his work provides a connection between different task interdependencies and different coordination requirements, constituting plural types of organizational technologies. In relations to the PSFs, characterized by a critical domain, knowledge-based resources and articulated value creation processes, the authors argue that only the complex type of technology involving reciprocal interdependence and

mutual adjustment is feasible. They observe that Thompson's framework is more focused on tasks that can be pre-defined rather than on firms which deliver highly customized services (*ibid.*: 923), requiring different kinds of task characteristics and different types of knowledge bases.

Kulkarni e Ramamoorthy (2005) analyze the critical role employment contracts have in strategic human resource management literature. Specifically they address how uncertain environments convey apparent conflicting tensions between commitment and flexibility. They refer to Thompson's theory pointing out his contribution in highlighting uncertainty as one of the most relevant problems for complex organizations (*ibid.*: 745). Identifying different types of uncertainty, the authors describe how they underpin firm's decision of commitment and flexibility, influencing the choice of the employment contract.

Denis *et al.* (2007) study strategy practice in pluralistic contexts, arguing how it can be positioned at the intersection of three theoretical frames: Actor-network Theory, Conventionalist theory and Social practice perspective. Such frameworks may enrich the understanding of the strategy-as-practice perspective in four ways: linking the managerial micro-daily activities with the macro-structures; describing what happens when managers are strategizing; shedding light on the materiality of the strategizing processes; improving reflexivity among practitioners (*ibid.*: 180). The authors address Thompson's contribution within a comment to the conventional theory, pointing out the reference to "charisma" as a mode of conflict resolution in anomic organizations, since "pluralistic contexts imply multiple value logics tied together by conventions that accommodate their contradictions" (*ibid.*: 209).

Conclusion

With his work, Thompson provided an approach to composition and working through the paradoxes (closed system *vs.* natural system, flexibility *vs.* uncertainty, technical rationality *vs.* organizational rationality, uniqueness *vs.* multiplicity) that shape the dialogues between structural / hard dimensions and cultural / soft dimensions of the organizational activity.

It is not a question neither of proposing a restrictively eclectic position that confuses and unduly overlaps the appropriate differences and distinctions between approaches, nor of giving up all the technical, formal and codified knowledge, built up in the disciplines that deal with organization.

It is a question of taking up the challenge that the reference to Thompson's contribution makes: to reduce the fragmentation and dispersion of theoretical constructs in the approach to organization.

What is at stake is the opportunity to acknowledge and dialogue with the variety of theories, and to reaffirm the need for a post-bureaucratic approach to organizational models (Hendry, 2006) that can fuel an even critical comparison with the implications that a practice turn introduces into the development of an applied WOP. We think about a WOP able to reintroduce an authentic application approach, that grasps (but also feeds): on the one hand, the dimensions of complexity that characterize the current working and organizational scenarios, by means of a marked sensitivity to the contextual and situated aspects in which the problems of concerted action take shape; on the other hand, a clear vocation to support the often dramatic and turbulent processes of transformation and change, which frequently characterize those problems, especially in economic and social crisis situations.

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Political science and organization theory

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Introduction

The purpose of this contribution is to provide a reflection about how James Thompson's contribution and heritage is, and was, used and recalled within the public administration studies rooted in political science.

I will begin with a brief overview on the linkages between administrative science and organizational theories, with a focus on some of Thompson's reflections on this topic. The evidence on how Thompson's work is, and was cited in the journal *Public Administration* is illustrated, as this is one of the leading journals for political science rooted public administration studies.

In the second part, I will focus on a specific issue that today is under the lens of public administration scholars: the externalization and contracting-out of services. As this is one of the themes on which the public administration (PA) debate is currently engaged, it is interesting to verify about whether and how Thompson's ideas are used to analyze and reflect on this theme.

A primary attribute for the PA: organizational complexity

The linkages between organizational theory and administrative science are today crystal-clear for scholars of public administration. However, this was not so clear in the 50s-60s, when these linkages started to be taken for granted after some seminal works by Selznick (1949), Simon (1947), March and Simon (1958), Etzioni (1961) and Crozier (1963). It was exactly upon these scholars that the political science approach to the study of public administration was being built.

The political science approach, unlike the legal-juridical one, focuses its attention mainly on the structural dimensions of PAs conceived as complex organizations, characterized by multi-functional dynamics and a strong

differentiation in terms of organizational forms. Given this specific trait, it is clear why organizational theory is considered one of the founding pillars of administrative science, understood as rooted in political science.

Among many other relevant contributions, it was thanks to Simon's (1947) reflection about rationality and decision making within organizations, Etzioni's (1961) visions of organization as social system and Crozier's (1963) study on power and conflict in French bureaucracies, that PA started to be analyzed not only as a rational hierarchical machine in which skilled functionaries perform their duties following precise guidelines, but also as a social system characterized by "grey zones", dysfunctional procedures and gaps between goals and results. The political science approach then focused its attention on organizational culture, actors' behaviors, routines and cognitive maps that interact within the PA, thereby rendering it a complex organization.

Thompson's concepts and ideas in public administration studies

Among the organizational theory contributions cited as inspiring sources and roots for the political science studies of the PA, we cannot avoid mentioning James Thompson's work which, although not always properly considered, constitutes one of the most interesting and original contributions to the analysis of PA as a complex organization.

Starting from Thompson's important reflection in the article titled "On building an administrative science" published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Thompson, 1956) and then with the volume *Comparative Studies in Administration* (Thompson *et al.*, 1959), the author in his work highlighted the close links between organizational studies and administrative science.

One first point worthwhile stressing is Thompson's emphasis on considering PA not as a unified entity with the same characteristics and dynamics but, on the contrary, as an organizational type characterized by different structures, procedures and internal dynamics. In the article published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Thompson (1956: 106) argues that: "The development of an administrative science will be hobbled until we find

concepts applicable to a variety of administrative levels so that, for example, scientific knowledge of phenomena at supervisory levels can feed into understanding of events at higher levels, and vice versa, or until we develop concepts which will permit confirmation in, say, the hospital setting, of relationships observed in a business or military organization”.

Then there are other important concepts that Thompson presented with *Organizations in Action* (1967), which still constitute a crucial reference to understand PA, in particular as a complex organization.

Along with the classical reflection on differentiation and integration and on the structural complexity of PAs, it is worth mentioning the concepts of interdependence and coordination, as developed by Thompson.

The idea of interdependence proposed by Thompson is, in fact, particularly useful to explain and understand the attribute of complexity at the basis of the political science rooted conception of PA. The study of interdependence focuses on how different departments or units within the same organization depend on the performance of others. It also defines three different types of interdependence based on the intensity of the interactions and the behaviors needed to execute a certain task. Along this line, coordination becomes one of the core tasks for complex organizations, the effort of acting and performing together to achieve the organizational goals.

If we take for granted this vision of interdependence and coordination, it is quite clear that these concepts could be still extremely relevant for the study of PA. After the reflection on the unanticipated consequences of the bureaucracies (Merton, 1949), the vicious circles (Crozier, 1963) and many other dysfunctions characterizing PAs, still in 2000, after the partial failing of the New Public Management (NPM) inspired reforms in Europe, it was not so clear that achieving coordination in public services could be the key issue in the debate and the final goal for whatever reforms and policies about PAs (Bolgherini, Dallara, 2016).

NPM had its main focus on improving efficiency, horizontal specialization, contractualization, marketization, a private-sector management

style, explicit performance standards and output/outcome control, and the reliance on autonomous managers held accountable through performance arrangements and incentives (Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011). The post-NPM reforms paradigm, instead, is more centered on improving the horizontal coordination of governmental organizations and also on enhancing coordination between the government and other actors (Christensen, Lægreid, 2007). Thus, only many years after Thompson's reflection on coordination as core tasks for complex organizations the whole PA reforms debate emphasized this need.

In this scenario, it is promising that some of the leading authors within the PA studies are re-focusing their attention on public sector organizations coordination needs. See for example the book of Guy Peters (2015), *Pursuing Horizontal Management - The Politics of Public Sector Coordination* returning on the topic after years in which it disappeared from the PA debate.

Evidence from the journal *Public Administration*

Even if we look at one of the leading journals for the political science rooted PA studies, such as *Public Administration*, we get a picture of limited attention to Thompson's ideas, and more specifically we observe scarce consideration for some of his concepts, such as coordination, technology, uncertainty and complexity.

Public Administration was founded in 1922, and it is currently a major refereed journal focusing on public administration, public policy and public management. The journal is published by Wiley and Sons, with a global circulation and coverage. Much of the work published is comparative, with a high percentage of articles sourced from the European countries and covering all aspects of West and East European public administrations. As for the methodology used in this contribution, the journal was accessed using the University of Bologna proxy allowing for full-text access to the Public Administration archive. Two different search criteria were used: first, a query on the whole accessible archive from 1988 to 2017 with the keywords "J.D.

Thompson"; second, a query, again on the whole archive, with the keywords "organizational theory" and "Thompson + organizational theory".

Concerning the first query, the total number of citations for "J.D. Thompson" is 74. These are all articles in which Thompson's works are cited. Some of them are articles in which Thompson is generically cited as a reference for organization as a process, or for the contingency theories. Then, there are also some interesting articles in which Thompson's ideas are used to build the arguments or to analyze specific topics related to the way PA functions. As for the second query with the keyword "organizational theory", the total number of found articles is 108, while for the keyword "Thompson + organizational theory", 186 articles were found.

I am conscious of the limits and possible errors with this type of query. The search system in the journal website is not so accurate to ensure that the 74 articles, selected with the first query, all include a correct citation to J.D. Thompson. Especially for the articles published before 1997 it was not possible to access the PDF full-text version to check the precise citation.

For this reason I selected some of them by looking both at the main topic of the analysis, precisely public services and administration topics, and at the use of Thompson's works in presenting the main argument of the article.

Among the few articles matching these conditions, there are works in which Thompson is used only as reference for justifying the analysis of the organizational environment and the linkages between such environment and the focal organization. As an example, Walker's article (2006) titled "Innovation type and diffusion: an empirical analysis of local government" in which the author presents a research conducted on 120 upper tier English local authorities which indicates that adoption of innovation is both complex and contingent-different factors drive the diffusion of different types of innovation across upper tier English local government. Here Thompson is only used to remind that "Theory and empirical evidence suggests innovation adoption is likely to be mediated by the external context within which an organization sits" and "it is likely that demanding and complex environments will increase the likelihood

of a public agency seeking new solutions to meet the needs of its citizens and users" (Walker 2006: 314-315).

Another interesting work is Nylén's (2007), which addresses interagency collaboration in human services production as a way to improve quality and/or reduce costs. The paper, recognizing that collaboration could be arranged in a multitude of ways, investigates, through a literature review, the consequences on effectiveness of alternative collaboration arrangements. Here Thompson's work on interdependence is extensively used to explain that "When interdependencies progress from being sequential to reciprocal the accompanying collaboration needs also to be intensified. Nevertheless, the more intense forms of interaction were alternatively arranged as a formal team or accomplished through informal networking" (Nylén, 2007: 160).

Intra-organizational coordination is also examined in the article of Andrews *et al.* (2012) reporting the results of a study examining the effects of vertical strategic alignment (the degree to which strategic stances are consistent across different organizational levels) on public service performance. In spite of the focus on intra-organizational coordination, Thompson is only cited in the list of the authors addressing this topic and as a reference for the influence of context on public agency outputs and outcomes.

Another contribution worth mentioning is one by Malatesta and Smith (2014) titled "Design contract for complex services". The authors utilize transaction cost economics and the contingency stream of organization theory to answer two related questions. First, when contracting for complex services, do governments design contracts for flexibility? Second, is the contingency perspective relevant to understanding contract design? Examining 130 professional service contracts awarded by state government agencies in the USA, they find that task complexity and task unpredictability, two dimensions of task uncertainty, increase the probability of flexible governance.

The authors recall the way Thompson (1967) classifies tasks in terms of how they are performed and the extent to which task phases are interrelated. Organizational structures are then explained as arrangements associated with

task completion. For example, complex tasks associated with reciprocal dependencies require structures that allow for mutual adjustment. The degree of task interdependence is a key to understand how a decision-making system should be designed. More complex and uncertain tasks require adaptable systems.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the most recent article using Thompson's concepts, authored by Boon and Wynen (2017), titled "The bureaucracy of bureaucracies: analyzing the size and organization of overhead in public organizations". The study, focused on the Flemish context, analyzes size differences between central government organizations and the organization of two overhead processes: human resources management, and finance and control. Relevant effects are found for autonomy, organizational size, spatial dispersion and budgetary stress. In the Flemish civil service, less autonomous organizations need to uphold to a wider array of regulations and procedures when performing overhead activities, for instance, when recruiting employees. One of the effects of these regulations is an increased complexity of the environment, because of the numerous situations covered in the regulatory framework. Increased in-house overhead, then, is seen as a response to having to understand and manage the task complexity as explained by Thompson (1967).

On the contrary, it is surprising that a recent article devoted to analyzing control patterns in contracting-out relationships (Ditillo *et al.*, 2014) does not mention at all Thompson's reflection on control and coordination. Even though the authors affirm that their focus is on processes and practices through which contracted-out services are controlled and monitored at the municipal level and on variables explaining their choice, drawing specifically on inter-organizational control literature, no reference to Thompson's work could be found in the article.

In what follows, a further reflection on the organizational theory perspectives on externalization and contracting-out will be presented, trying to underline the added value of Thompson's work to study this topic, besides the

always cited approaches of transaction cost economics and resource dependence theory.

Organizational perspectives for externalizations and contracting-out

It is well known that while classic organization theory focuses mainly on intra-organizational dynamics and problems, since the 1950s, the external environment and the social context in which the organization is embedded has become the key point to understand complex organizations' actions. The origins of this approach can be found in Selznick's (1949) work on the TVA and, more generally, in systems theory, but it is in 1967 that several, crucial contributions on organizations and their environment have been published: the volumes authored by Thompson (1967), Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Perrow (1967), and Miller and Rice (1967).

Among the multitude of works focusing on the linkages between the organization and the environment, and specifically on how the focal organization changes, interacts with, and reacts to the external environment, there are theories that, more often than others, were and are used in the analysis of contracting out and externalization in PA: the transaction cost economics - TCE (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975) and the resource dependence theory-RDT (Pfeffer, Salancik, 1978).

For the purpose of this article, it is not necessary to go into details about the two theories just mentioned; nevertheless, it is worth stressing the reasons these do not offer a complete and comprehensive picture about the decision of contracting out public services.

Taking for granted that TCE contributes to overcome the tayloristic vision of the organization, drastically separated from the external environment and strictly defined by the physical and structural boundaries, this theory considers the hierarchical model as economically more efficient when fundamental transactions are characterized by specificity, uncertainty and high frequency, while the market model will be preferable in cases of low specificity, uncertainty and occasional transactions. Actually, the key question is to

understand whether these assumptions are valid in the case of outsourcing related to public services delivered by PAs and, even more, whether they are still valid today, after over thirty years since Williamson's work (1979), in a context in which ICT and new organizational forms (networks and hybrid forms of governance) are a widespread reality.

Differently, Pfeffer and Salancik's resource dependence theory (1978) considers the organizational strategies being strictly conditioned and determined not only by a logic of economic efficiency, but mostly by political needs and power dynamics related to the issue of controlling the external environment. It is worth mentioning that the starting point for RDT is Thompson's (1967) reflection about coping with uncertainty as the organizational main task.

Conceiving the logic of organizations also, or predominantly, as political interactions in response to external pressures can help to investigate such outsourcing decisions that do not always meet criteria of effectiveness and economic savings. However, even this theory presents limits and shortcomings in fully accounting for decisions and consequences of public service externalization and outsourcing. For this reason, our proposal is to look deeper at some of Thompson's ideas in order to integrate and better disentangle the topic.

Thompson potential contribution for externalizations and contracting-out

Although Thompson's contribution did not focus explicitly on public services outsourcing and on the modes of governance for contracting out in the PA, there are many points and ideas that could be potentially useful and promising to analyze this topic.

Thompson's vision of organization overcomes the antithesis between rational and natural model, which finds its representation in the three analytical levels the author proposes: the external - institutional level, the intermediate - managerial level and the internal - technical core. Applying this analytic scheme

in order to study the PA allows us to identify different organizational logics within the same PA and to reflect on how these logics could be connected.

Then there is Thompson's reflection on uncertainty as the fundamental problem for complex organizations, and coping with uncertainty as the essence of the administrative process. The organization will utilize different technologies and different strategies of action. The strategies of action are devoted to managing the task environment, controlling as much as possible the sources of uncertainty and diminishing the external resources dependence.

In this way, the changes in the strategies of action - new productions, joint ventures, organizational and corporate mergers, outsourcing and contracting-out - could be seen as strategies and decisions for coping with uncertainty. This point appears relevant if we consider the specific functions of the PA and, even more, the recent developments in term of public service reforms in Europe. In the recent reform trends is a sort of conflict between the need for more flexibility in the public sector, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need of coping with uncertainty, is emerging.

According to Thompson, this is not necessarily an unsolvable conflict, but rather a "paradox of administration" (Thompson, 1967: 148-149), as organizations look simultaneously for a reduction of uncertainty and a search for flexibility. But according to Thompson (*ibid.*: 149) "flexibility is a reaction to uncertainty". Flexibility (in structure, in strategy) is what allows an organization to cope with an uncertain, ever-changing environment. The paradox of administration can also be discussed in terms of time. In the short run administrations seek to reduce uncertainty. In the long run, however, administrations should strive for flexibility through freedom from commitment by increasing the slack (*ibid.*: 150).

It is crystal-clear that these specific reflections could be crucial to approach the topic of outsourcing in PA. Nevertheless, as the analysis of the journal *Public Administration* has shown, the political science studies in which Thompson's ideas are recalled and applied are not so many.

The above-mentioned reflections are also strictly connected to the issue of controlling and changing the organizational boundaries thanks to devoted and deliberate strategies. On this point, Thompson's suggestion is clear-cut: "Organizations under norms of rationality seek to place their boundaries around those activities which if left to the task environment would be crucial contingencies" (*ibid.*: 39). Moreover, the organization will tend, on the long run, to internalize such elements and units it is dependent from and that it is not able to control adequately.

On the basis of this assumption, it seems that, if we want to understand why PAs decide to externalize, a key variable to consider could be the capacity to maintain control over the service or the activity subject to contracting-out. The lack of control over activities and units that are out of the organizational boundaries, or even just on the boundaries line, could provoke serious and difficult problems, especially in cases of complex and heterogeneous task environments. In these cases, organizations will create and organize structural units on the boundaries in order to maintain such control. This is, according to Thompson (*ibid.*: 82), the "major form of decentralization".

On this last point, a crucial aspect to be considered, when assessing how much an organization externalizes services and supplies, is the existence of informal channels of regulation; or, more precisely, the existence of alternative forms of control, even the informal ones. This reflection calls for further studies and research on externalization focusing the attention on the informal channels of regulation and control that are not necessarily linked to the economic side of transactions.

Moreover, this explanation seems to suggest new hypothesis and research avenues to investigate both reasons and consequences of the contracting out practices.

As already mentioned, the most widespread and applied hypothesis explaining the outsourcing choice is the one offered by the transaction cost economics, based on economic efficiency criteria. Thus, according to

Williamson (1975) the key variable to explain the make or buy choice is the attribute of specificity of the service or good subject of the transaction.

In spite of that, during the Eighties, when Williamson's hypothesis started to be applied on empirical cases and research, it appeared that the service or good with high specificity would tend to reduce opportunism, but at the same time would lock down the two parties of the transaction so that they would encounter difficulties in finding other partners interested in the same type of transaction. Moreover, the TCE hypotheses were in some cases falsified by the increasing presence of hybrid forms of governance for the transactions of goods and services (Genugten, 2008).

An interesting and comprehensive study proposing alternative explanations for public services contracting-out was conducted by Genugten (2008). In her work, the author proposes a reflection about if and how TCE can be used in public sector analysis as well, treating decisions of governments to provide particular public services themselves or to contract them out to external partners as *make-or-buy decisions*. On this first point she argues that TCE tends to concentrate on the attribute of asset specificity while often neglecting the attribute of uncertainty. One reason for this neglect could be the fact that uncertainty is difficult to operationalize. Inversely, she proposes to bring back the attribute of uncertainty, distinguishing between environmental and behavioral uncertainty; a distinction that, better than the TCE, allows to incorporate the distinctive characteristics of outsourcing in the public sector.

What emerged from the comparative case study of waste management in eight municipalities with a high urbanization degree is that, regarding this particular public service, there is not a clear-cut linkage between the choice of a certain governance structure and the economic efficiency of the transactions.

Particularly striking is the finding that uncertainty, especially environmental uncertainty, plays such an important role. Public companies may be expected to be relatively less efficient and be performing worse than forms of contracting out to a private company. However, they are frequently chosen as a preferable model of governance.

According to the author, this choice could be explained not in terms of transaction costs assessment but by the need of maintaining a slack of power and discretion in the management of the service. A space of maneuver that the contracting out towards private actors does not allow for.

This conclusion not only is in line with the few available data on public services outsourcing, revealing that PAs tend to contract-out services only when they are really specific, but it is also consistent with Thompson's ideas above summarized. In other words, the key variable in the decision to externalize or outsource is the ability to maintain control, even partial, over the service subject to the transaction.

It is then clear that, according to such interpretation, control is rather different from the formal, juridical and contractual meaning of such a term; the type of control here considered could be in fact exercised throughout channels and tools very different from formal juridical contracts, such as the information and communications technology and new organizational forms and structures (networks, partnership, virtual structures).

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Managerial studies and organization theory

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Introduction

The *Academy of Management Journal* (hereafter AMJ) is one of the leading journals in the field of management. This chapter attempts at: a) analyzing the role of AMJ in the theoretical advancement of the contribution made by Thompson; and b) discussing the standpoint of AMJ in the development of the academic debate in the organizational field. In order to fulfill these aims it is necessary to first clarify the initial positioning of AMJ in the intentions of the founders and the first editorial boards, and then examine more in details the content of the articles using Thompson's theoretical legacy, as well as its role as a reference journal in the fields of management and organization.

AMJ was founded in 1958, thus placing it as one of the founding journals of the discipline of management. The year of AMJ's foundation is also very close to the year in which *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ) was founded. Albeit AMJ was not intended to be a reference point for organization studies, but rather dedicated to the broader field of management, the analysis presented in this contribution shows that it has been founded with a clear mandate to advance the theory on management and organization. As an example, it is noteworthy that the very first article of the first issue of the journal discussed organization theory. It is therefore interesting to maintain a historical perspective on the evolution of these different and yet related fields of studies. To do so, the initial mission statement of the Editor is discussed and compared with the changes that have marked the evolution of the journal's positioning over time. The long history of AMJ accounts for several changes in the editorial boards, as well as in its mission statements. By analyzing some selected editorials, in the remainder of the contribution, these changes are discussed and the mission of the journal is presented as it is stated

today, to unravel the evolution of the field as it is understood by the editorial boards of AMJ, and probably by the whole Academy of Management.

This study is based on the analysis of a selection of articles published on AMJ. As a first part of the study, the contribution focuses on the more recent evolution of AMJ with respect to Thompson's theory. This is done by analyzing the articles that have been published from 2000 to 2016 in terms of their tribute to the Thompsonian legacy.

Second, this study discusses the evolution of the positioning of the journal with respect to the fields of management and organization. This is done a) by using an original dataset of articles that appeared on the AMJ over the period 2000-2016 that provide some theoretical advancement in the organization domain, and b) by discussing the most prominent editorials that have either marked the accomplishment of a milestone for the journal.

Both analyses confirm that notwithstanding its prominence in the academic debate, AMJ maintains a broad scope in the field of management and it offers only a limited space to organization theory. Moreover, its empirical orientation has been increasingly stressed and pursued by the editorial boards over the years, whilst a more theoretical orientation has been delegated to the sister journal of AMJ, *Academy of Management Review*.

The remainder of this contribution is organized as follows. First, a discussion of the content of the first issue of the journal is offered in order to trace back the original standpoints that led to the foundation of the Journal. AMJ's tribute to Thompson's theory is commented through a detailed analysis of the articles that have appeared in the journal over the last 17 years. Furthermore, I discuss the contribution of AMJ to the organization theoretical discourse through the analysis of the most recent articles and the selected editorials. Last, implications are drawn on the theoretical advancement supported by AMJ.

At the origins of AMJ: was AMJ intended to be a good venue for organization theory?

The *Academy of Management Journal* was founded in April 1958. At that time, the journal was named *Journal of the Academy Management* and it then changed to the new name in 1963. Paul M. Dauten Jr. and Dalton E. McFarland served as first Editor and Associate Editor, respectively. It is important to understand the standpoints of the founding editorial board of the AMJ, as it is clarified in the Preface of the first issue of the journal. These have certainly guided the evolution of the journal over the first years. The same founding principles are at the basis of the very first article that appeared on AMJ, which explicitly defined the organizational construct (Wolf, 1958). Thus, these principles are discussed in a separate section of the present contribution.

When AMJ was launched, the Academy of Management (AoM) had been operating for twenty years as a prestigious reference for the studies of management and organization. Hence, the decision to launch a new journal was made on the basis of an extensive discussion that took place within the Research and Publication Committee of AoM.

The decision to found a new journal should also be discussed while bearing in mind that the launch of AMJ took place at a critical moment for the field of management and organization. Two reports, one sponsored by the Ford Foundation (Gordon, Howell, 1959) and the other by Carnegie Corporation (Pierson, 1959), expressed a harsh criticism of the educational system and quality of management research. As a reaction, these reports contributed to instilling a strong emphasis on research and modified the type of articles that were published in AMJ: they were primarily essays between 1958 and 1963 and they became mostly empirical studies after 1963 (Colquitt, Zapata-Phelan, 2007).

The journal thus served as a means to reinstate the general objectives of the AoM, among which the development of a philosophy and science of management was demanded. Hence, the concept of management as science was defended. In fact, AMJ has always encouraged authors to submit

empirical papers with a strong theoretical contribution.

As a first point of concern, the issue of the definition of the science of management should be raised as different from the concept of organization theory (or science). This concern will inform the remaining of the present contribution, as I claim that AMJ should not be considered as the primary reference for the organizational field. In fact, since the very inception of this journal, it has been made clear that the scope was intended to be much broader, to embrace the management field as a whole. To discuss what is the relation between “management” and “organization” here would lead far beyond the aim of this contribution. Nevertheless, it should be clear that this contribution provides some comments on the evolution of AMJ with respect to its significance for the organization theory.

AoM has grown tremendously over the decades and it is now subdivided into 25 Divisions and Interest Groups. Therefore, the AMJ website clarifies that: “The mission of the *Academy of Management Journal* is to publish empirical research that tests, extends, or builds management theory and contributes to management practice [...] To be published in AMJ, a manuscript must make strong empirical and theoretical contributions and highlight the significance of those contributions to the management field. [...] AMJ is not tied to any particular discipline, level of analysis, or national context. [...] Meaningful new implications or insights for theory must be present in all AMJ articles, although such insights may be developed in a variety of ways. [...] Submissions should clearly communicate the nature of their theoretical contribution in relation to the existing management and organizational literature.”

Indeed, AMJ seeks to publish articles in the domain of every division inside the Academy of Management. Overall, the main message is that the content areas sought and published by AMJ are very broad and of interest to a wide number of disciplines and scholars (Rynes *et al.*, 2005).

The foundation of the AMJ on the ground of organization theory

As an example of the positioning of AMJ in the origin of the organizational field, it must be noted that the opening of the very first issue of the journal was chosen to be the contribution by Wolf (1958) on organizational constructs. In the foundation issue of the AMJ, Wolf aimed at proposing a general theory of organization. He offers a definition of organization, which comprises the following concepts: “[...] formal grouping of people [...] with its fundamental needs or goals under which it unites people in interrelated tasks, [...] and it involves deliberate and purposeful actions among men in order to maintain the cooperative system. An organization is a social system. It has a formal structure that designates the superior and subordinate relationship, [...] as well as a body of doctrines and techniques [...] and its own internal life which tends toward a closed system. [...]. In addition to its internal needs the organization has to adjust to a broader environment. It is subjected to a number of pressures from sources outside its immediate control” (Wolf, 1958: 14).

This definition reveals a conception of organization as a living entity. The organization refers to a social environment, a formal structure, recognized goals, and a variety of needs. Moreover, the organization is seen as an evolving entity, continually adjusting and changing to “perpetuate itself” and to “achieve its overall goals” (Wolf, 1958: 14).

Wolf concludes with a sort of vision, which resembles what Thompson and Lichfield did in ASQ in 1956. The author’s intent was to propose an approach for the study of all organizations and to stimulate the creation of a general theory of organization, which Thompson and Lichfield call the general theory of administration (Litchfield, 1956; Thompson, 1956). Although the concept of the organization may be different, still I detect a common purpose: to stimulate the community to build a general theory of organization/administration. It can be stated that organization science took initial roots within this vivid debate, which reveals a common understanding of a “concrete organizational reality, an objective world, capable of empirical

study" (Gergen, Thatchenkery, 2004). It is useful to recall here the definition of organizations provided by Parsons in the first issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly*: "a social system oriented to the attainment of relatively specific types of goals, which contributes to a major function of a more comprehensive system, usually the society itself" (Parsons, 1956: 63). Coherently, in the same issue of the ASQ Thompson describes the administrative science as based on "deductive and inductive methods, [...] operational definitions, [...] and measurement and evaluation" (Thompson, 1956: 102), which is in line with the concrete character of the organization that is explicit in the definitions recalled above (Gergen, Thatchenkery, 2004).

Nevertheless, the similarities between the approaches to organization pursued by AMJ and ASQ seem to end here. As a first evidence, the attention should be devoted to the fact that the article by Wolf did not receive much attention, as it has been cited only 19 times to date (Google Scholar, as of August, 10, 2017). The only reference to Wolf, 1958 that appeared on AMJ dates back to 1968, when Wright proposed a theoretical model to study the "organization character" (Wright, 1968). This result has been caused partially by the misfortune of Wolf's view of organizations and organization theory, which shared the modernist approach that was dominant at that time by suggesting that organizations should be decomposed into constructs that could be studied and later integrated into a big system of causality (Dreiling, 2007). It must be noted, however, that in general the articles appeared in the early issues of AMJ were not cited widely. The most cited article published in the first issue is 1958 is Koontz's contribution on the principles of planning and control (Koontz, 1958), which has received 67 citations to date, followed by Davis's contribution on the philosophy of management (Davis, 1958), which has received 29 citations. Therefore, I claim that most of all the limited number of citation of Wolf's contribution is due to the narrow overall impact that AMJ had at that time, and continued to have, on the community of scholars interested in studying the organizational issues. A general theory of organization has remained elusive for AMJ (Mowday, 1997). This statement

finds additional justification in the following paragraphs, where the evolution of AMJ is discussed with a specific focus on its liaison with organization theory.

AMJ and the advancement of organization theory

This contribution aims at discussing the standpoint of AMJ in the development of the recent academic debate on organization, both considering the most recent theoretical advancement of the contribution made by Thompson, and with respect to the broad field of organization. In order to do so, the articles that have appeared on AMJ over the period January 2000 - December 2016 have been selected using two criteria that led to two different datasets: a) the first one comprises those articles that cite at least once the work of Thompson (1967); b) the second one contains those articles that include either the keyword “organization theory” or “organizational theory” in the title, the abstract, among the keywords list, or in the whole text. The second dataset is complemented by a selection of the most prominent editorials that either marked some important anniversary of the journal (Schminke, Mitchell, 2003; Rynes, 2007; Ireland, 2008; George, 2016), or dealt with the trends in theory building in AMJ (*e.g.* Rynes *et al.*, 2005; Colquitt, Zapata-Phelan, 2007), or else have addressed “grand challenges” that AMJ helped to unravel (*e.g.* Eisenhardt *et al.*, 2016). These editorials are of great help in understanding the theoretical production of AMJ.

Recent standpoints of AMJ with respect to Thompson's Organizations in Action

With respect to the recognition of Thompson's legacy to organization theory, 92 (over more than 1.200) articles published over the considered time frame (2000-2016) are analyzed as they cite Thompson's seminal work of 1967. It is interesting to distinguish between formal and substantial tribute. In fact, some articles merely pay a formal tribute to the founding father of organization by citing his work, but they do not make use of Thompson's constructs. Many more articles, though, show a substantial tribute as the

authors employ Thompson's theoretical constructs either as a component of the theoretical framework or as a theoretical explanation of the empirical findings. The most prominent result of this exercise is that only a small percentage (7%) of all the articles published over the time frame 2000-2016 cite Thompson, 1967. If we compare the average number of articles per year citing Thompson that appeared on the AMJ, we notice that in the period 1967-1984 the average number is 4, in the period 1985-1999 it is 6, and in the period 2000-2016 it is 5.

These figures confirm that Thompson has never received great attention by the authors of AMJ, and certainly this did not happen over the last decade or so.

It is nevertheless interesting to analyze which theoretical constructs that constitute Thompson's view of organizations and organizational action are cited and used. To this aim, Table 1 shows the distribution of the keywords related to Thompson's contribution that are recalled in the analyzed articles. Some of them may appear different from Thompson's terminology as the table shows the same wording that appears in the articles published on AMJ that have been analyzed.

Moreover, a high percentage of these articles merely pay a formal tribute to Thompson (23%). Those are articles in which either a) the citation appears only in the list of references, or b) a citation appears vaguely in the literature review without reference to any specific theoretical construct. This evidence confirms that the organizational focus of AMJ, if any, is quite distant from the organizations in action view.

Table 1: Distribution of Thompson's theoretical constructs (articles published on the AMJ; 2000-2016). Source: elaboration from EBSCO Business Source Complete database.

Keywords related to Thompson's theory	% of occurrences
Mere citation	23%
Interdependence	18%
Team	8%
Contingency	7%
Uncertainty	7%
Slack	5%
Structure	4%
Routines	4%
Buffer	4%
Strategic decision	3%
Dominant coalition	2%
Power	2%
Coordination	2%
Environment	2%
Search	2%
Control	1%
Knowledge integration	1%
Coordinated actions	1%
Externally directed actions	1%
M-form structure	1%
Organizational domain	1%
Information systems	1%
Segmentation	1%
Technology	1%
	100%

Among the 79 articles that employ Thompson's constructs, there is a strong emphasis on interdependence, which in some cases is related to task interdependence (e.g. Jacobides, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2006), in other cases to teams (e.g. Joshi, Roh, 2009; Hu, Liden, 2015) or top management teams (TMT, Barrick *et al.*, 2007). "Uncertainty" is also cited in a quite interesting amount of papers. This is also related to a steady interest in the concept of "slack", mainly

in the sense that slack resources account for an organization's ability to buffer against uncertainty (e.g. Reuer, Leiblein, 2000).

Albeit being very scarce, it is noteworthy to discuss the content of those articles that either cite Thompson's constructs more extensively than the others, or that use those constructs to lay the foundation for their own theoretical contribution. In the analyzed dataset, a dozen contributions match these criteria. In the following paragraph, I offer a review of what emerges as the Thompsonian legacy from these contributions.

The concept of slack resources appears to be of particular interest, as it has been used to discuss the organizations' ability to utilize resources, as it helps them to buffer from environmental shocks and influence the enactment of strategies (George, 2005). Slack is conceived as adequate or excess resource endowments and it provides the theoretical construct to assess the slack-performance relationship, on the theoretical proposition that slack provides the flexibility for a firm to decide on a course of action when trying to adapt to its environment (George, 2005). Alternatively, organizational slack is conceived as an important predictor of innovation because firms with more slack have more financial resources, employees, and possibly more advanced technologies (Li *et al.*, 2013). Slack is also related to the managerial function of search, as Li *et al.* (2013) developed a theory to investigate top management team search for new information and knowledge.

Hierarchical structures are cited in connection with Thompson's concept of tasks localization to the smallest possible inclusive units, such as crews or teams, and the related organizational need to coordinate interdependent elements. This has been used extensively in articles that studied teams and team design. As an example, Perretti and Negro (2006) build on Thompson (1967) to investigate how status and organizational hierarchies affect exploration versus exploitation in team design. On a similar vein, formal structures have been discussed with reference to Thompson's construct of interdependency. In particular, Child and McGrath (2001) discuss the characteristics of emerging formal structures in an information-intensive

economy. By claiming that new organizational forms cope with four core issues: interdependence, disembodiment, velocity, and power, they maintain that a new vision of organization has emerged, which refuses the idea of “organizations as stable structures designed to absorb uncertainty, as they were conceived to be in Thompson’s (1967) era” (Child, McGrath, 2001: 1139). In a way, the authors recognize the importance of the Thompsonian legacy. Nevertheless, later in the same paper, they write about interdependencies with no reference whatsoever to Thompson, as if in an era of constant change the view of organizations in actions supported by Thompson’s arguments was outdated. At odds, Sine *et al.* (2006) found that structure increased performance in new ventures, even in the context of a very dynamic emergent sector. They build their theoretical arguments on the basis of Thompson’s construct of functional specialization, which “allows organization members to concentrate on the execution of specified and narrowly defined tasks and to accumulate task-related knowledge, and thus it enhances information-processing capabilities” (Sine *et al.*, 2006: 124).

Another set of articles that quote Thompson’s theory deal with interdependence. In particular, Thompson’s conceptualization of pooled, sequential, and reciprocal types of interdependence has been used to analyze the formal governance mechanisms that support hybrid organizational forms, such as alliances. In fact, it has been shown that in the case of alliances the design of coordination mechanisms must account for “the challenges and contingencies that arise with a higher level of interdependence between partners” (Reuer, Devarakonda, 2016: 516). Similarly, reciprocal interdependencies are analyzed in the context of target-acquirer relation in the context of market expansion through acquisition (Cording *et al.*, 2008). The results show that the acquisition process is undermined by integration difficulties due to management challenges that increase as the complexity of the interdependencies increases.

Interdependence is also often associated with teams. Johnson *et al.* (2006) discuss the results of a test on team reward scheme comparing social

interdependence theory (Beersma *et al.*, 2003) with the claim that task interdependence has been shown to affect both group-oriented behavior and team performance (as in Thompson, 1967). Team interdependence is also used as a moderator of the relationship between task- and relations-oriented diversity and team performance (Joshi, Roh, 2009).

Last, some authors associate Thompson's theory with other theories, in ways that sometimes seem debatable. This is the case of the association with Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) as power and resource dependence theory are co-cited in the effort to build a new theory on the influence of micro-level opportunity structures on non-CEO executives (Carpenter, Wade, 2002), based on the quote that jobs represent both "a unit in the organization and a unit in the career of an individual. Joining of the two [is] a result of a bargained agreement [...] determined through power processes" (Thompson, 1967: 116). On the same vein, Thompson's view of coordinated actions is associated with Weick's theory of organizational culture (Weick, 1993) as "self-design processes yield new agreements about values and purposes that must be shared to enable coordinated action" (Mohrman *et al.*, 2001: 358).

Standpoints of AMJ with respect to organization theory

In order to account for the evolution of AMJ with respect to organization theory, I complement the dataset with original articles published on the AMJ over the last 17 years with selected editorials. A recollection of the early years of the AMJ is provided by Paul Gordon in a later article (1997). By recalling his experience as Editor of the AMJ, he admits that the second half of the '60s brought a change by promoting "a shift from more exclusive identification with general management principles and processes, personnel administration, and production as then perceived and taught. The journal increasingly emphasized behaviorism, quantification, operations management, internationalism, general systems, multidisciplinary research, and clinical relevance, with continuing respect for those who represented more traditional approaches" (Gordon, 1997: 1415).

Celebrating anniversaries of the publication of AMJ has not been a habit of the journal until 1997, when the Editor in chief Anne Tsui commissioned a special section marking the milestone of the 40th anniversary of the journal. Tsui herself celebrated the 40th anniversary through a message to the authors where she asked for submissions that could allow scholars outside any specialized area to understand the ideas and data, and that would avoid using specialized terminology (Tsui, 1997).

In the same issue, Mowday (1997) provides an interesting content analysis of the articles published in AMJ over the period 1958-1996 and he speculates on the classification already proposed by Adams and Davis (1986) that arranges the articles according to the 22 AoM Divisions. This classification shows that the divisions related to organization (Organizational Behavior, Organization and Management Theory) attracted significant attention during the timeframe 1958-1969, as more than 60% of the articles were related to those divisions. Nevertheless, this number decreased over time in favor of other divisions such as Business policy and strategy, and Human Resources.

Schminke and Mitchell (2003) celebrated the 45th anniversary of the journal with an editorial that analyzes the evolution of AMJ over the 1958-2003 period. The Editors, starting from the first issue of AMJ, take into account the first issue of each one of the 45 years that had past. The results show that over time the journal orientation shifted towards the publication of micro-analysis (focused on the individual and hence having topics such as organizational behavior), and qualitative research. The resulting trend contradicted the stereotypes attributed to AMJ, which was perceived to have a strong quantitative orientation and focus on macro analysis (focused on the organization or its environment, hence on topics such as organizational theory). Although in the early years there was little room for papers belonging to the micro category, since the '70s there had been a marked counter-trend. Before the foundation of *Academy of Management Review* (AMR) in 1976, AMJ published both theoretical and empirical papers. Although qualitative work has occupied a minority position in AMJ, its presence has been felt throughout

the journal's history. Kirkman and Law (2005) also state that half of the papers analyzed over the years from 1970 to 2004 fall in the category of microanalysis.

A different perspective is adopted by Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007). Their contribution builds a taxonomy that allows to identify the characteristics of the theoretical contribution of an empirical article. This taxonomy is then used to assess such contribution in terms of building new theory and experimenting with what exists in the history of AMJ. The authors claim that a theoretical contribution can be made in three ways. Theory testing, *i.e.* articles that use the deductive method as they use theory to construct hypotheses that will be tested later on. Theory building, which is the case of studies using the inductive method (typical of qualitative studies): they start from the observation of reality to build new theory. The articles that have appeared in AMJ are classified as: a) *reporters*, *i.e.* empirical articles that have a low level of new theory building; b) *qualifiers*, *i.e.* empirical articles that present moderate levels of testing of existing theory and new theory; c) *testers*: they are empirical articles characterized by a strong degree of testing of existing theory without building a new theory; d) *builders*, *i.e.* empirical articles designed to build new theory without testing the existing one; e) *expanders*, *i.e.* empirical articles that have a high level in both the construction of new theory and the experimentation of the existing one (Colquitt, Zapata-Phelan, 2007). A close examination of the papers published on AMJ in the time frame 1963-2007 reveals that the articles that could be labeled as *theory expanders* increased dramatically between the late 1980s and the late 2000s, thus suggesting that the theoretical contribution of these papers has been limited to adding some elements or expanding existing perspectives rather than proposing new theoretical views (Shaw, 2017).

The most recent standpoints of AMJ with respect to organization theory

This section provides some results stemming from the combined analysis of the most recent editorials and the most recent AMJ articles that include either the keyword "organization theory" or "organizational theory"

in the title, the abstract, among the keywords list, or in the whole text. First, it must be highlighted that the proportion of manuscripts with high theoretical impact remains very low over the time frame considered. In fact, the majority of the articles falls into the category of empirical papers with a theoretical contribution, being the contribution to organization theory quite limited. Adopting the taxonomy proposed by Colquitt and Zapata-Phelan (2007) it could be stated that the majority of the articles in the dataset used in the present study falls into the category “expanders”. Second, it is not possible to detect a strong consensus over a group of specific theoretical approaches. Nevertheless, a significant proportion of manuscripts deal with either the macro-subject “Organization and Strategy”, or “Networks”, or “Organizational Behavior”. With respect to the methodology, quantitative studies are the vast majority.

Our preliminary findings can be complemented by some important editorials that have been recently released. As a general understanding, AMJ is perceived more as a management leading journal, and less as a reference journal for the organization studies. Nevertheless, among the divisions of the AoM, Organization and Management Theory (OMT) and Organization Behavior (OB) are among the most popular ones. Thus, the leading journal of AoM (*i.e.* the AMJ) should host a great proportion of articles that fall into the organization field. In order to provide a close investigation in this direction, Morrison wrote an editorial as Associate Editor and President of the OB division (Morrison, 2010), with the following research questions: a) are there particular types of micro-items that AMJ prefers to others? b) what kind of papers would you expect to receive as Associate Editor? Responses are developed through a longitudinal empirical study that analyzes the articles published in AMJ over the 2000-2009 time span. The Authors analyze the papers that presented a micro level of analysis. For an article to be considered a micro-type, the dependent(s) and/or independent(s) variable(s) must be measured at the individual or group level. Of the 601 articles published in the decade considered, 237 articles (40%) fall into the micro category. The

remaining 60% fall into a variety of macro-themes such as organization theory, strategy, entrepreneurship, strategic human resource management. Subsequently, the 237 micro papers were coded according to the following dimensions: analysis level (individual/group), applied research method (field survey, lab experiment, qualitative, network analysis, longitudinal, meta-analysis, multi-method, Archival) and geographic origin of data (North America, Europe, Asia, Multiregion). The results show that in most articles variables are studied individually (on average in 66% of cases). In the remaining cases, variables are studied at the group level (on average in 22% of cases) or at both levels (on average in 10% of cases). Moreover, longitudinal studies showed a growing trend (from just under 5% during the first three years of the decade, averaging 13% in the last three); the number of qualitative items has always been low with a peak in 2003 (18%) followed by 0% in 2004; Experiments showed a steady trend over the years (15%) while studies that employ more research techniques were rather rare.

The 50th anniversary of the journal provided the opportunity to publish some prominent reflections on the role of AMJ in the production of management theory and on its impact as a whole. Hambrick (2007) questions the emphasis on theory and the “management’s devotion to theory”. He argues that although top management journals certainly require that manuscripts have a strong theoretical contribution (Colquitt, Zapata-Phelan, 2007; Rynes, 2005), management suffers from a sort of idolization of theory unlike other more specialized fields such as marketing, finance. This reflection would call for a moderation of AMJ’s hyper-commitment to theory and would open up to a broader scope of AMJ. In the same vein, George in his final editorial as editor of AMJ questions the notion of impact as measured solely by citations (George, 2016). Instead of being obsessed by gaps in the literature or methodological refinements, authors and journal striving for impact should rather consider five criteria, such as: significance, novelty, curiosity, scope, and actionability (George, 2016; Colquitt, George, 2011). In the same vein, Shaw, Bansal, and Gruber (2017) recognize that in the management field there is a

relatively heavy emphasis on theory. Nonetheless, the number of theories is relatively small. In micro research, much emphasis is placed on general theories of motivation, while on the macro level, the most popular theories involve information asymmetry, resources, institutional environments (Shaw *et al.*, 2017). Nonetheless, the second half of AMJ's first century was greeted by the editor who stressed the mission of the journal as the locus for "empirical research with the potential to make significant theoretical and empirical contributions" (Ireland, 2008: 10).

Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that Thompson has been underestimated and even neglected over the pages of AMJ. The call for an even broader scope of the journal published in the editorials that have been analyzed in the first part of this contribution, as well as the impressive growth of the Academy of Management, brought AMJ to be labelled as the "big purple tent" journal (e.g. Shaw, 2017: 4), *i.e.* the venue for those high-quality manuscripts that investigate questions regarding all aspects of management. Broadening up the scope of the journal is correlated to the steady and impressive growth of the number of academics associated to AoM. I claim that such a phenomenon has also brought AMJ to become more and more the reference journal for the broad management field with a strong emphasis on empirical analysis. Thus, the theoretical production has been more modest. This is particularly true if the specificity of the organizational field is considered. As far as Thompson's theory is concerned, there is little evidence of the *Organizations in Action* over the pages of AMJ.

With respect to the future, the recent call for "grand challenges" (George, 2016) and "new ways of seeing" (Shaw, 2017; Shaw *et al.*, 2017) suggests that a great emphasis will be placed on the choice of the topics. These should address global and local societal problems, as well as capture topics of renewed and cumulative interest. Additionally, new ways of seeing are encouraged that encompasses *de novo theory development* (Shaw *et al.*, 2017).

This might be challenging and somewhat exciting. Nevertheless, a deeper reflection on recent organizational phenomena could lead to realizing that Thompson's *Organizations in Action* still holds its explicative and interpretative power.

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The editorial structure of top organization journals

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Introduction

One of the long-lasting legacies of James Thompson is, undoubtedly, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, still regarded by most scholars as one of the mainstays of the organizational field. The intent of the founder was to organize and systematize sparse and heterogeneous pieces of knowledge, as “Current knowledge of administration is not sufficiently organized” (Thompson, 1956: 109) into an organic corpus, around a shared theoretical backbone, which he felt was lacking “[...] due in part to the need to develop more comprehensive theory” (*ibid.*: 110), and integrating the findings of social sciences into it. In the same, first issue, Litchfield (1956) in his opening essay further specifies that the administrative science is a developing subject receiving contributions from a disparate set of seemingly unrelated fields, whereas scholars openly identifying with the field have contributed little. But of course, these contributions cannot be systematic without shared basic tenets, values and core interests. The two position papers, in essence, set the tone for the new journal. Namely, it will become a unifying tool to promote debate and create a community focusing on common theoretical themes (but not necessarily approaches) from starting traditions that are far apart. The choices about the original set of editorial board members are, thus unsurprising. Only six people are coopted (Thompson and Litchfield included), all from the Schools of Management and Administration of Cornell University, with two exceptions: Sune Carlson, a prominent Swedish economist with an interest in CEO behavior and Ewing W. Reilly, a consultant with McKinsey. The amount of diversity brought by these people, however, is astounding for such a small group, ranging from economics (Carlson and de Chazeau) to psychiatry (Alexander Leighton) and from operations (de Chazeau)

to the consultancy industry (Reilley), and to organization theory (Thompson and Litchfield).

Different considerations were at the core of the decision, by Arie Lewin and Richard Daft, to found *Organization Science* in 1990 (Daft, Lewin, 1990). In this case, the goal was that of “building a venue” for debate that did not privilege any specific approach or methodology that guaranteed variety and representation of several approaches to issues pertaining to the organizational fields. This is the main reason why the choice of the founding editors was to integrate into the original set of editorial board members a large group of scholars characterized by heterogeneity in terms of school of thought, methodological beliefs, values and so on. The clear attempt was to revitalize the field of organization studies by attracting peripheral ideas and giving legitimacy to minorities within the scientific communities.

Both cases are dealing with problems related to the development of a scholarly community. In the first case, one can talk about a nascent field that needed a unifying venue. Thus the fundamental goal was to help the convergence of scholars with different backgrounds, methodological approaches and basic research interests. In the second case, the field is more mature, but is facing, at least according to the founding editors, a sclerotic phase, where no significant theoretical advances are made because of the attitude of editors and reviewers who systematically reject ideas which are not already considered “legitimate”. In turn, this attitude produces “valid” knowledge which is deemed irrelevant outside the community.

The composition of the editorial boards of these two journals represents interesting cases for several reasons.

First, they can be considered two of the most important venues for publishing in the organizational field, thus the social norms regulating the access of scholars to their boards can give a solid representation of the scientific community as a whole.

Second, they are representatives of two clearly distinct “generations” of scientific journals in the field. ASQ (alongside the *Academy of Management*

Journal) was born in the mid-fifties and represents one of the first attempts at institutionalizing the field, separating it from sister branches of knowledge. *Organization Science*, by contrast, was born at the beginning of the 90s as an attempt at reviving the tradition of organization theory as a diverse and argumentative field.

Third, by and large they currently share the same readership, despite the fact that *Administrative Science Quarterly* has maintained its “sociological” roots, whereas the debate in *Organization Science* is slightly more tilted towards methodology, and specifically the empirical inquiry.

Comparing the structure of the editorial boards of these two journals, the goal is that of understanding the current trends in the field of organization studies, characterized by a general feeling of dissatisfaction with some of the publishing practices that have been taking place in the last two decades. The growing separation of approaches and themes between Europe and North America (Meyer, Boxenbaum, 2010). The growing pressure to publish, eroding the space and time for reflection (Davis, 2015) and the tendency to produce “marginal” theorizations. The divide in the education that young scholars receive at different institutions (Lyytinen *et al.*, 2007).

The rest of the contribution is structured as follows. In the next paragraph I collect evidence stemming from the literature on the rationales and the effects associated with specific structures of the editorial boards of scientific journals. In the following one, I detail the process of data collection and structure of the dataset I used for the analysis, alongside some methodological choices. I then present the results, and analyze them. The contribution ends with some comments and conclusions.

Editorial board policies and their effects on the scientific community: some evidence from the literature

The development of scholarly communities has long been the subject of scrutiny of both social scientists and philosophers of science (Merton, 1973; Frickel, Gross, 2005). Most of the research, however, has been focused on

authors and the dynamics of authoring. This is perfectly reasonable, as successful publishing is necessary for academic tenure and promotion (Glick, Miller, Cardinal, 2007) and translates into economic considerations relating to wages, resources, grants, and research funding (Bird, 2006). By contrast, considerably less attention has been devoted to the publication policies and editorial boards of journals. Bedeian and colleagues (Bedeian *et al.*, 2009) characterize this lack of attention as puzzling. In fact, by controlling the production of discourse, editorial board members are agents who control the distribution of acceptable knowledge. Institutionalized as gatekeepers, editorial board members serve as arbiters who appraise and authenticate competing claims to scientific originality (*ibidem*).

Past research on editorial boards has already outlined a few tendencies that characterize the choices of journals and those of their editorial board members.

Gender representation is the one area that stands out in terms of quantity and quality of work devoted to editorial board composition in management and organization studies. The number of women sitting on editorial boards, on average, tends to be relatively smaller than the number of women publishing in journals of the same thematic area, with the notable exception of *Organizational Behavior / Human Resource Management* (Metz, Harzing, 2009).

Attempting to signal to potential authors their prestige and authority, journals compete to attract highly experienced and capable editors (Aguinis *et al.*, 2012; Burgess, Shaw, 2010). This leads to the widespread phenomenon of multiple memberships. In the case of journals of finance, editors being members of multiple journals tend to be more entrenched in the social system and its norms, thus behaving more conservatively when they need to evaluate novel approaches to research (Andrikopoulos, Economou, 2015). By contrast, the literature on the generation of innovative ideas contends that “groundbreaking”, or simply non mainstream ideas are often generated at the periphery of fields of inquiry (see, for instance, Cattani, Ferriani, 2008).

Ozbilgin (2004: 219) states that there is an “overall lack of transparency in recruitment of editorial board members”. Sometimes the latitude of editors’ power shows through, when an editor talks about overriding the explicitly stated criteria of excellence and backing “promising talent” (Van Fleet *et al.*, 2006).

The domination of academic journal publications by US academics – although slightly declining in recent years – is well known (Archambault *et al.*, 2006; Kao, 2009; Mangematin, Baden-Fuller, 2008) and would, therefore, be expected to correlate with that country’s strength in board memberships.

However, Lyytinen and colleagues (2007), examining the case of *Information Systems*, claim that nationality of the board members should not be considered as a primary element of discrimination. In their research they find that there is no discrimination against non-US citizens in major journals, and, moreover, that European-based reviewers tend to reject European contributions more, simply because they receive more papers from European authors. This bias, which seems to hold true for all geographical groupings, is in part motivated by affinity of themes and expertise, making a lot more probable for an expert reviewer from a given country to be assigned to authors from the same country. However, perhaps more interestingly, the same authors point out to the prevalence of authors trained in Departments located in the US (Lyytinen *et al.*, 2007) The explanation they propose is that these selected departments focus specifically their training efforts to ensure the development of the skills which are deemed necessary in order to publish in high impact journals (Roy *et al.*, 2006). For the same reason, one can expect that editorial board members will disproportionately come from a reasonably small number of PhD school, typically based in the US.

Method and data

In order to evaluate the effect of the social structure of the editorial boards on the publishing choices of the journals, I built an original dataset by integrating two data sources¹.

The first one, consisting primarily of the composition of the editorial board, for each issue of the journals, was deduced from the “front matter” section of each issue of each of the two journals. Alongside membership and precise role within the journal, I was able to collect information on the current (at the time of each issue) affiliation of each board member. For the sake of comparability between the two journals, I included membership data in the timeframe 2000-2008. This choice is mainly motivated by the number of occurrences of a change in the chief editorial position (editor) of each journal, as a change of editor is the event that triggers most of the other changes in editorial board composition. In the time frame I considered, both journals had two main editors, with one change occurring after a rather sizable tenure of the previous editor. It should be noted that, in late 2008, ASQ experienced one more change of editor, with Hayagreeva Rao succeeding Donald Palmer, however, given the different number of issues published by each journal I decided not to truncate the time series at the time of the change.

The second set of information regards some biographical variables related to each editorial board member. Specifically, in line with previous research, I tracked, for each member of the editorial board, nationality, gender, school where they obtained their doctoral title, current position and organizational affiliation. Where necessary, I checked, corrected and extended data by going to the individual academic’s web pages at the organization of their primary affiliation. I cross-checked the data by sorting and inspecting for inconsistencies between records.

In this way I obtained a comprehensive dataset of about 10000 observations of person/membership type for the two journals in total. Given

¹ I would like to thank my colleagues Loris Gaio and Manh-Duc Le for their precious assistance with the collection and management of the data.

the very asymmetric nature of the philosophies animating the two journals, with the board of *Organization Science* generally being more inclusive, the database ended up including 2540 observations for ASQ and 7384 observations for *Organization Science*.

For this chapter, I decided to use descriptive statistics only, as the main goal is that of understanding the social structure of the editorial boards, rather than building inferences on their influence on the editorial strategies of the journals.

Main results

I subdivided out results into 5 main sub-groups, to better correlate the observations to the evidence stemming from the literature. In the first subparagraph, I detail the simultaneous presence of editorial board members in both journals, in each of the following subsections I compare the two cases to track any possible differences in the strategies they followed to form their editorial boards.

Compresence of editorial board members in both journals

I started the analysis by checking the number of editorial board members sitting on both boards during the same period. It turned out that 68 scholars were members of both journal boards in the same time frame. This means that about 38% of members of the board of ASQ sat also on the board of *Organization Science*. This percentage confirms the conjecture that, by and large, editorial board membership is essentially a “small world” phenomenon, with a relatively small amount of individuals wielding a considerable amount of power in deciding the editorial policies of main venues of publication.

Gender distribution of editorial board members

Gender distribution among board members does not seem to yield any specific biases. Looking at Figure 1, we can see that the ratio of male and female members keeps mostly constant in a 9 years period covering 36 issue, with a

slight decline in number of females around 2003, and a clear, albeit slow, steady growth since then.

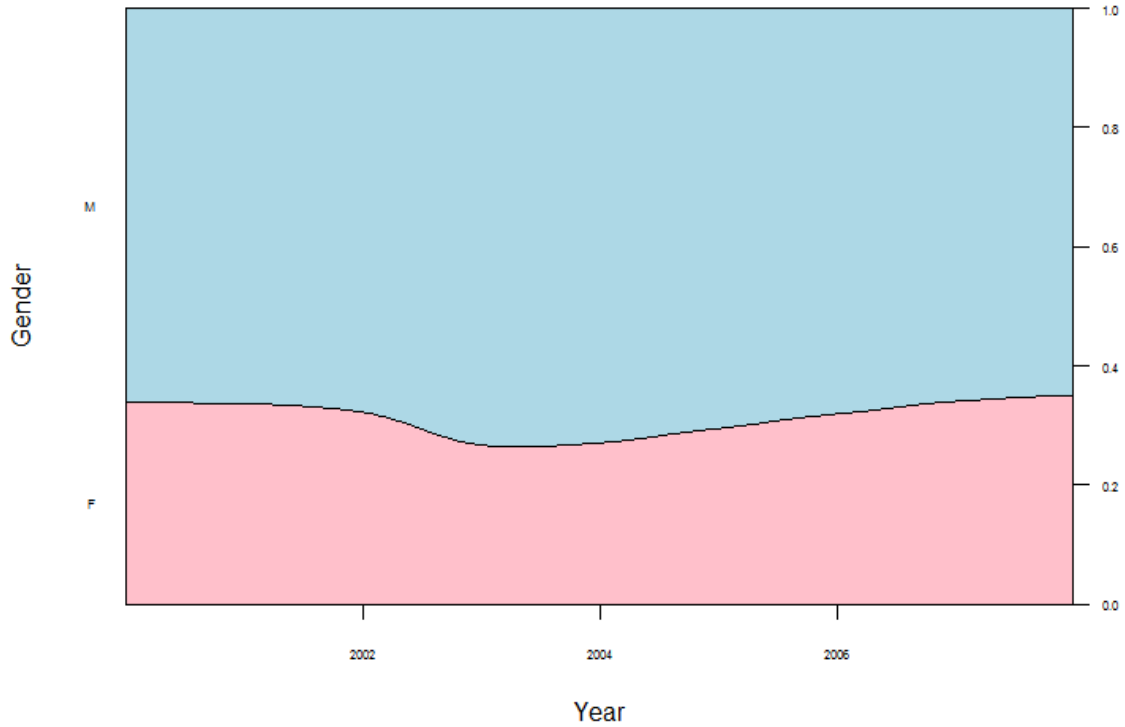


Figure 1: Gender distribution of board members in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 2000-2008.

The situation in the board of *Organization Science* is perhaps a bit more balanced, as shown in Figure 2. In this case, we observe a bumpy growth of the percentage of female members in the board of the journal. In both cases, however, we do not observe any critical issues of underrepresentation of females in the two journals as the share of females is roughly the same as the ratio of female scientists in the social sciences (UNESCO, 2015). Moreover, we do not observe any obvious bias when we take role into account: both journals have a significant, and comparable, number of females in their governing bodies (editor and associate editors for ASQ, editor, senior editors and associate editors for OS).

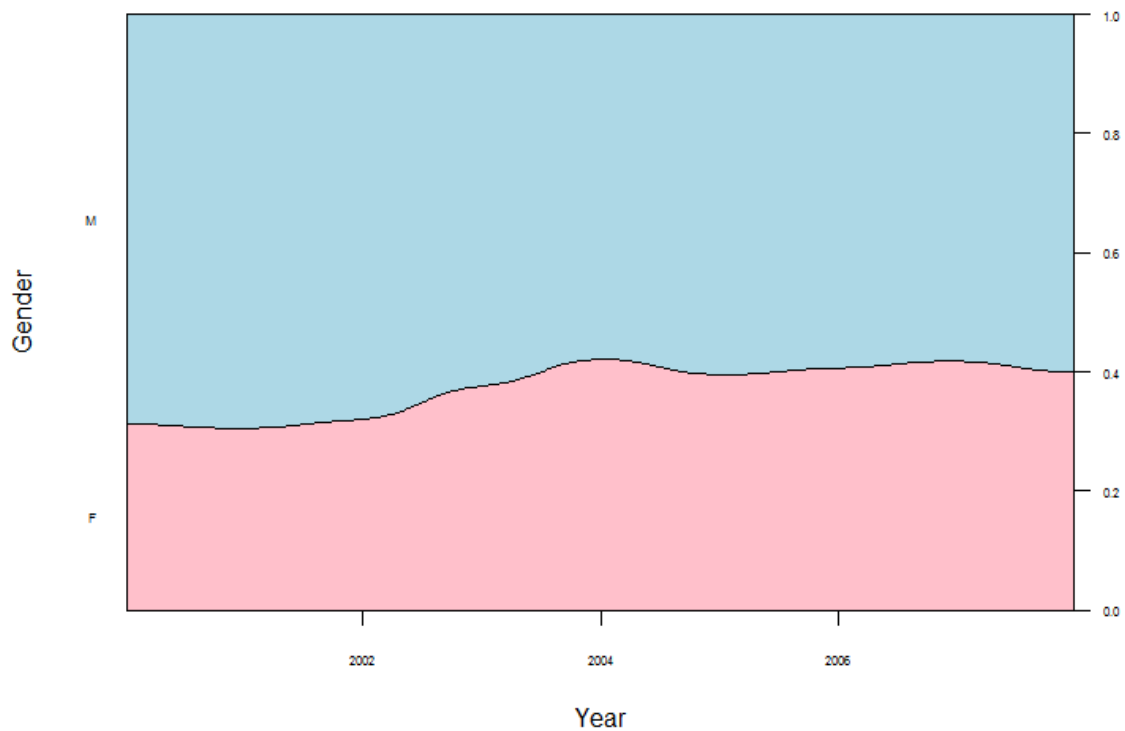


Figure 2: Gender distribution of board members in *Organization Science*: 2000-2008.

Nationality

Unsurprisingly, US nationals dominate the composition of both boards in the considered period. Looking at Figure 3 and Figure 4, below, the only slight difference between the two journals is that, in the board of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, there is a relatively smaller number of nations represented, and a relatively higher percentage of US national. This is perfectly understandable, given the much smaller scope of the board in the case of ASQ. The trends in time are also pretty stable, with perhaps a slight tendency to increase the number of nationalities represented on the boards of both journals, but leaving the percentage of US nationals pretty much stable.

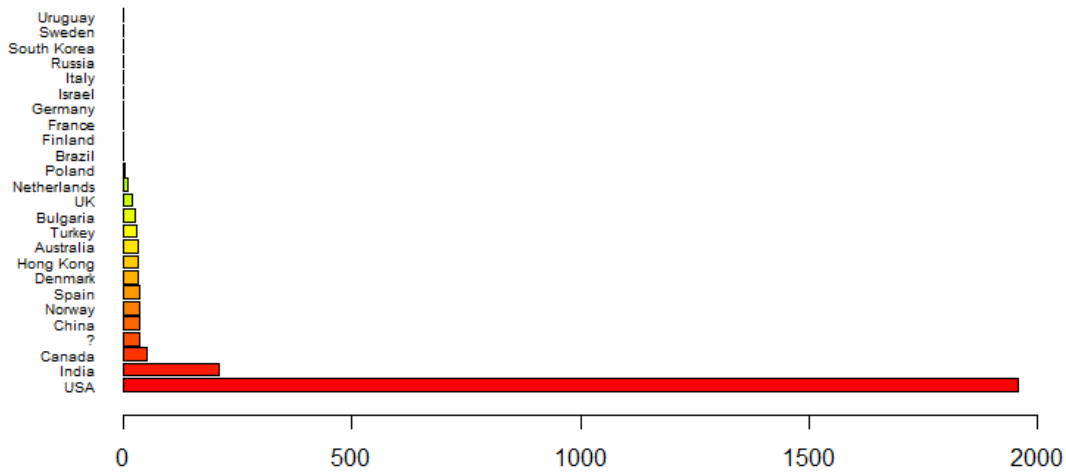


Figure 3: The distribution of board membership by nationality, ASQ 2000-2008.

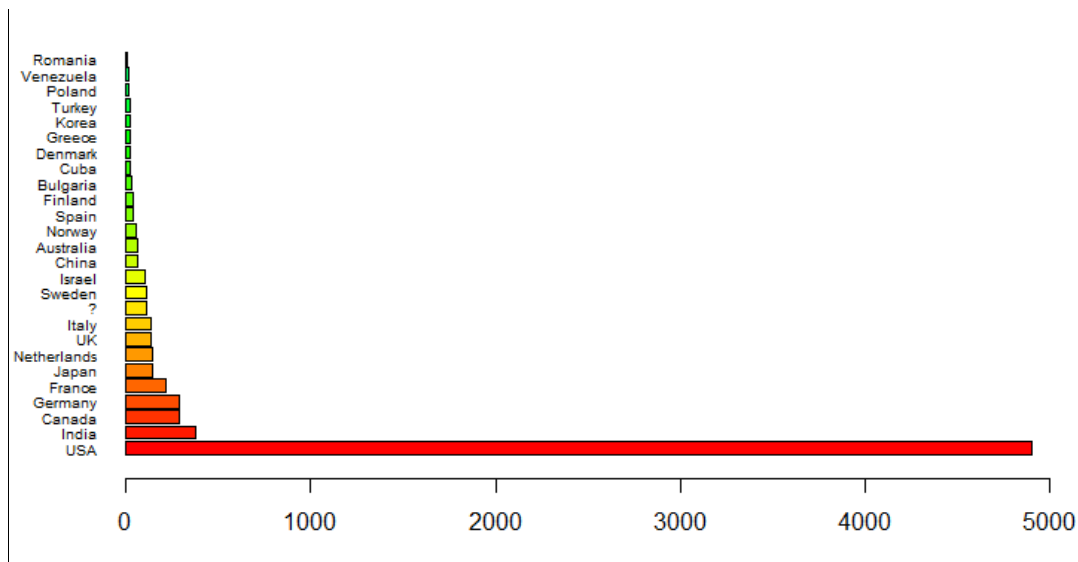


Figure 4: The distribution of board membership by nationality, OS: 2000-2008.

Affiliation

Examining the institutions represented in the editorial board of *Administrative Science Quarterly* for the considered period, we find that 79 schools are represented, with a clear dominating outlier: Harvard University. The other major US-based schools are all represented continuously in the board, along with some prominent Canadian and European institutions. Overall the distribution is very smooth, and the level of inclusion is rather balanced over time.

Looking at the distribution of editorial board members by institutional affiliation, we find that 151 schools are represented in *Organization Science* for the considered period. Several schools are represented by about four distinct members at any given time, with one of them, INSEAD, being a European Business School. The others are all major US based business schools and departments.

Doctoral schools of provenance

One last group of evidence refers to the distribution of the boards by doctoral school of the members. This element proves to be probably the most interesting in one. First, one should observe that a total of 36 doctoral School/Departments are represented on the boards of ASQ in the 2000-2008 timeframe. Second, out of 2540 spots on the board of ASQ for the period I considered, students coming from the top six schools take up 1425 of those spots, that is the 56% of the board. More specifically, looking at Table 1, we can see that out of about 70 spots available on the board, 11 were occupied by scholars educated in Stanford, about 7 by Berkeley PhDs and so on. Remarkably, the only European-educated member in this time-frame was trained in Amiens, France.

Table 1: Number of average spots on the board of ASQ by PhD School of origin: 2000-2008.

Doctoral School of origin	Spots on the board
Stanford University	11,11111
University of California, Berkeley	7,111111
Northwestern University	6,25
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	5,722222
Columbia University	4,777778
Harvard University	4,611111

Over time, the successful schools seem to take over more and more space in editorial boards, although a few schools are in decline, and there is a certain number of schools that successfully emerge at the end of the period.

The situation is significantly different for *Organization Science*. Generally speaking, the pool of editorial board members is a lot more widespread in terms of doctoral schools of origin. In fact, 95 schools had at least one of their former students in the board – in any capacity – in the 2000-2008 time frame. Students from the top six schools represent only the 37% of the membership. This is only partly surprising as traditionally, and in line with the policy of the founders, the board of *Organization Science* is very inclusive. This is also testified, in Table 2, by the average number of spots occupied by the most represented schools in the board. Out of about 132 spots available for each issue, only 12, that is 1/10th is taken by Stanford educated scholars.

Table 2: Number of average spots on the board of OS by PhD School of origin: 2000-2008.

Doctoral School of origin	Spots on the board
Stanford University	13,61111
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	8,259259
University of California, Berkeley	8
University of Michigan	8
Harvard University	6,87037
University of Pennsylvania	6,018519

One stable feature emerging from the comparison of the two distributions points to the legacy of the two journals. *Administrative Science Quarterly* has a much stronger group of schools offering outstanding degrees in sociology in its top group, whereas *Organization Science* tends to include business schools with a stronger emphasis on quantitative methods.

Moreover, I found a significant number of European and Asian educated scholars in the board of *Organization Science*.

The two journals, however, do not differ much in terms of tendencies, as both *Organization Science* and *Administrative Science Quarterly* present the same trend. Some schools, namely Stanford, Berkeley and New York University are becoming more and more represented in the editorial board. Whereas other schools seem to be on the decline (e.g. Carnegie Mellon University).

Analysis

The data I presented in the previous section, despite being simple descriptive illustrations of the evolution of the board composition for the journals I selected as case studies, allow some remarks on the tendencies highlighted by the literature on publication strategies adopted by both journals and authors.

In terms of the co-optation choices, it appears that the two journals are clearly intertwined, sharing a conspicuous number of editors. Andrikopoulos and Economou (2015) observe that this trend tends to produce boards that more often than not prefer a conservative approach in their choices. This might, in part, explain why there has been a substantial reduction in the amount of groundbreaking new theoretical papers appearing in the main journals of the field, as lamented by many (e.g. Davis, 2015).

Gender does not seem to be an important divide when it comes to understanding the membership in these two editorial boards. Women are generally well represented, and their presence seems to be growing in the most recent years of our timeframe. Moreover, some of the senior officers of both journals are, or have recently been, females.

However, the two journals have clearly different strategies, when it comes to differentiating the scope of their editorial boards: *Organization Science*, in keeping with the program outlined by its founders, strives to maintain a much larger editorial board and relies on an extensive set of senior (that is executive) editors. This translates into a wider representation, in terms of nationalities represented, institutional affiliation of its board members, and in the doctoral schools where these members received their higher education.

The distribution in terms of nationalities presents no surprises: both boards are dominated by US nationals, with a very slightly growing percentage of foreign (mainly European and Asian scholars with a US education) scholars. In terms of affiliation, the usual suspects are present, that is major US business schools, but with a significant growing importance of both European and Asian business schools. However, the most prominent difference is given by the role

of doctoral schools. Comparing the frequencies, the number of doctoral schools represented in each board is much smaller than the number of represented institutions (36 *vs.* 79 for ASQ and 95 *vs.* 151 for OS). I believe that this implies a much more prominent role of doctoral schools in shaping both the craftsmanship of young scholars and in maintaining control over the most important publication venues (see Lyytinen *et al.*, 2007).

Conclusions

This contribution has looked at editorial board composition histories of two of the main journals in the field of organization studies, *Administrative Science Quarterly* and *Organization Science*. The starting point of the analysis was that of understanding the outcome of the legacy of the founding fathers of the two journals: Thompson and Litchfield, for *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and Daft and Lewin, for *Organization Science*.

The intentions of both pairs of scholars were clear from the outset. Thompson and Litchfield established *Administrative Science Quarterly* in the mid-fifties as a unifying venue for what they perceived (correctly) as a nascent field in search of a precise identity amidst several, powerful and competing traditions. As a result, they expressed the need for an integration of several areas of expertise, aiming to generate new and cumulative knowledge by means of diversity and exchange. Daft and Lewin, operating in the late 80s, were facing a different problem: that of reviving a field that they felt was being suffocated by a lack of variety that they attributed mainly to a conservative approach in editorial policies. Again they indicated the path of heterogeneity of voices, methods, approached to reviewing to dig out novelty in a seemingly moribund field.

Decades later, I looked at editorial board composition policies to understand what has become of these legacies in the years 2000s.

Analyzing the two journals, I mostly found confirmation of some evidence stemming from the literature on editorial boards. First, the increase in competition among journals has prompted an extension of the phenomenon of

“interlocking” boards, as renowned scientists are recruited to sit simultaneously in multiple boards. Often, the coopted scientists are central in the field, and tend to be more conservative in their choices. I could not directly observe this phenomenon in terms of outcomes of their choices, but definitely a large subset of board members was sitting on both boards at the same time. Second, both journals are still very much US-dominated, even though *Organization Science* has started a process of diversification, starting to recruit a sizeable mass of European- and Asian-based scholars. Third, both journals kept recruiting editorial board members from a large number of different institutions, in line with their tradition. To some extent this variety of voices might be able to counterbalance the control of the “interlocking” subset of members. Finally, I observed the huge role played by the doctoral schools in shaping editorial boards. A relatively small number of doctorates are represented in the boards of both journals, indicating that a common affiliation to the same doctoral school creates links that provide access by means of cooptation, are used as a signal for quality, and allow for the reproduction of a large part of the board over time.

This contribution has at least three obvious limitations, that also points to directions for future research. First, the timeframe considered is still probably too small to capture trends of change in the policies of the journals. It is true that during our observation window several changes in the leadership of the two journals occur, and that a considerable rotation of editorial board members could be observed, however an extension of the timeframe could allow for a better appreciation of these trends (or lack thereof). Second, albeit these journals represent two of the most prestigious venues for publication in the field of organization theory, extending the research to the other main journals would definitely provide a clearer picture of the state of the art. Third, and most important, integrating the dataset with data on published authors in the same journals, would allow for a more straightforward evaluation of the effects of editorial board composition on publication outcomes.

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