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Source: *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), pp. 1265-1281

Published by: Academy of Management

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20159366>

Accessed: 26-02-2020 11:05 UTC

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CONSTRUCTING MYSTERY: EMPIRICAL MATTERS IN THEORY DEVELOPMENT

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We outline a research methodology developed around two basic elements: the active discovery and/or creation of mysteries and the subsequent solving of the mysteries. A key element is the reflexive opening up of established theory and vocabulary through a systematic search for deviations from what would be expected, given established wisdom, in empirical contexts. "Data" are seen as an inspiration for critical dialogues between theoretical frameworks and empirical work.

How do we develop theory? Broadly speaking, we can rely on speculative thinking or empirical observation (followed by careful analysis). Some have argued that empirical material has no systematic role to play in theory building. Popper (1963, 1972), for example, compared theory creation with guesswork and explicitly called unjustified (or unrefuted) theories "conjectures." Others have tended to rely heavily on and perhaps overplay the importance of empirical material—often viewed as data.

Typically, theory is claimed to be developed either through discovery—by sifting through data—or by the accumulation of verified (or corroborated) hypotheses. These views of social science are in many ways different, but each relies on data as the central elements in social research. Theory is supposed to "fit" data—either by design, where misfit should lead to rejections or revisions of theory (Fetterman, 1989), or by default, where theory is understood as emerging from data (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

In this paper we adopt a different approach. In conventional terms, we focus on the discovery (or creation) of theory, rather than its justification. Although we find novel approaches toward the refinement and justification of theory valuable, we aim for more creative ways of theorizing. Like many others, we claim that data—or, our preferred term, *empirical material*—are simply not

capable of showing the right route to theory or screening out good ideas from bad. Rather, empirical material is an artifact of interpretations and the use of specific vocabularies. Data are inextricably fused with theory. Acknowledging this fusion—which is broadly accepted in the philosophy of science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gergen, 1978; Hanson, 1958; Kuhn, 1962)—has major consequences for how we consider the theory–empirical material relationship.

We emphasize the potential of empirical material as a resource for developing theoretical ideas through the active mobilization and problematization of existing frameworks. In particular, we point to the ways empirical material can be used to facilitate and encourage critical reflection: to enhance our ability to challenge, rethink, and illustrate theory. This approach recognizes the constructed nature of empirical material and "proofs" (Astley, 1985; Shotter, 1993; Shotter & Gergen, 1994; Steier, 1991). It advocates a light or moderate version of constructionism—assuming that something is going on out there and there may be better or worse ways of addressing things, but also that the frameworks, preunderstandings, and vocabularies are central in producing particular versions of the world. We propose a relaxation of the emphasis on "data" and a greater interest in the contribution of how data are constructed for the benefit of theoretical reasoning (cf. Sutton & Staw, 1995).

A key element here is the role of empirical material in inspiring the *problematization* of theoretical ideas and vocabularies. To *problematize* means to challenge the value of a theory and to explore its weaknesses and problems in relation to the phenomena it is supposed to

We are grateful to guest editor John Van Maanen, the anonymous reviewers, Andy Van de Ven, and Karen Lee Ashcraft for helpful and challenging comments, and the Vinnova research foundation for a research grant on developing qualitative methodology.

explicate. It means to generally open up and to point out the need and possible directions for rethinking and developing the theory. We consequently attempt to develop a methodology for theory development through encounters between theoretical assumptions and empirical impressions that involve breakdowns. It is the unanticipated and the unexpected—the things that puzzle the researcher—that are of particular interest in the encounter. In this sense our approach attempts to take systematic advantage of what Robert Merton calls “serendipity”—that is, “the art of being curious at the opportune but unexpected moment” (Merton & Barber, 2004: 210). Accordingly, theory development is stimulated and facilitated through the selective interest of what does *not* work in an existing theory, in the sense of encouraging interpretations that allow a productive and noncommonsensical understanding of ambiguous social reality.

The empirical material, carefully constructed, thus forms a strong impetus to rethink conventional wisdom. However, the ideal is *not*, as in neopositivist work, to aim for an “intimate interaction with actual evidence” that “produces theory which closely mirrors reality” (Eisenhardt, 1989: 547).¹ The empirical material may be mobilized as a critical dialogue partner—not a judge or a mirror—that problematizes a significant form of understanding, thus encouraging problematization and theoretical insights (cf. Ragin, 1987: Chapter 9). The dialogue metaphor is not uncommon in contemporary qualitative research. Emphasizing the critical aspect of theory as well as data construction—involving careful consideration of alternative representations—frames the enterprise somewhat differently from established views. We think it is important to draw attention to (the construction of) friction (as a potentially productive force) rather than harmony in the interplay among theory, researcher subjectivity, and empirical material.

¹ Neopositivism (or postpositivism) assumes the existence of a reality that can accurately but imperfectly and probabilistically be apprehended, the observer and the observed separated, and data and theory treated as separable, although the theory ladenness of data is acknowledged. The aim is to produce generalizable results (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Most contemporary quantitative social research and qualitative research like grounded theory (although there are different versions of the latter; Charmaz, 2000) appear to be based on neopositivist assumptions.

We are inspired by Asplund’s (1970) stimulating idea of social science as involving two elements: the discovery or creation of a breakdown in understanding of theoretical interest (the construction of a mystery) and the recovery of understanding (the resolution of the mystery).² In a sense, our project also shows an affinity for Poole and Van de Ven’s (1989) suggestion to view paradoxes as resources for theorizing. However, in contrast to Asplund’s and Poole and Van de Ven’s strong focus on armchair theorizing, we pay particular attention to the interplay between theory and empirical material, thus focusing on how inconsistencies and breakdowns derived from empirical observation, rather than (pure) theoretical speculation, may help us develop theory. Chiefly, our goal is to explore how empirical material can be used to develop theory that is interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant, or absurd (Davis, 1971).

Theorization may be understood as disciplined imagination (Mills, 1959; Weick, 1989). Empirical material can facilitate theorization because it provides resources for both imagination and discipline. Breakdowns create spaces where imagination can be put to work. And although empirical material never exists outside perspectives and interpretative repertoires, it nevertheless creates a relative boundary for imagination. Some constructions make more sense than others. Empirical material anchors the process of theorization in specific claims about the object under study, thus prohibiting arbitrary ideas from being put into play.

Exploiting breakdowns is, of course, not new to social science. In particular, in ethnographic work the initial difference between the traditions involved (the researcher’s and the topic of study) produces breakdowns in understanding: “A breakdown is a lack of fit between one’s encounter with a tradition and the schema-guided expectations by which one organizes experience” (Agar, 1986: 21). The researcher resolves this problem by trying to understand the cultural elements causing the breakdown and then adjusting the research schema. Breakdowns continue to appear until the researcher fully understands the studied culture. This

² Asplund (1970) developed two metaphors for creating novel understanding of social reality: the riddle and the crime mystery. In this paper we use a generalized version of the mystery metaphor as a device for developing theory.

means that ethnography can be described "as a process of coherently resolving breakdowns" (Agar, 1986: 39). In this sense ethnography has a built-in propensity toward the type of theory development we outline in this paper.

However, ethnography is far from the only method that can take advantage of breakdowns for developing new theoretical ideas. An example of quantitative studies producing a breakdown is Lincoln and Kalleberg's (1985) piece on job satisfaction and organizational commitment among U.S. and Japanese workers. The result showed higher scores for the former, which certainly was surprising. The "mystery" can possibly be solved through seeing questionnaire responses as less objective measurements of objective phenomena than clues to cultural norms for expressions and the following of language rules (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). Another example is the classical Hawthorne studies, which started with experiments on how light affects performance and ended with open-ended ethnographic research that explored radically new ideas on the dynamics of workplace social interactions—a shift clearly encouraged by empirical material that challenged the initial frameworks of the researchers (cf. Schwartzman, 1993).

Our objective in this paper is to suggest an approach to theory development that uses theory and imagination to critically open up alternative ways of framing empirical material. We follow a large amount of work in methodology, including significant contributions of, for example, Mills (1959), Garfinkel (1967), Davis (1971), Gergen (1978), Peirce (1978), Weick (1989), Becker (1996), and many others in philosophy of science and interpretive social science. Critical reflection, theory-driven disclosure, and the specific procedure of working with breakdowns and mysteries combine to create an overall methodology. This process systematizes attempts to explore new terrain and develop novel ideas, thus potentially overcoming the inherent conservatism in well-established frameworks. In this paper we focus on exploring a maximalist version of breakdown-induced theory development. However, we also briefly address broader strategies for taking advantage of breakdowns for theory development. Our ambition is not to try to colonize empirical research through a specific design but, rather, to provide some overall guidelines and concepts potentially useful for novel theorizing.

THE FICTION OF "FACTS" IN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS

In interpretive and reflexive research, scholars view data as constructions, created through interaction between the researcher and the group under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Rorty, 1979; Rosenau, 1992; Van Maanen, 1988). Since the metaphor "data collection" tends to be understood far too literally and, thus, is potentially misleading, we prefer, as noted above, the expression "empirical material" as a representation of what is conventionally understood as data. The metaphorical quality of "material" indicates that we, as researchers, must actively do something with it. With this in mind, we use the two mentioned terms interchangeably. A key assumption is that "in the social sciences there is only interpretation. Nothing speaks for itself" (Denzin, 1994: 500). Sensitivity to language is vital. Most conventional researchers assume that language operates as a kind of medium, albeit an imperfect one owing to noise, distortion, and ambiguity, which ideally mirror the world "out there." However, the linguistic turn in social science has attacked this language as mirror perspective (cf. Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Deetz, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Rorty, 1979), pointing to the ways all observation and all data are theory laden and embedded in language.

Thus, vocabularies simply don't mirror the world. They produce and conceal as much as they reveal. The language used in a study to a large extent determines the results. Theories can be understood as repertoires of lenses (Deetz, 1992), each providing and communicating particular understandings. This metaphor points out the productive and pragmatic characteristics of language. Language is a human artifact that affects our vision—blurring, clarifying, magnifying, and diminishing the things we see through it. From our point of view, theories do not express the underlying engines of generalized empirical patterns. Rather, they are instruments that provide illumination, insight, and understanding. In this sense theories operate as idealizations (Freese, 1980). Our conception of theory may be looser than the mantra of explicitness, abstractness, discreteness, systematicity, and completeness. It is, however, more useful—as Shotter (1993: 113) points out, few if any theories meet the criteria above.

From this perspective, empirical evidence is constructed within particular paradigmatic and

linguistic conventions and is typically less robust when approached from any other angle (Gergen, 1978). Most interesting (complex) ideas cannot be easily "checked" against data, and empirical measures are always contestable. Organizations, for example, are complex, dynamic, and difficult to observe. Rigorous studies have their limits, and the researcher has to depend on pictures, maps, and metaphors (Morgan, 1980; Weick, 1989). Social changes—partly fueled by social science itself—tend to render empirical findings obsolete over time (Cronbach, 1975).

Ideas about empirical evidence, objectivity, reason, truth, coherence, validity, measurement, and fact no longer provide great comfort or direction. If such concepts are relative, not absolute, they are always contestable in whatever form they appear—although this is not to say that such concepts are thereby rendered irrelevant or unthinkable (Van Maanen, 1995: 15).

Values other than verification become important for the assessment of the value of a theoretical contribution: "Theories gain favor because of their conceptual appeal, their logical structure, or their psychological plausibility. Internal coherence, parsimony, formal elegance, and so on prevail over empirical accuracy in determining a theory's impact" (Astley, 1985: 503). Although we do not advocate solipsism, relativism, or an exclusive focus on the rhetorical qualities of research texts and theories, we think there are good reasons to move from

- a strong focus on data to an interest in the construction of empirical material;
- a view of theory and data as separate to an acknowledgment of the "internal" relationship between them—the theory impregnation of all data; and
- a strong emphasis on the procedures and techniques for "collecting" and analyzing data to a greater interest in researcher reflexivity in dealing with the empirical material—that is, how to interpret and reinterpret the material.

From this perspective, the acts of construction—always guided by theory in some form—become central. The knowledge and the person doing knowledge work/development cannot be separated (Calás & Smircich, 1992). The framework, the researcher, and social reality—inescapably represented through potentially contested representations—are thus always interrelated and provide an interconnected net of potential insights and ideas, ideally cultivated through discipline and

self-critique (cf. Mills, 1959; Weick, 1989). Reflexivity enters the picture (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Calás & Smircich, 1999; Hardy & Clegg, 1997), pointing to the struggle to acquire an awareness of how paradigms, sociopolitical contexts, frameworks, and vocabularies are involved in shaping the researcher's constructions of the world at hand and his or her moves in doing something with the world.

REFRAMING THE RESEARCH OF ORGANIZATIONAL PHENOMENA

What is an interesting research problem? As we see it, an interesting research problem includes the high potential for an empirical response and a novel insight that adds significantly to—or against—previous understandings. Contrary to conventional wisdom, we think that it is fruitless, even counterproductive, to attempt to minimize the influence of theory and subjectivity. These should not be denied and hidden but should be reflexively and self-critically cultivated and mobilized, reinforcing the ability to discover interesting research issues. As Weick puts it, "Whenever one reacts with the feeling *that's interesting*, that reaction is a clue that current experience has been tested against past experience, and the past understanding has been found inadequate" (1989: 525).

In order to make this experience more valuable and relevant, it must be abstracted and made more general. We address this through concepts such as reflexivity, sensitive constructions, and interpretive repertoires. More specifically, we suggest that theory-developing organizational research is characterized by

- research themes that can be empirically investigated—empirical material that carries some credibility, meaning that it is capable of offering clues for thinking and the making of claims and/or counterclaims, and
- ideas that offer challenges to conventional thinking within an area, pointing at shortcomings or paradoxes; this requires an intensive empirical material/theory interplay where theory is also used "negatively"—a significant resource is theory (models, vocabularies) that fails to be useful to account for a phenomenon, which does not imply a Popperian ideal of falsification but can be seen as a chance for problematization, a vital element in theory development as we see it.

The inference mechanism that guides this kind of theory development is usually labeled

abduction (Peirce, 1978). It consists of three steps: (1) the application of an established interpretive rule (theory), (2) the observation of a surprising—in light of the interpretive rule—empirical phenomenon, and (3) the imaginative articulation of a new interpretive rule (theory) that resolves the surprise. This approach includes an interest in problematizing and rethinking dominating ideas and theory, when empirical impressions encourage such need for novel thinking. The rationale for this is that “the contribution of social science does not lie in validated knowledge, but rather in the suggestion of relationships and connections that had not previously been suspected, relationships that change actions and perspectives” (Weick, 1989: 524).

This way of looking at empirical material means that its dialogic qualities are emphasized. The researcher must call upon or actively try to reach empirical material that can produce, or inspire the construction of, a variety of alternative “stories.” Thus, the process of engagement, in which the languages and theories of the researcher are activated, is central. This view differs from a position aiming to passively mirror reality—for example, through collecting data and coding, processing, and trying to “discover” the facts and meanings that are assumed to be already present. For instance, when considering statements of research subjects—whether in interviews or through observation—we can see these not just as possibly revealing the meanings of those studied (or facts about their organizations) but as political action, moral story telling, identity work, script application, and so forth (Alvesson, 2003). Rather than assume that the subject is reporting authentic experiences, we can see the subject as a politically motivated producer of what are, for him or her, favorable “truths,” or as a person repeating institutionalized standard talk about a specific theme. Thus, interview talk can be seen as useful for a study of political action or the circulation of discourse, rather than for a study of the experiences, meanings, and beliefs of individuals.

The proposed view—sensitive constructions—is different from most conventional approaches, guided by a desire to order and control what is studied. But the impulse to control—through measuring, codifying, checking, and so on—can be bracketed, and a desire to become

challenged, surprised, bewildered, and confused may take center stage in research.³ The researcher’s preunderstanding, including his or her academic framework(s), may be used as a tool that opens up a dialogue with the empirical material. The dialogue needs to include the reader. The researcher is normally a part of a broader we, which includes the research community (or communities) that the researcher belongs to and which informs preunderstanding and preferences. How this community is targeted, convinced, and challenged are key issues in doing field work, interpreting empirical material, and—even more so—crafting a text.

Key elements in this project are

- a flexible theoretical framework requiring multiple readings of the talk, the behaviors, the events, and the documents one faces in fieldwork, and
- a reflexive approach to empirical material that encourages alternative constructions and the self-critical interpretations of one’s own paradigmatic, political, theoretical, methodological, and social predispositions.

Without the first element there is insufficient direction or an inability to produce sufficiently open and challenging observations and interpretations, which can then be picked up as opportunities for breakdowns and problematization. Without the second element the empirical material may not be dealt with in sufficiently rich and varied ways to engage in a critical dialogue with theory. Our point is that we do not just encounter empirical material and see where it leads us. Rather, we are always doing something with it—framing and constructing it. A careful consideration of alternative constructions is necessary in order to produce a dialogue that may be theoretically inspiring and innova-

³ We realize that there are many ways in which researchers of different camps and with various personal convictions work. Some people, in associating themselves with grounded theory, would probably share Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1994) beliefs that objectivity, reproducibility, and unbiased data collection provide a robust base for theory building; others would open up more constructivist considerations (Charmaz, 2000). A strict focus on coding would probably, for most, mean a minimization of researcher subjectivity for the benefit of reliable procedure. One may, however, work with coding in different ways, perhaps do multiple codings, based on rereadings and reframings of one’s position, take incoherences and contradictions seriously, and generally try to open up experiences of productive breakdowns.

tive, transcending the received wisdom and preferred line of constructing.

An important question—and an exercise of reflexivity—is to ask oneself, “Can I construct/make sense of this material in another way than suggested by the preferred perspective/vocabulary? Can I let myself be surprised by this material? Can it productively and fairly be constructed in a way that kicks back at my framework and how we—in my research community—typically see and interpret things?” Such reconstructions should meet the criterion of being well supported by the empirical material (assuming that this can support different constructions) and should be assessed to have some theoretical potential. The serious consideration of alternative representations and interpretations thus becomes crucial to work that encounters empirical reality. Reflexivity can be encouraged by using various theoretical perspectives and metaphors, listening to alternative voices of the research subjects, imagining multiple reader groups, considering different political interests and research purposes (emancipation, thick description, better management), trying to consider oneself in various identity positions (gender, ethnicity, class), working with coresearchers from another background or with a different theoretical framework, and thus increasing the chance to be challenged when encountering empirical material. The dialogue among framework, researcher, and empirical material should be, whenever possible, multilingual.

Of course, all this leads to considerably more freedom, compared to an approach in which the researcher tries to stay very close to data and sees the latter as providing the robust building blocks of theory. This does not mean that the researcher has a licence to follow any creative hunch. Still, the empirical material has a very important and critical role as a dialogue partner, providing considerable constraints on what can be done.

A METHODOLOGY OF SORTS FOR THEORIZING FROM EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

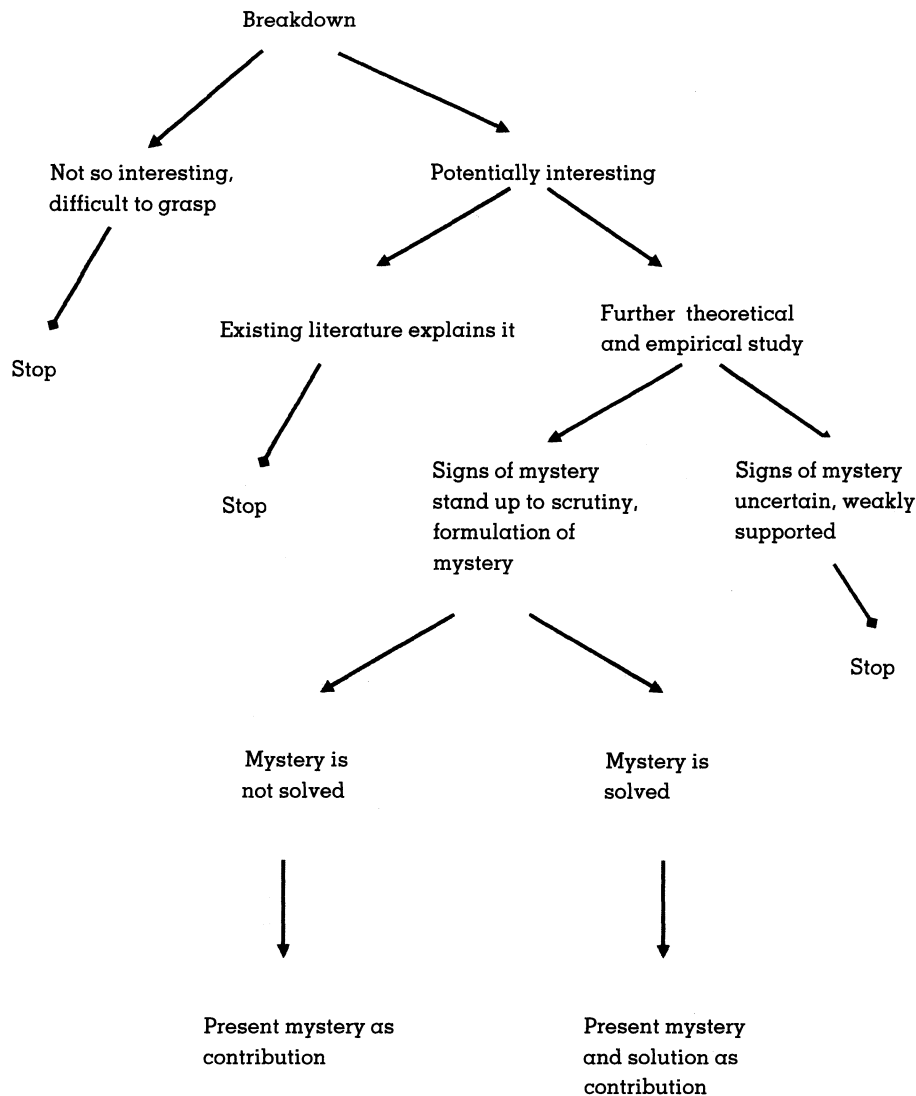
The metaframework outlined above offers guidelines and direction but, crucially, is not “locked” into a narrow way of seeing that determines the results a priori. This makes it possible to work with a methodology that stimulates a dialogue between theory and empirical material, in which the preunderstandings, expectations, and imaginations of the researcher are crucial. The

key elements here are finding ways of encountering breakdowns and creating mysteries. Below, we outline a methodology for doing this.⁴ (See Figure 1.)

1. *Familiarizing oneself with the setting* under study and making inquiries about themes in a fairly open way: This is based on preliminary decisions on a field of interest and an initial, fairly broad focus for the investigation. Rather than focusing on narrow themes—for example, “knowledge sharing,” “teamwork,” or “leadership”—one can ask oneself, “What is going on here?” or “What do the natives think they are up to?” Obviously, a study must have a degree of direction. The trick is to balance this with a capacity to expose oneself to something unexpected, something that can’t easily be disciplined by the preferred vocabulary and framework and too narrow of a research question. One may, for example, start with, but not necessarily stick to, an idea of “knowledge” being “shared,” workers horizontally coordinating their work, or managers influencing their subordinates’ meaning constructions, and then see what may turn up—what one may produce—in terms of unexpected empirical material in that kind of area, broadly defined. Reflexivity here could involve a critical awareness of the risks of imposing and sticking to a set of favored themes and a willingness to invoke alternative themes, vocabularies, and understandings. Issues around politics and ethics may also enter here: Who may benefit from studying a specific set of phenomena in a particular way?
2. *Encountering/constructing breakdowns in understanding*: Fieldwork should be theoretically informed but also varied and rich enough in the sense that it allows for the existence and exploration of breakdowns. A really interesting breakdown means that an empirical “finding” can’t easily be accounted for by available theory. The breakdown, thus, is not an outcome of the ignorance, naivety, or narrow-mindedness of the researcher. The surprise should be the reaction likely to be experienced by most members of the research community, who are supposed to be able to understand/explain the empirical observation/construction trig-

⁴ This is a full version of the ideas we are advocating. We assume here the possibility of having close contact with and going back and forth to the research site. As pointed out above, breakdown-oriented research can be associated with the use of any kind of method and can also be used in more moderate ways, but, for clarity and space, we concentrate here on one version.

FIGURE 1
The Research Process: Decision Tree for Mystery-Focused Research



gering the breakdown. Hence, it is not just the individual researcher but also the collective theoretical and paradigmatic framework and the knowledge shared within the research community that are involved in acknowledging the breakdown. The researcher is wise to make certain that the surprise appears in the context of a sophisticated position and is not partly an outcome of poor scholarship.

3. *Moving from breakdown to mystery:* After encountering an unexpected finding, the researcher's next move is to formulate some preliminary interpretations of a theoretical contribution through showing (a) the broader relevance of an empirical finding, (b) the problems with the earlier theory or critique, and (c) some hints of a new under-

standing through the formulation of the mystery. This phase includes the critical checking of whether a breakdown can lead to something new that is of potential theoretical relevance. Not all breakdowns allow for the construction of a "real" mystery. Indeed, most do not. A breakdown may—in the context of this paper—be viewed as a mystery candidate, and a mystery can be seen as a breakdown with a strong potential to offer a theoretical contribution. A key distinction is that a breakdown is mainly of local relevance and can sometimes be overcome through additional empirical work (leading to deeper or broader empirical knowledge) and/or through consulting the literature. A mystery, as we use the term here, requires a novel theoretical contribu-

tion. In other words, when asking more questions, hanging around (Dingwall 1997), and walking to the library and reading more books fails to be sufficient, a mystery is at hand. Self-critique and reflexivity are important elements here, as antidotes to the tendency to be carried away by the prospect of constructing a true mystery. Reflexivity may also mitigate the risk of being insufficiently careful in monitoring the empirical grounding and potential theoretical value of the claim to mystery.

4. *Engaging in more systematic work* to develop a new understanding/theory, inspired by a "negative finding" (breakdown induced): Here, additional resources, including philosophy and social theory, are used. This work typically also involves further empirical investigations, guided by developed understanding and interpretations supported by the use of additional theoretical and linguistic resources.
5. *Solving or reformulating the mystery* through the development of a new idea that offers a new interpretation of the phenomenon that inspired the mystery: This move typically draws on the critical use of the interplay between different theories being problematized by the empirical input. One can throw some novel light on the phenomenon indicated by the mystery by using new concepts, a new theoretical framework, or a new metaphor. This move can also involve the formulation of new research tasks. The idea is also to transcend the empirically specific and to produce something of broader relevance. Again, where acts of creativity are central, moments of reflexivity are important in enabling the rethinking of one's preferred positions and vocabularies.
6. *Developing the (re)resolution of the mystery* so that it gains a broader relevance for a specific terrain and positioning it more clearly in relationship to other theories: This means more systematic considerations of other, but not too diverse, terrains than the one that "produced" or inspired the breakdown and subsequent mystery. This development may be about theoretical abstraction, as well as considering where and when this may encourage a productive understanding. No theory is always wrong or always right—all are more or less relevant and helpful in different situations. And it is important to have a good idea of when and how they may be relevant. At the same time, the approach suggested here is not so much concerned with generalization and abstraction. It is more oriented to the specific and related empirical terrain that provides the empirical inspiration for the mystery—and thus has a local touch. However, some ideas about the nature of this locality and what

domain it may cover are important to establish. This is not just a matter of type of organization or organizational phenomenon but of time and history and the relative interpretive value of a theoretical concept or metaphor.

This list of elements, or stages in work, easily gives a too mechanical or overly structured impression of this process. It is not intended as a manual or a model of how this kind of research typically takes place, although we hope it can be used as a source of guidance and inspiration. As Mills (1959) pointed out, research is a craft. It cannot be reduced to steps, manuals, and models. Rather, the list above should be seen as a rough description of the elements in research processes that can bring the role of sophisticated preunderstandings and the possibility of gradual development of theoretical understandings more into focus in fieldwork. One can imagine different modes of working with some overlap from the framework. Work can be conducted cyclically—one may want to revisit and reframe the field with a "preliminarily solved" mystery in order to develop the idea, metaphor, or theory. It is also possible that a really challenging encounter triggers an excellent idea on the spot—making the breakdown/mystery distinction and bypassing stage 3 and 4.

Structuring the research process in ways as illustrated by the model facilitates interplay among theory, researcher subjectivity, and empirical options that can encourage theoretical development through problematizing existing theory. As stated, the framework presented is a kind of full version associated with fieldwork research. The process may differ when working with breakdown/mystery ideas in other kinds of research. What is important are the major orientations, not the details or the stages of the research process.

THE CREATION AND RESOLUTION OF BREAKDOWNS AND MYSTERIES

Having outlined a mystery approach, we now indicate some key aspects of how breakdowns and mysteries can be produced. Crucial in this kind of work is an open *attitude*. Here, of course, it is important to avoid the naive idea of being "nontheoretical" or blank as a means of being open, as implied by some views on grounded theory (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss,

1967). This simply means that cultural taken-for-granted assumptions and other implicit theories take precedence. Illiteracy does not lead to an open mind. Openness—the consideration of alternative routes of interpretation and analysis—is better accomplished through familiarity with an extensive repertoire of theories and vocabularies used reflexively (Rorty, 1989). In terms of gender, for example, “openness” is not just a matter of making gender visible through observing sex differences (“body counting”) or through paying attention to the meanings and experiences of men and women. It involves questioning these two seemingly homogenous categories, paying attention to various forms of cultural masculinity and femininity, the possible shifting character of these cultural meanings in local contexts, and the ways they inscribe a particular order on the world. It also means openness to how researchers may order the world through constructing it in terms of masculinity and femininity (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Calás & Smircich, 1999).

Openness, thus, is not a matter of avoiding theory or postponing the use of it; rather, it includes broadening the repertoire of vocabularies and theories that can be mobilized in order to consider more and less self-evident aspects. A particular interpretive bias, following from a closed theoretical/cultural/private orientation, may be counteracted. Theory is often seen as providing direction and control, but it can also be mobilized as a tool for disclosure. A theory can open up not only other theories and their lines of interpretation but also sensitive constructions and interpretations of empirical material.

When studying relatively familiar phenomena like organizations and management within one's own country, the problem often is not only or even primarily resolving breakdowns; there is typically an element of *creating* them required. If we accept the socially constructed nature of social reality as well as research, this creative element is always involved. But more of an effort is called for in organization studies than in more unfamiliar settings, even though one occasionally encounters original and exotic organizations. The trick is to locate one's framework (cultural understanding) away from the cultural terrain being studied so that enough significant material emerges to resolve the breakdown.

This is, of course, to a large extent a matter of creativity, but it is also a matter of wanting to achieve “anthropological” rather than familiar or “technical-pragmatic” results. To some degree it is a matter of using the critical strategy of defamiliarization: “Disruption of common sense, doing the unexpected, placing familiar subjects in unfamiliar, even shocking, contexts are the aims of this strategy to make the reader conscious of difference” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986: 137). Apart from general intellectual efforts to accomplish this, one can employ such tactics as using unconventional and varied literature, drawing from personal and research experiences that are different from those salient in a previous study, and putting together a research team so that different viewpoints—and, thus, different inclinations to see a variety of familiar and unfamiliar aspects—are represented.

What is needed, we believe, is a combination of theories that allows the researcher to see a multitude of perspectives and facilitate the development of results that may be from more than one point of view. We label the set of perspectives, concepts, and themes that a researcher masters his or her *interpretive repertoire* (Alvesson & Sköldböck, 2000). Such a repertoire includes the paradigmatic, theoretical, and methodological qualifications and restrictions that guide and constrain research work. The interpretive repertoire is made up of theories, basic assumptions, commitments, metaphors, vocabularies, and knowledge. It indicates the “academic” part of the researcher's preunderstanding and the whole spectrum of theoretical resources that may be put into use when the researcher confronts empirical material. It marks the limits for what a researcher can do in terms of making something out of certain empirical material—material that in itself is produced based on the interpretive inclinations of the researcher. It offers input to the struggles of, as Becker puts it, “getting control over how we see things, so that we are not simply the unknowing carriers of the conventional world's thoughts” (1996: 8).

The interpretive repertoire is made up of elements of relative degrees of depth and superficiality. Of course, few people master a broad spectrum of theories in depth. At one extreme the researcher has a firm grasp of some theories and discourses and can therefore skillfully use them. At the other extreme the researcher has a

mere familiarity with other theories and discourses and can therefore only apply them in a crude and uncertain manner. We can refer to these end points as the deep (or scholarly) and the shallow (or lay) elements in the repertoire. The deep elements are central in the interpretive repertoire and easily activated, whereas the shallow elements may be described as crude in terms of mastery and peripheral in terms of interest and awareness. Typically, researchers have a strong tendency to use the deep elements of their repertoire, since there is a likelihood that they will lead to results, albeit in a rather predictable way.

The shallow elements in the interpretive repertoire are only activated in research work if the empirical material obviously appears to be in line with these elements. This typically indicates that the empirical material is seen as important or interesting when framed in this way. The researcher has three alternatives when he or she thinks that the empirical material triggers thinking activating the shallow/peripheral elements in the interpretive repertoire: (1) to drop the theme, (2) to refer to it briefly or mainly in empirical/low-abstract terms, or (3) to develop the relevant parts of the interpretive repertoire and then do a more advanced investigation of this phenomenon. The third alternative means that the shallow part of the repertoire takes more center stage and the researcher develops her or his skills in using it, thus moving it to the deeper part of the repertoire. In such a case, empirical material typically has the chance to make a real impact on the research outcome.

The ambitious use of the idea of an interpretive repertoire inspires a critical use of theory in which empirical material and alternative theories are employed as elements in theory development. Carefully constructed empirical material is used to problematize a targeted theory, thus opening it up for reconsiderations and alternative understandings. In organization studies the work of Morgan (1980, 1997) has been vital in this regard. Also, the literature advocating multiparadigmatic studies is relevant here (e.g., Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). One can debate the extent to which it is possible to cross and master several paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 1996; Hassard, 1991; Parker & McHugh, 1991), but we agree with Lewis and Grimes (1999: 686) that "exploring 'foreign' paradigms offers theorists a potentially 'frame-

breaking experience'" that challenges an established position and encourages rethinking. One can imagine the same effect also through the use of less divergent approaches than those associated with different paradigms. If this intertheory challenge interacts nicely with the empirical material, the likelihood of a productive breakdown in relationship to empirical material increases. The combination of questioning in empirical experience and intertheory confrontation gives the input to the rethinking of a particular understanding.

AN ILLUSTRATION: A "FEMININE" ORGANIZATION DOMINATED BY MEN?

Below, we provide an example of how empirical material can be used productively to rethink and develop theory. We want to stress that we use the example as an illustration. For a more thorough discussion of the case, see Alvesson (1998). The empirical material stems from an ethnography of an advertising agency (LAA). The study was initially fairly open, guided by a broad interest in organizational culture—facilitated by the small size of the organization (twenty-one people)—but soon we discovered a somewhat extreme division of labor along with other interesting gender themes. All the men, with one exception, occupied the professional positions, while all the women worked as assistants. In addition, the men were ten years older than the women, who were typically twenty-five to thirty years old. The women were all attractive and well dressed. LAA was an organization led by men, while the women managed routine jobs and the "domestic chores."

There was no specific intention to focus on gender issues at the outset of the study, but this "discovery" was seen as a surprise. Why did it emerge as such? A gendered division of labor—including vertical division—is common, and many students of gender may have constructed the case as a standard one, indicating broad patterns. But the pattern here seemed extreme and unexpected in this kind of work. We guess that most researchers, not interested in gender, would not have made much of this observation, but the researcher here had an interest and competence in gender and identity themes. Of course, careful consideration here preceded the choice to explore this in depth. Other factors, including age, education, occupational back-

ground, and so forth, were considered. One question raised concerned whether the case was an example of an overall gender division of labor that would not come as a surprise for an expert in gender theory. Or could there be something "local," associated with organizational conditions that might inspire new ideas? When the accounts of the men dominating the agency were interpreted, the fieldwork revealed even more interesting and surprising results. They emphasized that the men were intuitive, emotional, sensitive to interpersonal relationships, family oriented even at work, uninterested in careers and management, and so on.

Advertising people are normally very outgoing and they are emotionally charged. Because feelings and things like that are the basis of creativity, so to speak. They are often very rich in ideas and associative, they can quickly associate with various phenomena. They are normally rather difficult to steer and jump for joy when they become happy or hit the roof when they become mad. The amplitude of their reactions is much higher than for example people in companies' accounting departments. Advertising people are seldom very systematic or structured (male advertising worker).

They described themselves, their occupation, and their organization in ways that were closely in line with cultural views of femininity, at least on an overall and cliché-like level. One male used the metaphor of pregnancy to describe the work of developing an advertisement. Of course, these accounts are not just facts, or even authentic meanings, but, rather, constructions. As such they are of considerable interest. Once again, it is perhaps not surprising that advertising people construct themselves in these terms, but given the context of the gendered division of labor, we encounter a second breakdown. It seems reasonable to see that the statements show considerable alignment with the ideals of many feminists around the importance of emotion and the personal in terms of thinking, working, and organizing (Jaggar, 1989; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Correspondingly, males are conventionally constructed as nonemotional (Hearn, 1993). Hollway writes that, "in our society, the judgment is a sexist one: expressing feelings is weak, feminine and in contradiction to men's rationality" (1984: 253). "Masculine" occupations require people "to be cool, impassive or stern" (Cockburn, 1991: 150). But the discourses of the advertising industry stress emo-

tionality as a core dimension at work, whereas "masculine" occupations and organizations typically do the opposite. We thus have interesting breakdowns of understandings based on theories that men and masculinities go together and that feminine values are at odds with male-dominated institutions.

The interview accounts—and statements noted during observations—were carefully considered in a multitude of ways before being seen as cultural constructions with a gender relevance. One may view the statements as purely factual—referring to the personalities of the people in the agency—or treat them as non-gendered. The construction of the constructions of the male advertising people in feminine terms was eventually viewed as a (1) a good interpretation of the empirical material and (2) one that was part of the construction of a breakdown with potential mystery qualities.

Hence, we have a possible mystery: How can highly asymmetrical gender relations (with the men dominating) coexist with "feminine" values and meanings? Or how come an organization that is dominated by men is constructed by them in feminine terms? Further consultations of the gender literature were unhelpful in making sense of this. Gender organization studies generally emphasize how workplaces dominated by men are constructed in masculine terms (e.g., Hall, 1993; Leidner, 1991; Mills, 1988). They do not, on the whole, seem to be able to produce a good understanding of an organization that is extremely strongly hierarchically structured in terms of gender, where men dominate and where the dominant understanding matches what a large body of literature sees as feminine orientations and values.

Literature reviews and additional empirical work supported the case for a "mystery." The case may be uncommon but may still encourage us to revise some theoretical ideas around the tight connection of male domination and domination of masculine cultural constructions, mutually supporting each other, emphasized by the gender literature. Without denying that this theoretical idea often makes sense, perhaps the case can problematize the operations of gender and help us rethink constructions of masculinities and femininities.

The case indicates that the link between construction of the organization in feminine terms and women's positioning is not straightforward.

The ambiguities of the work situation, results, and client relations of the advertising workers heighten identity problems. As in much other professional service work, "the largely fluid character of anything external to interactional accomplishments, provides for very active symbolic labour" (Deetz, 1998: 157). In the present case it complicates issues of gender. The construction of the work and organization through the use of the emotionality-intuition-personal chemistry-antibureaucracy vocabulary facilitates identity work. It indicates positive values, coherence, and distinctiveness, for example, in relation to client's personnel and other conventional people. These are constructed as the opposite of the advertising people: as cautious, bureaucratic, and lacking the right intuition. What the gender literature identifies as feminine orientations—which it claims that men avoid and downgrade—are used as symbolic and discursive resources in the identity constructions of the advertising people. But the feminine undertone/low degree of masculinity makes this solution a mixed blessing. The advertising agency appears as subordinate and feminine in relation to its clients—the relationship is often referred to as a marriage, and it is clear that the agency assumes the female part. This discourse puts some strain on gender identity. In sum, the precarious character of the occupational identity has a clear gendered meaning. From the other angle, one can say that the gender identity of male advertising professionals is only partially, and in some respects even badly, supported by work, organization, and client relations.

In LAA the weak symbolic support for masculinity in the work content (connected to the low degree of technical expertise) and client relations is compensated for by highlighting workplace sexuality and perpetuating internal gender structures. Masculinities emerge in relation to female personnel, subjected to what may be referred to as "hyperfeminization." Gender becomes structured so that male work/gender identities are supported. One aspect here is the location of men and women in the division of labor, where male power accounts for the recruitment of younger, sexually attractive, lower-positioned women. Another is the heightened state of gender interaction. These two mean that the men can place themselves in "masculine subject positions," using gender as a resource

for their symbolic labor, despite the construction of themselves, their work, organization, and position in client relationships as feminine.

To conclude, the study suggests the possibility of a loose coupling between male domination and the domination of masculinities (as these are described in the literature and typically culturally defined). In particular, the presence/absence of specific linkages made by subjects in organizations between what in the gender literature is viewed as masculine/feminine properties and the two sexes is important for the fate of men and women. This is partly a matter of power: explicitly labeling what is generally, but not necessarily consciously, seen as culturally feminine may well upset gender orders. In the present case, a gendered division of labor would be more difficult to reproduce if the constructions of work content, client relations, and organizational practices acknowledged the correspondence with what is broadly defined as culturally feminine. The case presented here provided inspiration for a theory of workplace gender relations that allows for a discrepancy between abstract ideas of masculine/feminine properties proposed by gender researchers and local constructions of gender. It also provides a framework to understand gender stereotypes as resources in social processes, thus illuminating the elastic and relative aspects of gender relations that enable richer interpretations of their social effects.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF TAKING ADVANTAGE OF BREAKDOWNS FOR THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Although we think the approach developed in this paper is a fruitful and underutilized way of developing more novel interpretations of empirical phenomena and innovative theoretical ideas—and most people probably agree that there is a shortage of such—some (self-reflexive) words of caution are necessary. The maximalist version sketched out above is not a low-risk strategy. Constructing and solving a mystery calls for a fortunate combination of inspiring empirical material, access to a rich frameworks and resources for reflexivity about how to use these, creative construction work, and, in the available literature, empty space for a theoretical contribution. Many research projects have other agendas and/or do not lead to the discov-

ery/construction of great mysteries with theoretical potential.

However, more moderate uses of the breakdown idea are also possible. Arguably, all research approaches confront (or have the potential to construct) breakdowns, as long as we accept that social reality is not fully understood. It is possible to imagine variation in emphasis on elements of breakdowns and mysteries in research. We propose a spectrum that includes breakdown-focused, breakdown-sensitive, and breakdown-considering research, with varying degrees of interest in and attention paid to exploring and exploiting breakdowns.

Breakdown-focused research means working fully in line with the ideas suggested here, aiming for a full-scale mystery-scanning approach and being more than willing to explore and construct breakdowns. Of course, sometimes this intention is not fulfilled, and the research project may be turned into something else. Breakdown-sensitive research means a strong to modest interest in potential mysteries. It may be carried out as part of a more conventional study, which is guided by a specific research question and a design for studying it. In this case the mystery approach operates as an additional guiding principle. The researcher is open to the possibilities of an unanticipated theme and keen to follow it, even though this is not the initial or primary intent of the study. Possible outcomes could be refinement of theory or suggestions for new lines of inquiry. The breakdown-considering researcher is less inclined to actively work with breakdowns and mysteries, unless he or she bumps into something really interesting. He or she has some awareness of the possibility of taking advantage of breakdowns but takes this road only when extraordinary opportunities emerge. For researchers and research projects guided by this orientation, breakdowns only occasionally play a significant role in accounting for results. When they do, self-critique and new research questions are more likely to result than the formulation and solving of a mystery. However, occasionally, the researcher who is not initially not very breakdown oriented may encounter breakdowns that trigger radical rethinking.

Presumably, most researchers have such a breakdown-considering research orientation, although it is difficult to find examples of researchers actually espousing it explicitly, at least in management and organization stud-

ies. The norm seems to be that the researcher is in control, producing a linear, coherent study, where research questions, framework, fieldwork, empirical results, and conclusions follow a rational procedure. Even in some research drawing on Foucauldian and other poststructuralist ideas, the studies reported tend to produce conventional "depersonalized, third-person and apparently objective and authoritative representations" (Wray-Bliss, 2002: 20; see also Richardson, 2000). This may say more about the established standards for presentation in journals—despite decades of positivism critique—than about how researchers actually work. Arguably, breakdowns and projects following these are not so rare, but there may be a need to make them more legitimate and explicit.

Which methods are most suitable for research working with breakdowns and mysteries? Here we have two answers. The first is that the more a study is processual, emergent, open, and empirically varied and rich, the more likely an interesting mystery, via breakdowns, will be produced and solved. Ethnographic studies (Prasad, 1997; Wolcott, 1995) here have some advantages. Other studies that are open to the views of the research subjects (perhaps viewing them as coparticipants; Heron, 1981)—allowing them to express unconstrained voices in the research—may also increase the frequency with which breakdowns will appear. Our second answer—and this is our main point—is that *all* kinds of research can lead to—or be used for—the discovery or construction of breakdowns and mysteries. As our initial reference to Lincoln and Kalleberg (1985) and the Hawthorne studies indicates, even questionnaire studies and experiments may provide interesting breakdowns. The Hawthorne studies are particularly illuminating in this respect. The ideas discussed here are thus of potential broad relevance, even though research that does not allow for the flexibility of developing and exploring new ideas in the process of gathering additional empirical material may have difficulties *solving* a mystery. Often, however, the formulation of a mystery can be a great contribution: it can be a vital step in encouraging reflexivity and new lines of inquiry. Asking innovative questions can be as important as providing answers.

In addition to being feasible in any kind of research, breakdowns can, in principle, occur

at almost any point in the research process, based on serendipity or conscious efforts to reflexively remain open to them. Working with empirical material in different phases is important here. The trend to shift the emphasis from fieldwork to textwork (Geertz, 1988; Richardson, 2000; Van Maanen, 1988) has pointed to the importance of writing in crafting ideas and articulating findings. Our approach does not necessarily imply a linear development. We indicated earlier the potentially cyclical nature of this kind of research. Breakdowns and mystery construction may start with the writing process, which then may lead the researcher to return to fieldnotes or other empirical material (interview protocols, questionnaires), the literature, and even the field. The kind of curiosity and willingness to reconsider received wisdom that characterizes the research methodology suggested here is thus not limited to a specific phase in the research project.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have advocated the use of empirical material as input for theorizing. In short, our approach encourages researchers to actively work with, expand, and vary their interpretive repertoire by being open to and focusing on breakdowns. Breakdowns, in most research, are seen as a nuisance—they indicate that the researcher is not in control and may obstruct the research design and threaten the production of predictable results. Students interested in "leadership," for example, may face settings in which people do not seem concerned about or refrain from/fail to produce strong asymmetrical relations and coherent behaviors that fit a "leadership style" concept. Such experiences will typically not make the student of leadership happy. From the approach suggested here, which is in line with a long line of scholarship (e.g., Becker, 1996), breakdowns are potentially good news—they may make space for theoretical reconceptualizations and development.

Breakdowns offer a vital step in the production of a mystery. Establishing a mystery in itself offers an interesting source of further thinking, since it encourages problematization and self-reflexivity. This may be an important contribution. But the formulation of mystery also provides an impetus for solving it and, thus, adding new knowledge beyond the critical

questioning (Asplund, 1970). Solving here means that the mystery becomes more understandable: it is less puzzling and less ambiguous, and we have concepts, a line of reasoning, a metaphor, or other tools that give us a sense of what to expect and how to intellectually understand the mystery.

A mystery emerges as a combination of the researcher's preunderstanding, including access to theoretical framework(s) and vocabularies, and the inspiration of empirical material. The ratio of input from empirical experiences and the intellectual-creative work necessary to construct a mystery may vary. Since this is a paper emphasizing empirical work and methodology, we have devoted much attention to the role of empirical studies in triggering a mystery, but, as mentioned previously, "pure" empirical impressions do not lead us far. In addition, creativity and concentrated work in supplementing and focusing theoretical work are necessary to assess whether the mystery candidate is fruitful for theoretical development—that is, is not just a breakdown for the researcher only and/or within a narrow terrain. A mystery promising a theoretical contribution must meet high criteria—it can't be solved through a literature search but, rather, calls for innovative theoretical work. The successful solving of a mystery means that one produces a theoretical understanding that (1) illuminates the phenomenon leading to the breakdown and subsequently mystery and (2) allows an abstracted set of ideas and concepts with broader bearing on how to make sense of similar phenomena in other settings.

Because the literature on the interplay between theory and empirical material is vast and varied, it is difficult to claim that our contribution is a great invention. Rather, we synthesize, expand, sharpen, and refine ideas that, to a degree, have already appeared in social science. We can distinguish among three elements in our contribution:

1. One contribution concerns the introduction and, to some degree, development of a general framework for and an alternative conceptualization of the research process. The aim is not primarily to provide a blueprint for methodology but to offer inspiration through a guiding set of generative ideas. We have advocated a framework for thinking about empirical material and how it can be used in more creative and challenging ways than may be common. This means go-

ing beyond recommending openness and following where data may lead us and, instead, actively working with alternative constructions. One aspect here is the encouragement of a willingness to be surprised in research and a willingness to revise the frameworks and traditions from which we originate. Not just encountering but also trying to produce breakdowns is a vital part of this approach, in which problematizing existing ideas is crucial.

2. A second, somewhat more specific, contribution concerns vocabulary. We can capture the advocated alternative conceptualization through metaphors. We have used both critical and positive ones. Conventionally, data are seen as building blocks in research, as unknown territory (of facts and/or meanings) to be discovered and/or judged in terms of what are true/valid and false/nonacceptable claims to knowledge. We are skeptical of such metaphors as data guiding or ultimately validating theory. Empirical material is, in most cases of interest for organization studies, not robust but shaped and reshaped in various ways, depending on the language and perspectives used. We propose alternative metaphors and conceptualizations. Empirical material is seen as a potential dialogue partner, leading to questioning, doubting, and problematizing existing/dominant expectations and frameworks. Theory is viewed as a potential tool for disclosure, and so are breakdowns in understanding. We suggest the creation and solving of mysteries—aided by breakdowns—as a root metaphor for the research process. We also suggest that concepts such as sensitive constructions, interpretive repertoires, and reflexivity are helpful in realizing the full generative potential in breakdowns and mysteries.
3. A third contribution concerns the specific methodology proposed for working with breakdowns and mysteries. We hope this is not read as a recipe, and we would argue that in an area of methodology where “progressive” (e.g., constructivist) ideas frequently are rather abstract and of uncertain relevance for research practice, outlining a research process taking these ideas seriously may be supportive. There is a strong norm to present research results in a fairly linear and rational way. Researchers have difficulty fully using constructivist ideas in empirical studies and take the insight about the fusion of theory and empirical material seriously. We have formulated an alternative to dominating and sometimes misleading notions of research as a mainly rational process of planning, execution, and analysis based on a separation of theory

and data and the minimization of researcher subjectivity.

To a believer in conventional methodology, including the most popular versions of qualitative methods, this may appear to be a dangerous and unreliable enterprise. But similar critique can be directed at hypothesis testing and inductive projects that frequently exhibit a misleading surface of rigor and robustness. Since the purpose is to generate new ideas, it is important not to emphasize rigor too much and to allow space for the researcher’s imagination when working with empirical material. Still, we are not propagating an “anything goes” version or a license for researchers to be creative and try to innovate for the sake of saying something novel. The researcher needs to persuade the skeptical reader—building a convincing case involves illuminating empirical material, using a well-mastered interpretive repertoire, and demonstrating elements of reflexivity in the process, as well as showing a careful and sophisticated understanding of the relevant literature. In the end, this is not less demanding than building theory from data or validating and falsifying hypotheses.

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