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REVITALIZING ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY THROUGH A PROBLEM-ORIENTED SOCIOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Organizations remain a vital sociological topic, but organizational sociology, as a subfield, has evolved significantly since its inception. In this paper, I argue that organization sociology is becoming increasingly disconnected from organizational theory, as currently conceived. The focus of sociological research on organizations has become more empirically grounded in the study of social problems and how organizations contribute to them. Sociologists continue to see organizations as important actors in society that play a role in shaping social order and as contexts in which social processes play out. I propose two main sociological approaches for organizational research, which I describe as “organizations within society” and “society within organizations.” The first approach examines the role of organizations as building blocks of social structure and as social actors in their own right. The second approach treats organizations as platforms and locations of social interactions and the building of community. These approaches are somewhat disconnected from the sort of grand theorizing that characterizes much of organizational theory. I argue that the problem-oriented sociology of these two approaches offers a vital way for organizational scholars to expand and theoretically revitalize the field.

Keywords: Organizational sociology; social problems; bureaucracy; social actor; inequality; community

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Laments of the decline of organizational sociology have become common in recent years (Gorman, 2014; King, 2017; Scott, 2004). One underlying reason for the supposed demise of organizational sociology is that the subfield has become less theoretically vibrant and less central to the discipline and, consequently, less important to sociology departments themselves (Gorman, 2014). But I contend that our view of organizational sociology's place in the discipline is slanted by looking back nostalgically to an era when the subfield was, arguably, at its peak of theoretical creativity. In the 1970s and 1980s, sociology was fertile ground for offering new theories of organizations, which went on to seed the maturing field of organizational theory. Institutional theory (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977), organizational ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1977), resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and network theory (Burt, 1980) all blossomed during this period. The careers of these theories' progenitors thrived as well, leading some of them (and their students) to emigrate to business schools. Increasingly, scholars who adopted these perspectives found their homes in business schools, and not surprisingly, many of the scholars who used the theories in their own empirical work imbued those theories with a more managerialist orientation. Rather than simply explain how organizations come to be and interact with other elements of society, organizational theories were now meant to also explain how to make organizations better or how to make them better serve the purposes of managers.¹ Sociologists became less interested in these theories as they mutated.

But that is just one narrative of what happened to the subfield of organizational sociology. Another way to read the history of organizational sociology is one of success. Organizational sociologists developed uniquely sociological views of organizations, which departed in important ways from economics-oriented approaches; those perspectives proved useful for management scholars, and they incorporated key insights into their own research about how organizations behave (or ought to behave). Management scholars borrowed extensively from sociology, and the new field of organizational theory thrived as a result (Lounsbury & Beckman, 2015; Whetten et al., 2009). Organizational sociology succeeded precisely because it had practical and applied implications! But a consequence of this success was that organizational theory began to develop a life of its own, distinct from the discipline of sociology.

Another consequence of vibrancy of organizational theory was a distancing from the founding discipline of sociology (and we can include anthropology and psychology among the disaffected disciplines). Organizational theory (or organization studies) became its own settled field, as Leopold Ringel (2024) argues in this volume. Even though organizational theory will always be profoundly influenced by the early importation of sociological theories, it has since evolved into a distinctive field and grown distant from the discipline of sociology, as the ongoing theoretical concerns of sociologists seem to differ from what organizational theorists care about. This is the story we often hear, at least.

But I will argue that sociologists have not moved on from organizational sociology at all or at least not from "a sociology of organizations" (Lammers, 1981). Organizations continue to be a concern of much theoretical and empirical sociology. Due to their prominent role in most societal dynamics, sociologists need

to theorize what organizations do, how they influence societal dynamics, and how they serve as social contexts for groups and individual behavior. The kinds of organizational phenomena that sociologists analyze range from the sources of economic and social inequality to the drivers of political participation. And of course, the forms of organizations that sociologists study are equally varied, including voluntary associations, schools, and the business establishments that management scholars typically study. Moreover, sociologists are increasingly interested in organizations because they see them as contributors to social problems (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988), such as inequality or climate change, as well as offering the tools for interventions that can help alleviate those problems.

Organizations matter because they are fundamental building blocks of society. Perrow's (1991) and Coleman's (1982) basic observation that organizations facilitate much of social life still remains true. We rely on organizations to accomplish our collective endeavors, not to mention our personal ones. Organizations are as relevant as ever. The question that organizational scholars should ask is not, is organizational sociology in decline? But rather, they should ask, what does organizational sociology look like today? What is its relationship to the broader field of sociology?

In this paper, I offer a reading of contemporary organizational sociology based, somewhat selectively, on research published in the traditionally most important journals in US-based sociology and one European journal: *American Sociological Review* (ASR), *American Journal of Sociology* (AJS), and *European Sociological Review* (ESR). Searching the keywords, titles, and abstracts of articles for mentions of "organization" and "organizational," I identify 118 articles published about organizations in these top sociology journals during a 10-year time span from 2012 to 2021. By selecting exclusively only those articles published in elite sociology journals, the group of articles is an idiosyncratic subset but one that, I believe, accurately reflects how organizations are represented in mainstream sociology. When organizational theorists say that sociologists no longer care about organizations, they usually say this in reflection of journals like ASR, AJS, and ESR. Although there is some engagement with organizational theory as typically conceived, most of these articles are not written with organizational theorists as their primary audience. But they are, undoubtedly, organizational in their focus. The articles touch on a variety of sociological themes, ranging from culture to employment discrimination.

Based on my reading of these articles, I identify two approaches to organizational sociology that currently thrive in the discipline: "organizations within society" and "society within organizations." The first approach examines the role of organizations as building blocks of social structure and as social actors in their own right. The second approach treats organizations as contexts of social interactions and the building of community. Both approaches allow for the study of organizations as part of society and, importantly, as both drivers of and solutions for the pressing social problems of society.

A common theme within these articles is understanding the role of organizations in creating and magnifying important social problems. This theme, I will argue, is rooted in a long sociological tradition in understanding the causes and

implications of social problems and is now the orienting perspective within mainstream sociology (e.g., [Schneider, 1985](#)). Rather than starting from a common theoretical orientation – as is true with economics’ adherence to rational choice – or a methodological approach – as is true of psychology’s embrace of experimental positivism – what sets sociology apart is its interest in explaining and potentially offering solutions to social problems, such as inequality. Sociologists often find that organizations take center stage in their explanations for these social problems. The approach that sociologists take to study organizations depends on whether they cast the organization as a unit within society or as a social structure or platform that is worth interrogating on its own.

Articles that capture the *organizations within society* approach cast organizations as basic building blocks of social structure. Some organizations, such as corporations or grassroots movements organizations, are created to accomplish some social purpose, like generating wealth for owners or pursuing a social justice cause. Organizations, whether they intend to or not, also create, reproduce, and amplify basic inequalities within society, as when a business organization enables wealth generation for an elite few. Another type of article in this genre of organizational sociology focuses on the organization as a social actor. That is, it conceives of the organization as pursuing some purpose and emphasizes the agentic qualities of the organization. Research in political sociology, for example, often analyzes organizations as powerful entities that put their goals and interests above those of individuals in mass society. Analyses of this type depict organizations as bodies of concentrated resources that are able to leverage institutional mechanisms of control to wield their power. Other studies in this vein highlight the extent to which organizations serve as gateways to larger institutions or as the purveyors of public goods, as was the case of [Lipsky’s \(2010\)](#) “street-level bureaucracy.”

Articles that capture a *society within organizations* approach usually analyze organizations as platforms and spaces that host the social dynamics that interest the authors. This kind of research recognizes that many of society’s meaningful interactions, such as the building of community, take place within the boundaries of formal organizations. Often, these studies focus on the workplace. Scholarship on occupations, professions, and work focuses on organizations because that is where people do their jobs. In this sense, organizations are primary sites of other fundamental social processes that sociologists care about, including processes of conflict, cooperation, and creativity. But this genre of sociology also emphasizes organizations as locations where elite reproduction takes place. Much of this research examines internal stratification of resources among competing groups and individuals.

What is our understanding of organizational sociology if we consider articles from this sample as the foundation of the subfield? I will argue in this paper that it gives us a more empirically grounded view of organizational sociology that is rooted in an effort to understand society itself and the problems within that society. But empirically grounded research is not necessarily theoretically vacuous. In fact, this type of research, which begins with an exploration of an empirical problem or puzzle, creates the seeds for new theoretical insights. Beginning with

an empirical puzzle was the starting place for most of the theoretically fruitful papers that shaped the period of high creativity in organizational sociology in the 1970s and 1980s. Scholars like [John Meyer and Brian Rowan \(1977\)](#) did not begin writing about “rationalized myths” in an effort to revolutionize organizational sociology and found a new theoretical literature on institutions. Rather, their analysis was an effort to understand the empirical puzzle of why schools adopted the language of rationalization without any real behavioral commitment to the formal structures left in its wake. They were trying to understand a basic social problem that persisted in educational organizations. This insight led to a theoretical breakthrough that not only changed the way we conceive of Weberian bureaucracy and rationalization processes but also reoriented our study of institutions in organizations ([Scott, 1992](#)).

As mentioned before, the purpose of much contemporary organizational sociology is to shed light on basic social problems. This type of organizational research, while fundamental to sociology, is somewhat different from the way that organizational theorists have come to approach research, in which the question of “theoretical contribution” reigns supreme and motivates the impetus for the study. Rather than seek theoretical insights from developing a better explanation of a social problem or empirical puzzle, organizational theorists usually begin by finding a theoretical puzzle and trying to find an ideal organizational setting in which to resolve that puzzle (or at least that is the way papers are written). This difference in framing research creates distance between the body of contemporary organizational sociology and organizational theory, at the current moment.

In this paper, I discuss the implications of taking organizational sociology on its own terms. I argue that the potential for developing novel theoretical insights is still there, but creating a fruitful dialogue between the two fields may require loosening our expectations about what constitutes a theoretical contribution and focusing more on the problem-oriented nature of empirical research.

ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH IN SOCIOLOGY

In pursuing a grounded approach to understanding the contemporary state of organizational sociology, I selected all articles in the *ASR* that included “organization” or “organizational” as a keyword or word in the title of the paper. The same search in the *ESR* yielded zero articles, and the *AJS* does not include a keyword search. To create comparable results for these journals, I expanded the search to include all articles with the word “organization” in the abstract. I eliminated articles that used the term “organization” to describe a structure other than a formal organization, as for example, when an article describes the “social organization” of a neighborhood. *AJS* yielded the greatest number of articles with 52, *ASR* had 47, and *ESR* had 18. These represent roughly 15% of all articles published in *AJS*, 10% of articles in *ASR*, and 3% of articles in *ESR*.

I coded key features of each article that came up in the search. *Organizational form* refers to the type of organization(s) analyzed in the research. Forms can

be as abstract as a general kind of organization, as is the case with Ray's (2019) theory of "racialized organizations," or quite specific, as in the of Fligstein et al.'s (2017) research on the Federal Reserve Bank. The most typical form was "employer." In this case, the kind of organizational form likely varied, as it was often self-reported by an individual survey participant simply as the organization that employed them.

Theory refers to the primary theoretical orientation(s) that the authors use to motivate their analysis. In some cases, it was stated quite clearly, but in many cases, especially in work that is more problem oriented, the theoretical orientation refers to a broad literature on the topic that has built-in assumptions about the behavior or social dynamic in question. *Method* refers to the type of analysis applied in the study. In most cases, I simply note the most prominent method used, but when multiple methods were applied equally, I listed both methods.

Outcome of interest is the object of the study design. In quantitative studies, outcome refers to the dependent variable of the analysis, but in many qualitative studies, the outcome is a process or dynamic the authors are seeking to shed light on. *Unit* refers to the unit of analysis that the authors are interested in examining. In quantitative studies, the unit of analysis is relatively straightforward, but in qualitative studies, it is not always clear. I chose the unit of analysis that seemed most relevant to the research question posed by the authors.

Finally, I coded each article by the *organizational approach* evident in the paper. The approach is a categorization of the author's interest in organizations. To code these approaches, I first created two subcodes: level of theorizing and organizations' role in the theorizing. For the level of theorizing, I focused on the primary mechanisms used by the authors to generate an explanation for their outcome of interest. The second subcode, organizations' role, was more specifically about where the organization resided in the authors' chain of theorizing.

If the authors are interested in organizations as structures or actors that they want to explain or as structures or actors that influence broader society in some way, I categorize their approach as "organizations within society." In these studies, the main theoretical lens explains how organizations shape the broader society in which they are a part or how they operate and function as social units. Studies of this type are generally quite "macro" in their flavor. Individuals may be present in the study, but organizations operate as actors in their own right alongside individuals. For example, consider the case of an organization seeking to shape the mindset of policymakers and thereby shape legislation (Best, 2012). The focus of studies like this is about the existence and impact of organizations on broader societal, and more specifically legislative, outcomes; hence, I refer to this approach as organizations within society.

If the authors are interested in organizations as contexts in which societal dynamics play out, I categorize their approach as "society within organizations." Sociologists often study organizations simply because this is the place where society happens. Individuals rely on organizations for forming a community, getting jobs and income, and doing a variety of other things that require collective endeavors. For many of these studies, the main interest of the authors is not the organizations themselves, but rather the outcomes that take place within organizations. For

instance, if a scholar is interested in explaining why some occupations have a greater gender pay gap than others, they are likely to turn to organizations as a location for their study (e.g., van Hek & van der Lippe, 2019). Many of these studies include organizational practices, rules, or other dynamics as key variables in their analysis, but not all do. These studies tend to be more “micro” in that they are interested in outcomes experienced at the individual level of analysis. For example, Qvist et al. (2018) focus on voluntary organizations as a setting to understand better why certain individuals dedicate more hours to volunteering than others.

Tables 1 and 2 display the coded variables for each article found in my search. Table 1 includes all articles that use an “organizations within society” approach, and Table 2 includes all articles using the “society within organizations” approach. There are 32 articles using an “organizations within society” approach and 51 articles using a “society within organizations” approach.

One of the most notable aspects of the papers represented here is the sheer diversity of theoretical perspectives represented. Whereas many organizational scholars associate sociology with one of the core theories exported from sociology to organizational research, such as institutional theory or organizational ecology, these theories are not well represented in the mix of articles. Institutional theory only appears as a primary theoretical orientation in five articles, with an additional three articles framed around diffusion theory (a strong corollary of institutional theory). Organizational ecology or resource partitioning theory is only a primary orientation in four articles, with an additional article motivated by “social ecology” (which is a Chicago school of sociology theory about local ecologies of relationships between organizations and individuals). And interestingly, two of the articles using an ecological framework are derived from the network-based approach to ecology as originated by Miller McPherson and associated with the concept of Blau Space (Brashears et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2017). This version of ecology is far less common in studies published in organizational or management journals.

The most common theory represented in the studies is social movement theory, which is a primary motivating theory for 11 articles. The presence of so many social movement-related papers is indicative of the strong interest that sociologists have in bottom-up theories of social change, often represented in the form of collective action taken by activists. Much of this research is organizational inasmuch as one of the core theories – resource mobilization theory – is about how organizations provide infrastructure and other resources for the emergence and mobilization of movements. Moreover, in recent years, there has been a surge of research that uses insights from social movement theory to explain corporate and market outcomes (e.g., Bartley & Child, 2014; McDonnell et al., 2015). Organizations are often both the targets of movement mobilization and inputs for anti-corporate campaigns.

The broad mix of remaining theoretical orientations reflects, in my view, the social problem orientation. Rather than seeking to contribute to a particular theoretical perspective, this paper sets out to better understand a problem. In what follows, I will discuss the theoretical ambiguity of organizational sociology and what it says about the discipline and its relationship to organizational theory.

Table 1. Articles Using an “Organizations Within Society” Approach.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
S. Y. P. Choi; R. David	2012	Lustration systems and trust: evidence from survey experiments in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland	<i>AJS</i>	Government agencies	Lustration systems	Survey research	Trust in government	Citizens
D. J. Wang; S. A. Soule	2012	Social movement organizational collaboration: networks of learning and the diffusion of protest tactics, 1960–1995	<i>AJS</i>	Social movement organization	Diffusion theory	Network analysis; protest data	Tactical diffusion between organizational dyads	Dyad
H. R. Greve; H. Rao	2012	Echoes of the past: organizational foundations as sources of an institutional legacy of mutualism	<i>AJS</i>	Nonprofit organizations; cooperatives	Imprinting theory; institutional theory	Panel data; longitudinal analysis	Founding of cooperative stores	Norwegian communities
I. B. Vasi; B. G. King	2012	Social movements, risk perceptions, and economic outcomes: the effect of primary and secondary stakeholder activism on firms’ perceived environmental risk and financial performance	<i>ASR</i>	Public corporations	Social movement theory; sociology of risk	Longitudinal analysis	Risk perceptions	Company/year
R. K. Best	2012	Disease politics and medical research funding: three ways advocacy shapes policy	<i>ASR</i>	Advocacy organizations	Political agenda setting	Longitudinal analysis	Funding and legislative attention to diseases	Disease as treated in congress/year

J. Alcaer; P. Ingram	2013	Spanning the institutional abyss: the intergovernmental network and the governance of foreign direct investment	<i>AJS</i>	Intergovernmental organizations	Relational theory	Gravity models	Foreign direct investment flows	Country network dyads
A. Goldstein; H. A. Haveman	2013	Pulpit and press: denominational dynamics and the growth of religious magazines in Antebellum America	<i>ASR</i>	Religious organizations (as represented by religious magazines)	Social movement theory; economic theories of religion	Longitudinal analysis	Magazine foundings	Denomination/year
E. d. Graauw; S. Gleeson; I. Bloemraad	2013	Funding immigrant organizations: suburban free riding and local civic presence	<i>AJS</i>	Immigrant service organizations	Social construction theory; civil society	Interviews	Source of funding for organization; how organizations procured funding	Immigrant organization
G. Negro; F. Perretti; G. R. Carroll	2013	Challenger groups, commercial organizations, and policy enactment: local lesbian/gay rights ordinances in the United States from 1972 to 2008	<i>AJS</i>	Commercial organizations linked to gay/lesbian	Social movement theory; organizational ecology	Longitudinal; hazard models	Policy passage of anti-discriminatory policy	Municipality
M. T. Heaney; F. Rojas	2014	Hybrid activism: social movement mobilization in a multimovement environment	<i>AJS</i>	Social movement organizations	Social movement theory; organizational identity	Survey research	Movement organization membership	Individual activist

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
D. Riley; J. I. Fernández	2014	Beyond strong and weak: rethinking postdictatorship civil societies	<i>AJS</i>	Political parties; cooperative organizations	Civil society	Archival research	Organizational membership	Parties and organizations
J. P. Steil; I. B. Vasi	2014	The new immigration contestation: social movements and local immigration policy making in the United States, 2000–2011	<i>AJS</i>	Social movement organizations	Social movement theory	Archival research	Adoption of pro-immigrant ordinances	Local municipality
D. Strang; R. J. David; S. Akhlaghpour	2014	Coevolution in management fashion: an agent-based model of consultant-driven innovation	<i>AJS</i>	Firms	Management fads; diffusion	Computational experiments; agent-based modeling	Adoption of management fads	Firms
A. J. Sharkey	2014	Categories and organizational status: the role of industry status in the response to organizational deviance	<i>AJS</i>	US firms	Status theory; social evaluation	Financial analysis	Investor reaction to earnings restatements (car)	Firms at time of earnings restatements
A. Wimmer	2014	Nation building. a long-term perspective and global analysis	<i>ESR</i>	Voluntary and civic organizations	Theory of state formation	Longitudinal analysis	Number of voluntary associations	Nation-state
G. C. Gray; S. S. Silbey	2014	Governing inside the organization: interpreting regulation and compliance	<i>AJS</i>	Business organizations	Institutional theory; regulatory compliance theory	Ethnography	Perceptions of regulatory control and compliance	Individual managers; organizational perspective

G. C. Mora	2014	Cross-field effects and ethnic classification: the institutionalization of Hispanic panethnicity, 1965 to 1990	<i>ASR</i>	State agencies; Hispanic civic organizations	Field theory; social construction of categories	Archival and interviews	Emergence of new ethnic category	Historical process
G. Negro; F. Visentin; A. Swaminathan	2014	Resource partitioning and the organizational dynamics of "fringe banking"	<i>ASR</i>	Payday lenders	Resource partitioning theory	Longitudinal analysis	Entry and exit rates of payday lenders	Wisconsin county
T. Bartley; C. Child	2014	Shaming the corporation: the social production of targets and the anti-sweatshop movement	<i>ASR</i>	Multinational firms	Social movement theory; power analysis	Longitudinal analysis	Firms become target of an anti-sweatshop campaign	Firm/year
M.-H. McDonnell; B. G. King; S. A. Soule	2015	A dynamic process model of private politics: activist targeting and corporate receptivity to social challenges	<i>ASR</i>	Firms	Social movement theory	Longitudinal analysis	Receptivity to activists	Firm/year
J. J. Savelberg; H. N. Brehm	2015	Representing human rights violations in Darfur: global justice, national distinctions	<i>AJS</i>	Media companies	Media and ideological bias	Archival research; content analysis	Reporting of violent crimes	Media frames
M. Smångs	2016	Doing violence, making race: southern lynching and white racial group formation	<i>AJS</i>	Southern democratic party	Collective identity; resource mobilization	Event history analysis	Public lynchings	County
A. De Wit; R. Bekkers; M. Broese van Groenou	2016	Heterogeneity in crowdfunding: when are charitable donations responsive to government support?	<i>ESR</i>	Nonprofit organizations	Welfare state regime theory	Survey research	Donations to nonprofit	Individuals

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
B. Eidlin	2016	Why is there no labor party in the United States? Political articulation and the Canadian comparison, 1932 to 1948	ASR	Political parties	None	Comparative historical analysis	Formation and endurance of labor party	Country
H. R. Greve; J.-Y. Kim; D. Teh	2016	Ripples of fear: the diffusion of a bank panic	ASR	Banks	Diffusion theory	Longitudinal analysis	Bank experiencing a run	Bank
J. R. Levine	2016	The privatization of political representation: community-based organizations as nonelected neighborhood representatives	ASR	Nonprofit community organizations	Political sociology	Ethnography	Political role of community organizations	Community organizations
N. Fligstein; A. F. Roehrkasse	2016	The causes of fraud in the financial crisis of 2007 to 2009: evidence from the mortgage-backed securities industry	ASR	Mortgage securities issuers	Theories of white collar crime	Longitudinal analysis	Settlements over alleged fraud	Firm
S. Liu; H. Wu	2016	The ecology of organizational growth: Chinese law firms in the age of globalization	AJS	Chinese law firms	Social ecology	Longitudinal	Organizational growth	Law firm
A. D. Çakmaklı; C. Boone; A. v. Wittebloostuijn	2017	When does globalization lead to local adaptation? the emergence of hybrid Islamic schools in Turkey, 1985–2007	AJS	Turkish high school organizations	Globalization theory	Longitudinal analysis	Founding rate of hybrid organizations	School district

J. A. Kitts; A. Lomi; D. Mascia; F. Pallotti; E. Quintane	2017	Investigating the temporal dynamics of interorganizational exchange: patient transfers among Italian hospitals	<i>AJS</i>	Italian hospitals	Exchange theory; network analysis	Network analysis	Patient transfers between hospitals	Hospital dyads
J. Murray	2017	Interlock globally, act domestically: corporate political unity in the 21st century	<i>AJS</i>	G500 firms	Elite and class theory	Longitudinal analysis; network analysis	Common political donations	Firm dyads
K. Tsutsui	2017	Human rights and minority activism in Japan: transformation of movement actorhood and local-global feedback loop	<i>AJS</i>	Social movement organizations	World polity theory; organizational institutionalism	Interviews	Movement dynamics	Three Japan-based movement organizations
C. Tuğal	2017	The uneven neoliberalization of good works: Islamic charitable fields and their impact on diffusion	<i>AJS</i>	Islamic charitable organizations	Political economy; neoliberal diffusion	Interviews	Transformation of charity organizations	Turkish and Egyptian charitable fields
J. Jourdan; R. Durand; P. H. Thornton	2017	The price of admission: organizational deference as strategic behavior	<i>AJS</i>	Market finance organizations	Category theory; symbolic interactionism	Longitudinal analysis	Deference on social capital	Firm-year
K. Perneli; J. Jung; F. Dobbin	2017	The hazards of expert control: chief risk officers and risky derivatives	<i>ASR</i>	Banks	Institutional theory; moral licensing	Longitudinal analysis	Adoption of risky financial derivatives	Bank-year

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
Y. Shi; F. A. Dokshin; M. Genkin; M. E. Brashears	2017	A member saved is a member earned? the recruitment-retention trade-off and organizational strategies for membership growth	<i>ASR</i>	Organizations (general)	Organizational ecology	Formal model/simulation	Organizational growth	Organization
	2017	Patchwork leviathan: how pockets of bureaucratic governance flourish within institutionally diverse developing states	<i>ASR</i>	State organizations in developing countries	Bureaucracy theory	Comparative historical; interviews	Coexistence of bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic features	State organization
C. Arndt	2018	White-collar unions and attitudes towards income inequality, redistribution, and state-market relations	<i>ESR</i>	Labor unions	Labor and industrial relations	Survey research	Attitudes about economic redistribution	Individual union members
D. Clifford	2018	Neighborhood context and enduring differences in the density of charitable organizations: reinforcing dynamics of foundation and dissolution	<i>AJS</i>	Charitable organizations	Organizational ecology	Longitudinal analysis	Organizational foundings and dissolution	Neighborhoods
M. A. Kadivar	2018	Mass mobilization and the durability of new democracies	<i>ASR</i>	Social movement organization	Social movement theory; democratization	Mixed; longitudinal and case study	Democratic breakdown	Nation-state

Y. Long	2018	The contradictory impact of transnational AIDS institutions on state repression in China, 1989–2013	<i>AJS</i>	Chinese health organizations	Institutional theory; social movement theory	Multi-site field research	State repressions of aids activists	Government organizations
M. Ruef; A. Grigoryeva	2018	Jim Crow, ethnic enclaves, and status attainment: occupational mobility among U.S. blacks, 1880–1940	<i>AJS</i>	Self-employment	Ethnic enclave theory; ecology	Archival; longitudinal analysis	Self-employment; income attainment	Census tracts
M.-H. McDonnell; B. G. King	2018	Order in the court: how firm status and reputation shape the outcomes of employment discrimination suits	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Status and reputation; social evaluation theory	Cross-sectional analysis	Liability in lawsuits; punitive damages	Employment discrimination lawsuit
D. J. Wang; H. Rao; S. A. Soule	2019	Crossing categorical boundaries: a study of diversification by social movement organizations	<i>ASR</i>	Social movement organization	Social movement theory	Longitudinal analysis	Social movement organization diversification	Social movement organization
R. A. Benton; J. A. Cobb	2019	Eyes on the horizon? Fragmented elites and the short-term focus of the American corporation	<i>AJS</i>	Corporations	Elite theory; social networks	Social network analysis; longitudinal analysis	Corporate short-termism	Firm-year
J. E. Fiel; Y. Zhang	2019	With all deliberate speed: the reversal of court-ordered school desegregation, 1970–2013	<i>AJS</i>	School districts	Racial composition theory	Longitudinal analysis	Dismissal of desegregation orders	District-year

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
B. Reinsberg; A. Kentikelenis; T. Stubbs; L. King	2019	The world system and the hollowing out of state capacity: how structural adjustment programs affect bureaucratic quality in developing countries	<i>AJS</i>	State bureaucracies	Weberian bureaucracy theory; world systems	Longitudinal analysis	Bureaucratic quality	Nation-state bureaucracies
J. Go	2020	The imperial origins of American policing: militarization and imperial feedback in the early 20th century	<i>AJS</i>	Police departments	Imperialism	Comparative case analysis; archival analysis	Militarization of police	Police departments
N. P. Marwell; E. A. Marantz; D. Baldassarri	2020	The microrrelations of urban governance: dynamics of patronage and partnership	<i>AJS</i>	Nonprofit organizations	Urban governance	Social network analysis; event history	Tie formation and dissolution	City council member and nonprofit dyads
C. M. Smith	2020	Exogenous shocks, the criminal elite, and increasing gender inequality in Chicago organized crime	<i>ASR</i>	Organized crime organization	Network analysis; organizational restructuring	Network analysis; case study	Changes in network and its consequences	Organizational network
J. Rözer; H. G. van de Werfhorst	2020	Three worlds of vocational education: specialized and general craftsmanship in France, Germany, and the Netherlands	<i>ESR</i>	Vocational educational programs	Occupational training	Variance decomposition	Training program education-to-work link	Training program

L. B. Doering; K. McNeill	2020	Elaborating on the abstract: group meaning-making in a Colombian micro-savings program	<i>ASR</i>	Banks	Organizational theory; microsociology	Cross-sectional analysis and interviews	Financial interest	Savings group participants
T. Shift	2021	A sociology of discordance: negotiating schemas of deservingness and codified law in U.S. asylum status determinations	<i>AJS</i>	Asylum agencies	Institutional theory; practice theory	Archival research; interviews	Determination of asylum	Asylum officers
A. Wimmer	2021	Domains of diffusion: how culture and institutions travel around the world and with what consequences	<i>AJS</i>	Organizations (in general)	Diffusion; institutional theory; globalization	Theory development	Diffusion of organizational templates	Organizations

Table 2. Articles Using a “Society within Organizations” Approach.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
F. Varese	2012	The structure and the content of criminal connections: the Russian mafia in Italy	<i>ESR</i>	Organized crime organizations	Social networks	Network analysis; content analysis	Organizational structure of a mafia cell	Social network
C. Turco	2012	Difficult decoupling: employee resistance to the commercialization of personal settings	<i>AJS</i>	Nonprofit organization	Institutional theory; conflict	Ethnography	Employee resistance	Employee groups
K. Karpinska; K. Henkens; J. Schippers	2013	Retention of older workers: impact of managers' age norms and stereotypes	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Rational choice theory	Vignette study; surveys	Perceptions of early retirement	Managers
J. Rydgren; D. Sofi; M. Hällsten	2013	Interethnic friendship, trust, and tolerance: findings from two north Iraqi cities	<i>AJS</i>	Civil society organizations	Network theory; relational analysis	Network analysis	Friendship ties	Individual networks
N. Gerstel; D. Clawson	2014	Class advantage and the gender divide: flexibility on the job and at home	<i>AJS</i>	Workplaces	Class theory; gender	Survey; interviews; observations	Temporal flexibility in work	Individual employees
P. Lichterman; N. Eliasoph	2014	Civic action	<i>AJS</i>	Housing advocacy organizations	Civil society	Ethnography	Styles of civic action	Civic projects
A. Kalev	2014	How you downsize is who you downsize: biased formalization, accountability, and managerial diversity	<i>ASR</i>	US firms	Bureaucracy theory; institutional theory	Longitudinal analysis	Minority representation in managerial jobs	Firms
A. Lara-Millán	2014	Public emergency room overcrowding in the era of mass imprisonment	<i>ASR</i>	Public emergency rooms	Stigma theory; criminology	Ethnography	How er professionals decide which patients are deserving of pain medication	Er unit

B. A. Rissing; E. J. Castilla	2014	House of green cards: statistical or preference-based inequality in the employment of foreign nationals	<i>ASR</i>	Department of labor; regulatory agency	Employment discrimination models	Logistic regression of certification approval	Application from foreign-national
A. D. Reich	2014	Contradictions in the commodification of hospital care	<i>AJS</i>	Hospitals	Commodification and moral markets	Ethnography; interviews	Hospitals
B. Klandermans; J. van Stekelenburg; M.-L. Damen; D. van Troost; A. van Leeuwen	2014	Mobilization without organization: the case of unaffiliated demonstrators	<i>ESR</i>	Social movement organization	Social movement theory	Survey research	Individual activist
C. Noelke; D. Horn	2014	Social transformation and the transition from vocational education to work in Hungary: a differences-in-differences approach	<i>ESR</i>	Employers; schools	Comparative economy	Difference-in-difference	Individuals' unemployment
E. L. Kelly; P. Moen; J. M. Oakes; W. Fan; C. Okechukwu; K. D. Davis; L. B. Hammer; E. E. Kossek; R. B. King; G. C. Hanson; F. Mierzwa; L. M. Casper	2014	Changing work and work-family conflict: evidence from the work, family, and health network	<i>ASR</i>	Employer	Employee work-life balance	Randomized field experiment	Individual employee

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
J. B. Sorensen; A. J. Sharkey	2014	Entrepreneurship as a mobility process	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Organizational demography; entrepreneurship	Longitudinal analysis	Rate of entrepreneurship entry	Individual employee
P. Wiepking; R. H. F. P. Bekkers; U. O. Osili	2014	Examining the association of religious context with giving to non-profit organizations	<i>ESR</i>	Religious organizations	Rational choice theory; religious competition model	Survey research	Religious donation	Individuals
R. Braunstein; B. R. Fulton; R. L. Wood	2014	The role of bridging cultural practices in racially and socioeconomically diverse civic organizations	<i>ASR</i>	Civic organizations	Diversity research	Ethnography	Processes that enable participant diversity without destroying cohesion	Faith based organizational coalition
D. Baldassarri	2015	Cooperative networks: altruism, group solidarity, reciprocity, and sanctioning in Ugandan producer organizations	<i>AJS</i>	Ugandan producer organizations	Group processes; network theory	Field experiment	Cooperation between groups	Groups
F. Dobbin; D. Schrage; A. Kalev	2015	Rage against the iron cage: the varied effects of bureaucratic personnel reforms on diversity	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Bureaucracy theory; job autonomy; accountability theories	Longitudinal analysis	Changes in managerial diversity	Firms
J. Berger; A. Diekmann	2015	The logic of relative frustration: Boudon's competition model and experimental evidence	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Game theory	Lab experiments	Frustration with promotion opportunities	Individual
J. Rosenfeld; P. Denice	2015	The power of transparency: evidence from a British workplace survey	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Transparency theory	Survey research	Wages	Individuals

T. Anttila; T. Oinas; M. Tammelin; J. Nähti	2015	Working-time regimes and work-life balance in Europe	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Comparative economy	Survey research	Work-life balance	Individual employee
J.-P. Ferguson	2015	The control of managerial discretion: evidence from unionization's impact on employment segregation	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Inequality; discrimination theories	Regression discontinuity	Occupational and establishment segregation	Employing firm
S. B. Srivastava; E. L. Sherman	2015	Agents of change or cogs in the machine? Reexamining the influence of female managers on the gender wage gap	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Inequality; gender theories of discrimination	Longitudinal analysis	Gender wage gap	Individual employee
D. Tomaskovic-Devey; M. Hällsten; D. Avent-Holt	2015	Where do immigrants fare worse? Modeling workplace wage gap variation with longitudinal employer-employee data	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Inequality; wage discrimination; power	Cross-sectional analysis of workplaces	Immigrant-native wage gaps	Employer establishment
P. Catron	2016	Made in America? Immigrant occupational mobility in the first half of the twentieth century	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Assimilation theory	Longitudinal analysis of employment histories	Occupational mobility	Immigrant employees
A. Goldberg; S. B. Srivastava; V. G. Manian; W. Monroe; C. Potts	2016	Fitting in or standing out? The tradeoffs of structural and cultural embeddedness	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Cultural sociology; network analysis	Longitudinal analysis	Individual attainment	Individual employee
D. Minkoff	2016	The payoffs of organizational membership for political activism in established democracies	<i>AJS</i>	Political and civic organizations	Social movement theory; civil society	Survey research; propensity score matching	Political activism	Individuals

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization	Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
P. Moen; E. L. Kelly; W. Fan; S.-R. Lee; D. Almeida; E. E. Kossek; O. M. Buxton	2016	Does a flexibility/support organizational initiative improve high-tech employees' well-being? Evidence from the work, family, and health network	<i>ASR</i>	Employer		Worker well-being	Field experiment	Changes in worker well-being	Individual employee
A. E. Kentikelenis; L. Seabrooke	2017	The politics of world polity: script-writing in international organizations Is diversity still a good thing?	<i>ASR</i>	International nongovernmental organizations Business establishments	World-culture theory; power- political theory Diversity research	Archival data	Script writing about capital allocation Firm performance (various) Firm performance (various)	Transcripts of board meetings Establishment	
C. Herring	2017		<i>ASR</i>	Business establishments	Diversity research	Cross-sectional analysis	Cross-sectional analysis	Firm performance (various)	Establishment
D. Stojmenovska; T. Bol; T. Leopold	2017	Does diversity pay? A replication of Herring (2009)	<i>ASR</i>	Business establishments	Diversity research	Cross-sectional analysis	Cross-sectional analysis	Firm performance (various)	Establishment
F. C. Wezel; M. Ruef	2017	Agents with principles: the control of labor in the Dutch East India Company, 1700 to 1796	<i>ASR</i>	Dutch east India company	Agency theory	Longitudinal analysis	Longitudinal analysis	Desertion	Individual seafarers
M. E. Brashers; M. Genkin; C. S. Suh	2017	In the organization's shadow: how individual behavior is shaped by organizational leakage	<i>AJS</i>	School clubs/teams	Organizational ecology	Cross-sectional analysis	Cross-sectional analysis	Similarity in behaviors	Individual students
N. Fligstein; J. Stuart Brundage; M. Schultz	2017	Seeing like the fed: culture, cognition, and framing in the failure to anticipate the financial crisis of 2008	<i>ASR</i>	Federal reserve bank	Framing theory; culture and cognition	Topic modeling	Topic modeling	Frames used to make sense of the financial collapse	Meeting transcripts

Y. Lu; R. Tao	2017	Organizational structure and collective action: lineage networks, semiautonomous civic associations, and collective resistance in rural China	<i>AJS</i>	Civic associations	Collective action theory; social movement theory	Longitudinal analysis	Petitions	Rural Chinese villages
E. Hirsh; Y. Cha	2018	For law and markets: employment discrimination lawsuits, market performance, and managerial diversity	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Institutional theory; law and society	Longitudinal analysis	Gender and racial representation in management	Employer establishments
V. J. Roscigno; C. Sauer; P. Valet	2018	Rules, relations, and work	<i>AJS</i>	German employers	Bureaucracy theory	Survey research	Job satisfaction and fairness perceptions	Individual employee
H.-P. Y. Qvist; L. S. Henriksen; T. Fridberg	2018	The consequences of weakening organizational attachment for volunteering in Denmark, 2004–2012	<i>ESR</i>	Voluntary organizations	Organizational attachment	Longitudinal analysis	Hours spent volunteering	Individual volunteers
J.-P. Ferguson; R. Koning	2018	Firm turnover and the return of racial establishment segregation	<i>ASR</i>	Business establishments	Occupational segregation theory	Longitudinal analysis	Racial composition	Establishment
N. Wilmers	2018	Wage stagnation and buyer power: how buyer-supplier relations affect U.S. workers' wages, 1978 to 2014	<i>ASR</i>	Publicly traded companies	Wage premium and buyer power theory	Longitudinal analysis	Wages	Firm-year
A. Saatcioglu; T. M. Skritic	2019	Categorization by organizations: manipulation of disability categories in a racially desegregated school district	<i>AJS</i>	School district	Categories and inequality	Mixed; longitudinal and interviews	Excess costs for disability categories	Disability categories

(Continued)

Table 2. *(Continued)*

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization	Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
J. L. Nelson	2019	How organizational minorities form and use social ties: evidence from teachers in majority-white and majority-black schools	<i>AJS</i>	Secondary schools	Race and networks		Multi-site ethnography	How white and black teachers form social ties with other teachers	Relationship
L. Smith-Doerr; S. Alegria; K. H. Fealing; D. Fitzpatrick; D. Tomaskovic-Devey	2019	Gender pay gaps in U.S. federal science agencies: an organizational approach	<i>AJS</i>	Government agencies	Gender pay gap theory		Longitudinal analysis	Gender pay gap	Individual employee
M. Gieselmann; S. Bohmann; J. Goebel; P. Krause; E. Liebau; D. Richter; D. Schacht; C. Schröder; J. Schupp; S. Liebig	2019	The individual in context(s): research potentials of the socio-economic panel study (SOEP) in sociology	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	None		Survey analysis	None	Individual linked to organizational
M. van Hek; T. van der Lippe	2019	Are female managers agents of change or cogs in the machine? An assessment with three-level manager–employee linked data	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Gender pay gap theory		Cross-sectional; cross-national	Gender pay gap	Individual employee

R. Taiji; M. C. Mills	2019	Non-standard schedules, work-family conflict, and the moderating role of national labour context: evidence from 32 European countries	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Flexible work arrangements	Cross-sectional; cross-national	Work-family conflict	Individual employee
V. Ray	2019	A theory of racialized organizations	<i>ASR</i>	Organizations (general) University	Race theory	Theory building	Racialized practices in organizations	Organization
L. A. Rivera; A. Tilesik	2019	Scaling down inequality: rating scales, gender bias, and the architecture of evaluation	<i>ASR</i>		Gender evaluation theory	Field experiment	Performance ratings	Instructor-course
A. D. Reich; S. J. Prins	2020	The disciplining effect of mass incarceration on labor organization	<i>AJS</i>	Labor organizations	Labor market theory	Longitudinal analysis	Membership in labor organization	Individual employee
A. H. Wingfield; K. Chavez	2020	Getting in, getting hired, getting sideways looks: organizational hierarchy and perceptions of racial discrimination	<i>ASR</i>	Health care organizations	Racial discrimination theory	Interviews	Perceptions of racial discrimination	Individual employee
A. Ranganathan; A. Benson	2020	A numbers game: quantification of work, auto-gamification, and worker productivity	<i>ASR</i>	Garment manufacturing factory	Quantification of work	Natural experiment	Worker productivity	Individual employee
A. Storei; D. Schneider; K. Harknett	2020	What explains racial/ethnic inequality in job quality in the service sector?	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Flexible work arrangements	Survey data	Job quality	Individual employee
D. R. Schaefer; D. A. Kreager	2020	New on the block: analyzing network selection trajectories in a prison treatment program	<i>ASR</i>	Prison based therapy organization	Network theory	Network analysis	Network tie selection	Individual prisoner

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Author(s)	Year	Title	Published	Organization	Form	Theory	Method	Outcome of Interest	Unit
F. Bernardi; C. J. Gil- Hernández	2020	The social-origins gap in labour market outcomes: compensatory and boosting advantages using a micro-class approach	<i>ESR</i>	Employers		Effectively maintained inequality theory	Cross-sectional regression	Occupational status and net income	Individual employee
G. Altomonte	2020	Exploiting ambiguity: a moral polysemy approach to variation in economic practices	<i>ASR</i>	Post-acute care unit; health care		Ethnography; interviews	Moralization of economic goals	Organization	
J. M. Calarco	2020	Avoiding us versus them: how schools' dependence on privileged "helicopter" parents influences enforcement of rules	<i>ASR</i>	Public elementary school		Organizational theory; cultural capital	Ethnography	Homework rule enforcement	Teachers
S. Gorieer; P. Bracke; L. Hustinx	2020	The organizational field of blood collection: a multilevel analysis of organizational determinants of blood donation in Europe	<i>ESR</i>	Blood donation organizations		Organizational field theory	Survey analysis	Lifetime prevalence of blood donation	Individual blood donors
S. J. Correll; K. R. Weishaar; A. T. Wynn; J. D. Wehner	2020	Inside the black box of organizational life: the gendered language of performance assessment	<i>ASR</i>	Fortune 500 tech company		Viewing and Valuing Social Cognitive Processing Model	Content analysis; cross-sectional analysis	Performance rating	Performance evaluation
T. Kristal; Y. Cohen; E. Navot	2020	Workplace compensation practices and the rise in benefit inequality	<i>ASR</i>	Employers		Workplace compensation practices	Longitudinal analysis	Hourly inequality	Employer-job

J. Chu	2021	Cameras of merit or engines of inequality? College ranking systems and the enrollment of disadvantaged students	<i>AJS</i>	Colleges and universities	Rankings systems	Longitudinal analysis	Disadvantaged student enrollment	College-year
L. Zhang	2021	Shaking things up: disruptive events and inequality	<i>AJS</i>	Employers	Disruptive events and inequality	Longitudinal analysis; difference-in-difference	Change in occupational composition & segregation	Firm-year
F. Zimmermann	2021	Managing the gender wage gap – how female managers influence the gender wage gap among workers	<i>ESR</i>	Employers	Gender pay gap theory	Longitudinal analysis	Gender wage gap	Employer-employee
J. Laurence	2021	The impact of youth engagement on life satisfaction: a quasi-experimental field study of a UK national youth engagement scheme	<i>ESR</i>	Clubs and voluntary associations	Subjective well-being literature	Difference-in-difference	Life satisfaction	Individual youth
N. Wilmers; C. Aepli	2021	Consolidated advantage: new organizational dynamics of wage inequality	<i>ASR</i>	Employers	Wage inequality theory	Longitudinal analysis	Wage inequality	Occupation-workplace

THEORETICAL AMBIGUITY AND PROBLEM-ORIENTED SOCIOLOGY

Many scholars' views of organizational sociology reflect their training in seminal texts, such as [Clegg \(1989\)](#), [Scott \(1992\)](#), or [Aldrich and Ruef \(2006\)](#), that seek to lay out a coherent perspective of organizations as a social phenomenon, usually finding their roots in classic sociological theory. These perspectives bring together various strands of theoretical and empirical work into a cohesive framework. Within the perspective, one can deduce theoretical expectations and eventually hypotheses. The sociological perspectives, perhaps intentionally so, were developed as alternatives to economic perspectives that had become dominant but that sociologists viewed as too normative and not consistent with the social constructionist lens that runs throughout most sociology. Numerous cohorts of organizational scholars, of which I was a part, viewed these texts as the baseline for their training and as ideal models for how to theorize and conduct empirical work. Theoretical contributions, we were taught, were meant to be in conversation with these guiding frameworks. When a new framework emerged, you could do good scholarship by tagging on your own ideas to it in a generative fashion. This is what organizational scholars think of as a theoretical contribution when they do research. How do I contribute to an existing framework by adding a new idea, a new mechanism, modifying the boundary conditions of the theory, etc.?

But it is apparent from reading the articles listed here that this is not the only way to do organizational research, and it is certainly not the most common way to do organizational sociology. Rather, a different way of doing organizational sociology is what I will refer to as “problem-oriented” sociology ([Prasad, 2021](#)). The main purpose of this kind of sociological research is to identify social problems and then shed light on them, explain why they exist, and analyze what accounts for variation in exposure or consequences from those problems. Some research is even framed as an attempt to solve those problems (see, e.g., [Prasad, 2021](#)).

Problem-oriented sociology, of course, relies on scholars sharing an understanding of what important problems are. As sociologists, we take for granted that problems are inherently socially constructed, but nevertheless the problems that motivate the discipline's interest tend to have high agreement among sociologists as being problems and they receive a high proportion of public attention ([Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988](#)). The “social problems” perspective has a long history in sociology, with an early emphasis on crime and deviance and gradually morphing into programmatic research on various forms of inequality (e.g., [Schneider, 1985](#); [Spector & Kitsuse, 2017](#)). In many cases, research seeks to understand the negative consequences of various social phenomena (e.g., wealth inequality; racial bias), which further justifies the phenomena as a problem worth solving. When there is high agreement about the phenomenon as having negative consequences, scholars are “studying what is popularly seen as a social problem” ([Prasad, 2021](#), p. 33).

After reading the articles sampled for this paper, one can see the authors' interests in the topics as emanating from their desire to label, understand, and, if

fortunate, add insights about how to solve a particular social problem. The best example of this type of research, of which there are numerous in the list of articles, is related to social and economic inequality, whether based on race, gender, or some other form of group membership. [Ridgeway \(2014\)](#) captured well the sociological urge to study inequality in her presidential address for the American Sociological Association:

Sociologists want to do more than describe social inequality. We want to understand the deeper problem of how inequality is *made* and, therefore, could potentially be *unmade*. What are the mechanisms? How do we uncover them?

Ridgeway goes on to urge sociologists not just to consider how resources and power shape inequality but also status – or signifiers that convey respect or prestige – influence inequality between groups.

Naturally, organizations are an ideal place in which to study all three of [Weber's \(1968\)](#) sources of inequality – resources, power, and status – because it is in organizations that they accrue. Some have argued that the pursuit of these three kinds of resources motivates most organizational actions ([King & Walker, 2014](#)). Organizations are made up of various kinds of resources, bundled together in structures and routines. Organizations convey power on groups or individuals through their control of those resources and ability to exert authority on who else has access to them. And organizations are carriers of status and grant status to individuals, although not equally to all groups (see, e.g., [Croidieu & Powell, 2024](#), this volume). Thus, as scholars seek to study the problem of inequality, they easily find their way to organizations as an object or at least context for their analyses.

Types of inequality abound in organizations. Studies of inequality end up being one of the main types of papers in the “society within organizations” approach. Scholars recognize that inequality, bias, and discrimination abound in society and that we can better understand their sources by looking inside organizations where they are reproduced. In some papers, scholars portray organizations as the mechanism that accounts for inequalities, creating the structural fabric that allows certain kinds of discrimination to persist (e.g., [Smith-Doerr et al., 2019](#)). Many papers listed here relate to gender inequality and, even more specifically, to the causes of the “gender pay gap” (e.g., [Rivera & Tilcsik, 2019](#); [Smith-Doerr et al., 2019](#)) or gender bias as manifest in organizational evaluation practices ([Correll et al., 2020](#)). In most of this work, gender inequality is not only viewed as a problem to explain but also one that can be alleviated if we used organizational interventions consistent with the findings of the analysis. Much inequality research links problem identification with problem solving. If society happens inside organizations and we want to fix society's problems, naturally we turn to organizations as both the culprits and the potential saviors.

Inequality is not the only social problem that raises its head in the problem-focused research found in these papers, but it is the most common one, especially in the papers using a society within organization approach. Other problems include employee well-being and life satisfaction, worker productivity, performance ratings, and cooperation.

Much problem-oriented sociology is characterized by a loose theoretical orientation. By loose, I mean that the paper is not driven by a theoretical question at all. Instead, theory is in the background, offering expectations about what is contributing to the problem under investigation. In many cases, the theoretical background is not even a coherent theoretical framework but rather a literature of prior research and its associated findings. Consider, for example, Wilmers' (2018) article about wage stagnation. Rather than turn to a single theory about why wages stagnate, he instead looks at all of the available research on wages and market structure and uses that to generate hypotheses about how buyer power influences suppliers' wage-setting practices and ultimately wage differentials between firms. Reading theory this way can be shocking for an organizational theorist who is accustomed to having their feet held to the fire by reviewers demanding a theoretical contribution! There's no attempt to draw on resource dependence theory or formulate different types of Weberian power. Instead, Wilmers focuses squarely on "buyer power" as a practical construct that has relevance for the problem at hand – explaining wage differences across firms. In the conclusion, the author describes how the paper tests and extends economic segmentation theory, but prior to mentioning it in the conclusion the term "economic segmentation" is only mentioned twice. To be fair, there isn't a great need to describe the theory in detail. It is obvious from his description of buyer power what the theory is about.

Many of the "organizations within society" papers also tackle social problems, examining the role of organizations in formulating policy change (or resisting policy change) that might help resolve an existing social problem or by exploring the dynamics by which organizations contribute to or even create intermediate solutions to systemic problems. Steil and Vasi (2014), as an example of organizations contributing to policy changes, find that the presence of immigrant community organizations facilitated the passage of pro-immigrant ordinances in cities. Fiel and Zhang (2019), in contrast, show that the politics of local school districts influence the reversal of desegregation orders, a policy measure used to combat racial inequality in the education system. As an example of organizations creating intermediate solutions to social problems, McDonnell (2017) demonstrates that Ghanaian state organizations often have unique bureaucratic structures in order to adapt to the cultural and social needs of the communities in which they are embedded.

Not all problem-oriented papers are as loose with theory, as illustrated by some of the papers using an "organizations within society" approach. These papers use theory explicitly as a way to explain the problem at hand and generate hypotheses. For example, Pernell et al. (2017) seek to explain why banks begin adopting risky financial derivatives, a practice that they associate with the global financial crisis of the 2000s. To generate theoretical expectations, they draw from institutional theory as well as psychological theory on moral reasoning. In their conclusion, they contrast the implications of their study with what one would expect if deriving policy from agency theory. Thus, in the paper's conclusion, they offer generalizable policy solutions that would potentially combat dangerous risk-taking. The paper's theoretical contributions, as often conceived of by organizational theorists, are quite modest, but they nevertheless use theory deftly to diagnose the problem and find potential solutions.

It is clear from reading many of the problem-oriented papers that they embrace theoretical ambiguity. Rather than see that the purpose of the paper is to build or generate new theoretical insights, they instead allow theory to sit lightly in the background, or they draw liberally from various theories to shed light on a social problem. Doing this helps them get greater leverage over what is actually contributing to the problem. They are open to the idea that a single theoretical framework might not be sufficient to explain the problem. Moreover, their entire focus on the organization – as its own unit of analysis or as a context in which the problem is occurring – is to get better leverage in targeting the problem. The organization is often the problem itself, and that is why they are driven to study them.

This approach to scholarship is quite different from what we see in a typical publication in an organization theory journal, where the emphasis is placed on theoretical novelty. The reason for doing a study – at least as expressed by reviewers – is to make a theoretical contribution. Usually, we know if someone has made a theoretical contribution because they have identified a “theoretical gap” prior to doing the study and then they seek to address the gap with the new study, often by inventing a new concept or mechanism of explanation. Addressing problems or practical implications usually only enter the discussion on the back end of a paper and may even find their home in a section of the paper designed for that purpose. Showing the managerial implications of one’s research is a bonus for any study, but even this aspect of organizational research is quite different from what we see in contemporary organizational sociology. Drawing out the implications for managers is not warranted and may even be looked down upon by sociologists. The problems that interest sociologists derive from a different set of assumptions about why scholars engage in research and are usually focused on improving the collective good rather than simply benefitting the organization itself or a subset of elites within that organization.

ENGAGING WITH SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

One could conclude from reading the above description of contemporary organizational sociology that the field has entered a stage of normal science. We have enough theory now that we can use it as a tool to incrementally arrive at the answers to societal and organizational problems. And I would certainly agree that much of the research has embraced the spirit of normal science. But I think that characterizing the entire field in that way leads us to ignore the potential for creativity and idea generation had by organizational sociology. Moreover, I think we sometimes dismiss normal science as being theoretically vacuous when, I would argue, it can be the basis for important new theoretical insights.

In the last part of this paper, I focus on this theme: studying organizations as actors and sites where society plays out gives us unique opportunities to develop theory. One reason for this is that it frees scholars from being entirely bound by the constraints of existing theory and getting caught up in siloed conversations about theory that have little relevance to scholars outside that theoretical

tradition. When the entire purpose of research is to contribute to theoretical frameworks, over time, research in that area becomes narrower in its focus and offers more obscure innovations that can only be appreciated by the most ardent fans of the theory. Theory becomes its own goal and becomes delinked from the pressing empirical issues that call our attention to organizational research in the first place.

In contrast, when we approach empirical research as an attempt to better understand and (potentially) offer solutions to a social problem, we wear less opaque theoretical blinders. Seeing research through the lens of “social problems” gives scholars the opportunity to offer up new explanations and in the process rethink why organizations operate and function as they do.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, some of the most important theoretical innovations made in organizational theory came about because scholars were trying to better understand an empirical puzzle or problem. [Meyer and Rowan \(1977\)](#) and [DiMaggio and Powell \(1983\)](#), two of the most important starting points of institutional theory, began as attempts to explain why organizations adopted practices and formal structures that did not always make logical sense. From the point of view of Meyer and Rowan, the schools they studied may have even looked quite dysfunctional, even if they purported to do things for rational purposes. The theory of institutions they helped create came from a genuine struggle to understand social problems that previous theories fell short of explaining.

Not all organizational sociology seek to do this, but there are some good examples of theoretical development that emerge out of empirical puzzles and grappling with real social problems happening within those organizations. I provide two examples. The aforementioned [McDonnell's \(2017\)](#) investigation of pockets of high performing bureaucracies alongside highly dysfunctional organizations in Ghanaian government yields a theorization of a new type of bureaucracy – interstitial bureaucracy. By trying to shed light on why these highly effective bureaucracies exist, she is also able to help explain what is absent in the less effective bureaucracies next to them. Through interviews and comparative case analysis, she identifies the microfoundations of bureaucracy through which individuals tie together local culture and institutions to the ideal type of Weberian bureaucracy. Her approach – contrasting the ideal type with the reality she observes in her data – identifies adaptive characteristics local bureaucrats used given their interstitial position. McDonnell's study and a series of other papers related to the administration of public services (e.g., [Lara-Millán, 2014](#); [Seim, 2017](#)) breathe new life into bureaucratic theory and rejuvenate interest in variation in bureaucratic forms. These studies also remind us of organizational sociology's intellectual connections to urban and community sociology and public administration research.

Another example of theoretical development that came about through a problem-oriented focus is [Ray's \(2019\)](#) theory of racialized organizations. The problem that Ray seeks to explain is why seemingly race-neutral organizations are quite critical to the reproduction of racial disparities in society. His theoretical innovation is to bring Du Boisian critical race theory into conversation with organizational theory to develop a theory about how race becomes instantiated

and reproduced in organizational structure. Organizations, Ray (2019, p. 26) writes “are racial structures” inasmuch as “race is constitutive of organizational foundations, hierarchies, and processes.” He goes on to develop a set of assumptions and mechanisms to support this idea, as well as proposing an agenda for future research.

Both of these studies offer innovative ways of viewing organizations. And although it is clear that the authors were well read in organizational theory, they did not begin their papers as seeking to work within the constraints of a given theoretical framework. Instead, they approach their research by pointing to an existing social problem and then wrestle with existing theory that cannot easily account for the problems they are trying to explain and solve. It is the contradiction and tension that their empirical problems have with existing theory that gives impetus to new theory. In the case of Ray (2019, p. 46), he proposes that “organizational theorists should abandon the notion that organizational formations, hierarchies, and processes are race-neutral.” Organizational theory should incorporate insights from race theory about how organizations are manifestations of racial structures that reproduce and reinforce inequalities. His theorizing opens the door for a new way to theorize organizations and race. Given organizational theorists’ interest in conceiving of “organizational practices ... as being central to the reproduction of inequality” (Amis et al., 2020, p. 195), it makes sense that organizational scholars would heed Ray’s urging to integrate race theory with our own understanding of organizations. Theoretical innovation is likely to come from tackling these problems empirically.

Sociology’s gravitation around social problems also encourages scholars to study a broader variety of organizations. Whereas the tendency in organizational research is to study for-profit businesses,² sociological research on organizations is more inclusive, including research on nonprofit organizations, schools, social movement organizations, and government agencies. Organizational variety allows scholars to push against long-held theoretical assumptions about organizations, which may be only true of the for-profit organizations that management scholars study, and opens the door for comparative organizational research (King et al., 2009). In short, by expanding the variety of organizations studied, scholars will be able to test the scope conditions of existing theory and create new opportunities for theoretically generative analysis.

CONCLUSION

Organizational sociology, despite reports of its demise, is alive and well and regularly published in top sociology journals. And yet, it does seem to be the case that organizational sociology has grown somewhat distant from the broader community of organizational scholars. I have sought to understand this by looking more closely at the research that sociologists have published about organizations in the past decade.

One of the main implications of this paper is that the distance between organizational sociology is partly a function of very different approaches to doing

organizational research. Whereas much research in management and organizational specialist journals is motivated by identifying theoretical gaps or puzzles to resolve, much of the organizational sociology published in sociology journals is problem oriented. Explaining organizations and why they do what they do or how people behave in them is not the primary purpose of this research. Rather, sociologists are more likely to try to explain and identify solutions to social problems by studying organizations' roles in those problems. This research is in conversation with a "social problems perspective" of sociological research that seeks to identify, explain, and conceive of solutions for society's pressing problems. Organizations, because of their prominent role in society as either social actors or rich social contexts, are naturally caught up in those problems. They are often conceptualized as a source of the problem, although organizational interventions may also offer potential solutions as well.

The two approaches to studying organizations in sociology reflect the problem-oriented nature of research. An organizations within society approach implies that organizations are important actors and structures through which resources, power, and status are channeled. Organizations may impede change, especially when it is in the interest of the elites guiding them. But organizations can also be powerful agents for shaping the future of society, as we see in the case of Best (2012) in which she studies how interest groups draw attention to new diseases and advocate for federal funding to fight them. Many of the social movement theory papers in the sample are very much about organizations as drivers of social change. The second approach is more about what happens inside organizations. A society within organizations approach implies that organizations are contexts in which social dynamics play out, for good or bad. Many of society's problems therefore can only be understood and combated by studying how organizations work and what role they play in the perpetuation of those problems.

Research of this type is often theoretically ambivalent, choosing those theoretical tools that give them the best leverage in understanding the problem. But it doesn't always have to be that way. In fact, I would argue that some of the most innovative theoretical development comes when tackling an empirical problem that existing theory cannot easily explain. This is where the real potential for theoretical innovation lies.

For organizational scholars, more generally, organizational sociology offers a potential model for our own development. If we continue down the current path of publishing, in which theoretical contribution is valued above all, scholars will continue to be incentivized to do research that primarily addresses theoretical gaps or resolves theoretical puzzles, but perhaps at the expense of doing work that has broader social relevance. Moreover, given complaints about how much organizational theory has become more specialized, more jargon-filled, and less innovative, perhaps there is room for a different approach to organizational scholarship – one more grounded in real-world problems and connected to a broad variety of social settings.

As I have argued in this paper, studying organizations where we find problems does not have to be vacant of theoretical development. In fact, we may find that grounding organizational analysis in social problems will trigger new

innovations and change how we think about theoretical contributions to focus more on explanation, rather than situating findings within an umbrella theoretical framework. Generating theoretical insights from the study of social problems has the potential to unleash organizational analysis from the stifling conformity imposed by dominant theoretical paradigms, find ways out of theoretical silos, and lead scholars to rethink what constitutes a theoretical contribution. Finally, the approach laid out by organizational sociology will encourage organizational scholars to expand their view of what constitutes an organization and consider the organization's place in the broader social world. Undoubtedly, this repositioning of organizations will open up new theoretical possibilities.

NOTES

1. Many organizational theory journals now encourage authors to include a section about managerial implications at the end of their articles.

2. Granted, not all departments where organizational research takes place today are as management-dominated as American business schools. European schools of organizational studies or nonprofit management departments introduce key sources of heterogeneity in the kind of organizational research that is done, and of course as I show here, sociology departments continue to be a bastion of organizational research, although less likely to be labeled as such.

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