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Editorial

## In Defense of Theory and Original Theoretical Contributions in Administration



Em Defesa da Teoria e da Contribuição Teórica Original em Administração

Marcelo de Souza Bispo<sup>\*1,2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This editorial proposes how to build original theoretical contributions in a context that privileges practice over theory, where Anglo-Saxon theories dominate the scientific field of administration, and it is even unclear what “theory” means. The central idea is that the approximation between theory and practice only exists when the theory is constructed in the concrete world, i.e., where practice happens. This means that the uncritical adoption of theories to understand specific realities leads to the false impression that “in theory, practice is different.” My conclusion is that the original theoretical contribution must consider the multiple ways of life, culture, and the constituent elements of the social phenomena one wants to research. Added to this is the appreciation of indigenous knowledge (scientific or otherwise) on the reality where one aims to offer an original theoretical contribution.

**Keywords:** theory; original theoretical contribution; theory-practice; theorizing; decolonialism.

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste texto é oferecer uma proposta de como construir contribuições teóricas originais diante de um contexto de desvalorização da teoria frente à prática, da miopia do que é teoria e do predomínio teórico anglo-saxão no campo científico da administração. A ideia central é que a aproximação entre teoria e prática só existe quando a teoria é construída no contexto no qual a prática acontece (mundo concreto), o que significa dizer que a importação de teorias de maneira acrítica para compreender realidades específicas é que leva à falsa impressão de ‘na teoria, a prática é outra’. Concluo dizendo que a contribuição teórica original deve levar em conta as multiplicidades de modo de vida, cultura e os elementos constituintes dos fenômenos sociais que se deseja pesquisar. Soma-se a isso a valorização dos conhecimentos locais (científicos ou não) já produzidos sobre a realidade na qual se pretende oferecer uma contribuição teórica original.

**Palavras-chave:** teoria; contribuição teórica original; teoria-prática; teorização; decolonialismo.

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## THE ROLE OF THEORY IN RELATION TO PRACTICE

An old debate that continues to provoke many concerns in the academic environment is the relationship between theory and practice (Bispo, 2020, 2021b; Lundberg, 2004; Van de Ven, 1989). In administration, this debate is strongly influenced by the notion of 'research impact' (Bispo & Davel, 2021; Bispo, 2021a; Donovan, 2011; Edwards & Meagher, 2020; MacIntosh et al., 2017; Sandes-Guimarães & Hourneaux, 2020). One of the points of discussion about research impact is the perception that theory is detached from practice (Man, Luvison, & Leeuw, 2022; Mello & Pedroso, 2018) and that practice should be a protagonist in academic work in administration (McGahan, 2007; Nobel, 2016). I believe theory and practice are interdependent and must form a symbiosis (see Bispo, 2020; 2021b). However, a relevant aspect must be considered in the debate between theory and practice – the need to produce theory so that the theory-practice relationship continues to exist. This role is assigned to researchers who must ensure that theories correspond to the concrete world and practice. Every time one says that theory is far from practice is an indication that the theory used is not adequate for the situation analyzed, or that it needs refinement. After all, every theory simplifies a much more complex reality than the theory itself (Bourgeois, 1979; Suddaby, 2014). This simplification is most evident in the knowledge produced in the humanities, social, and applied social sciences (including administration) because the variations in behavior and customs are vast and constant.

The theory's limitations in the face of the complexity of the concrete world require the development of more theories to explain, describe, and understand the social phenomena. Developing theories able to offer correspondence with the concrete world is a complex challenge for researchers. The relevance of developing theories lies in covering as many realities as possible in the concrete world. When I say theories (plural) and not theory (singular) to cover as many social realities as possible, I corroborate Robert Merton (1970) on the relevance of what he called 'middle-range theories.' Middle-range theories start from the assumption that the concrete world from the social point of view is too complex for there to be universal theories. The assumption is that 'minor' theories have greater potential to correspond to some reality, and the sum of these theories contributes to a broader understanding of social phenomena (Bourgeois, 1979; Merton, 1970). Such a perspective leads us to the conclusion that not only must theories correspond to the concrete world, but there must be a correspondence between 'families' of theories as well.

I am offering here a proposal on how to build original theoretical contributions in a context that privileges practice over theory (McGahan, 2007; Nobel, 2016), where it is not clear what 'theory' means (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021) and where Anglo-Saxon theories dominate the scientific field of administration (Barros & Alcadipani, 2022; Muzio, 2022). Similarly to other relevant journals in the field of administration, the Journal of Contemporary Administration (RAC) requires the theoretical contribution in theoretical-empirical articles and theoretical essays to advance the debate on theory development, which remains a priority in science (Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Faria, 2022; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Suddaby, 2014).

I am addressing here the researchers from the Global South, especially from Brazil, who take little risk to produce original theory. In general, researchers from the Global South are trained to reproduce knowledge produced in the Global North, passively (Foucault, 1987), taking a subordinate role regarding the production of knowledge and original theories (Banerjee, 2022; Bruton, Zahra, Van de Ven, & Hitt, 2022; Muzio, 2022; Williams & Chrisman, 2015). The continued acceptance that foreign management theory produced in the Global North should serve as a priority in Brazilian research and that our role as researchers is to reproduce it in the Brazilian context to solve a practical local problem brings serious problems (see Ramos, 1996). Instead of producing a robust administrative practice that targets the local reality, we move toward a lame practice and, ultimately, the end of administration as a national scientific field. I agree with Professor José Henrique de Faria (2022) when he says that the original (Brazilian) theoretical contribution has 'gone on vacation' or is in a state of 'hibernation.' Part of this diagnosis is related to the training of PhDs in Brazil, which does not pay enough attention to producing an original theory, focusing on the reproduction of what has already been produced (in general) in the Global North.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY AND THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINAL THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

It is not by chance that several of the best universities globally focus on training researchers to publish in leading journals. These publications reinforce these universities' reputation, attracting more students and funding. In the field of administration, the journals that attract researchers (in general) seek to publish articles that offer an original theoretical contribution (see Cornelissen & Durand, 2014; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Suddaby, 2014). This preference occurs because theory production means having

the power to say how things are or should be. It refers to an ability to shape how people think and do without (often) realizing it. Theories are a subtle symbolic means for exercising power. When an academic community or country gives up producing original theoretical knowledge to import what is produced in other contexts, a position of subordination and dependence is created in which the others determine how things are or should be in that context.

I am not advocating that knowledge produced in foreign contexts should be avoided or discarded. My defense is that knowledge production (especially theoretical) must be a democratic process in which consumption and production must be stimulated in a global and diverse context. This position is based on the idea that the internationalization of science should be a process of exchange and not of subordination or colonization (Banerjee, 2022; Barros & Alcadipani, 2022; Muzio, 2022; Williams & Chrisman, 2015). If theory moves us forward in research and improves practice (or our understanding of a practice) (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021; Shepherd & Suddaby, 2017; Swedberg, 2014), then it is a valuable resource that should receive attention and be produced by researchers in the Global South too.

The relationship between theory and practice becomes closer when theory is thought and produced considering local contexts (Ramos, 1996). Therefore, my thesis is that an original theoretical contribution is a theory that maintains good correspondence with the concrete world. This occurs when it is built with strong influences from the context and from existing local theories. Researchers must consider that the original theoretical contribution gains power when based on what is unique in local contexts (Bruton et al., 2022).

A good example of my argument is the work of Bádéjo and Gordon (2022), in which the authors – one Nigerian and the other Scottish – criticize the totalizing character of knowledge and the vernacular produced in marketing. From a theoretical exercise of a dialogue between a Nigerian woman and a Scottish man, they show how Ifá philosophy and Yorùbá ontology (both Nigerian) allow a theorization in marketing with different thoughts and vocabulary from that dominant in the field of administration originated in North America and Europe. The authors' proposal is not to make the knowledge of Ifá origin a fad or even a new dominant paradigm in marketing but to put a different way of thinking, stimulating new forms of reflecting and acting in marketing beyond the American and Eurocentric context.

If we look at the scientific production in the Brazilian field of administration using the same lens proposed in this example, how many of our works are

guided by ways of life, philosophies, and national authors? How many of our works really reflect Brazilian cultural diversity and ways of life? There is vast literature produced in Brazil about the country itself that practically does not appear, much less subsidize the scientific work in national administration. Where are authors like Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Raimundo Faoro, Florestan Fernandes, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Celso Furtado, Caio Prado Junior, Darcy Ribeiro, Gilberto Freyre, Clóvis Moura, or Jessé Souza? I recognize that something based on Alberto Guerreiro Ramos and Paulo Freire exists modestly in the production in administration in Brazil, but note that I did not mention the name of any woman. That means something! The good news is that in the contemporary context some women have stood out, such as Djamila Ribeiro, Lilia Moritz Schwarcz, Debora Diniz, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado, and Mônica de Bolle. I hope that they and other Brazilian women serve as inspiration for us to think about original theories in administration in the national context.

The idea of a global and united administration blinds us to the need to produce knowledge and theories from our place. The potential of our scientific production for original theoretical contribution is there. Bearing this in mind, it is easier to see that our relationship with practice will be closer if we are oriented toward the main problems of the country we research. The Brazilian administration cannot disregard structuring elements of national society that certainly shape our social relations and ways of thinking and performing administration. More specifically, I am talking about how inequality, chauvinism, coronelismo, patrimonialism, familism, racism, food insecurity, poverty, misery, and the multiple forms of violence influence our way of doing and thinking about administration. As far as the administration is concerned, it is simpler to identify how these elements are present. It is enough to observe how they occur (concretely), for example, in labor relations in Brazil, in which uberization (see Abílio, Amorim, & Grohmann, 2021) is called entrepreneurship, or even how the relations between the national elite (commonly known as the market) and the Brazilian state (Souza, 2017).

Despite these characteristics being present in the practice of Brazilian administrators, where does it appear in our theoretical contributions? In general, such problems are not present in Brazil's theoretical production in administration. My perception is anchored in three aspects: (a) we theorize our reality from what comes from the outside; (b) we disregard the local context as inspiration for theorizing; (c) we are not used to citing authors who have proposed or propose to think about Brazil. Not even national researchers who sought to contribute in the administration field (with rare exceptions) with original theory are considered.

After all, how many doctoral dissertations do we see that are built from the ideas of a Brazilian author? Given this context, how can there not be a gap in theory and practice?

Looking at practice from a scientific perspective requires the researcher to read and interpret the context in which it occurs. This context is not ahistorical, neutral, and unbiased. Therefore, every practice occurs amid power struggles, political positions, and worldviews. Such an understanding leads us to realize that if theory must correspond to the concrete world, then any theory must be able to capture the structuring social elements that guide, shape, and contribute to the constitution of any practice we want to theorize. Hence the importance of considering the notion of middle-range theories (Bourgeois, 1979; Merton, 1970) to avoid the generalization of an imposed worldview – under the aegis of science – or a scientific innocence of reproduction of the dominant view as ‘truth.’ Multiple theories with strong local identification can collaborate with a broader understanding of how administration happens in different contexts, opening space for new ideas and a reading that is closer to the various existing realities.

Our relationship with imported theories needs to go through what Guerreiro Ramos called sociological reduction (Ramos, 1996). In general terms, the sociological reduction seeks to promote critical assimilation of foreign production, avoiding assuming an uncritical transposition of what is produced abroad to explain a local reality. The idea is to prevent the direct replication of a foreign theory from representing a flawed interpretation of reality from a place other than where it was produced. Therefore, the sociological reduction is not desk research and must be guided by the local reality. The idea is that foreign theories are confronted with local reality so that reality is not canned by theory. This is only possible through the parenthetical attitude, the researcher’s exercise of getting rid of previous conditions that shape their way of perceiving the researched theory and reality.

Sociological reduction (Ramos, 1996) is necessary for researchers from the Global South to exercise the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). The sociological imagination is the quest to promote awareness through the researcher’s ability to coordinate situations posed in reality. The focus is to realize that society is not the way it is by chance. It is necessary to capture the interests in dispute in that reality. Therefore, the original theoretical contributions arise in the diversity of social contexts (and not in the totality) and how practices happen in these contexts. The nationalities and regionalities of the authors

should gain more importance and relevance, not by a priori classifications such as developed or underdeveloped. The focus should be on the opportunity to access different ways of life, culture, and possibilities of knowledge production that lead to the identification of similarities and differences that expand our ability to understand, through theories, the concrete world in its broadest aspect.

## FINAL REMARKS

I invite potential authors of RAC to reflect on how their realities can be transformed into an original theoretical contribution so we can expand the theoretical diversity in the administration field. This attitude can help us overcome statements such as ‘in theory, practice is different.’ We can learn that theory only forms a symbiosis with practice if it comes from practice within the context in which theory is built. The breadth of the compression of social phenomena and their corresponding practices lies in the sum of the middle-range theories that show similarities and differences and how the concrete world happens in its multiple realities.

My perspective also leads us to consider that the notion of theory is not exclusively anchored in the positivist tradition in which theories are forms of cause and effect explanations that can reveal general laws that we usually call generalizations. I am not saying that anything can be a theory, but there is more than one possibility to consider what fits this term, and I think it is relevant to assume that, in humanities and social sciences (including administration), we understand that power explanation of any theory has more limited scope for the reasons I explained at the beginning of this text. I like the proposition by Sandberg and Alvesson (2021), who present five possibilities for theoretical contributions (explaining, comprehending, ordering, enacting, and provoking) because the authors show how to build theories. On the other hand, I also recognize that the Eurocentric context in which they produced the proposal leaves room for other forms of theorizing.

I conclude my reflection by assuming that the ideas defended here should not be seen as definite rules and that much of what is in the proposal presented to build original theoretical contributions also serves as homework for the continuity of my career as a researcher.



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