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**Spirituality, symbolism and storytelling in 21st century organizations: Understanding and addressing the crisis of imagination**

## **Abstract**

This article introduces the Special Issue concerned with organizational spirituality, symbolism and storytelling. Stressing the growing scholarly interest in these topics, the article makes a two-fold contribution. First, it critically assesses their development over time while identifying the emerging trends and new ways spirituality, symbolism and storytelling are taken up in management and organization studies. We make a case for utilizing their promise to transcend the epistemic boundaries and extend the scope of our academic practice beyond self-referential approaches or 'fashionable' topics. Second, it links them to what we term the current crises of imagination, calling into question extant institutional and organizational paradigms, as well as the theoretical frames we rely on in our teaching and research. The multiple crises we face - economic, financial, food, water, energy, climate, migration and security - we suggest, are partly due to the fragmentation of meaning that bedevils our scholarship and, implicitly, the failure of our collective imagination. Reaching across foundational disciplines and core methodologies, we bring into the conversation the interlocking fields of spirituality, symbolism and storytelling highlighting their potential for addressing the cardinal challenges we face as citizens of this world as much as organizational scholars.

**Key words: spirituality, religion, symbolism, storytelling, imagination, metaphor, ethnography, anthropology**

## Introduction

With the acceleration of communication technologies, the fragmentation of meaning in our world has never been greater. It is evidenced in splits and divisions among people within and without our societies, as apparent on the ground as it is in cyberspace. This concerns opportunities and resources that make lives liveable, under conditions of rapidly increasing inequality (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009; Scheidel, 2017); it also concerns coping in a post-truth era, where boundaries between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and nonfiction have become blurred or, it is argued, even irrelevant (Faroughi, Gabriel, & Fotaki, 2019; Snyder, 2019). While there is common agreement in acknowledging the multiple crises we face: economic, financial, food, water, energy, climate, migration and security; there is an absence of shared understanding about their causes and on the ways to address them. This, we suggest, is partly due to the fragmentation of meaning and the failure of imagination.

The failure of imagination concerns the inability to conceive new possibilities, like the refusal to consider the consequences of the world's better-offs action and inaction for tens of millions of dispossessed, manifested in the hostility toward refugees and forced migrants arriving at the shores of the European Union or knocking on the border gates of the USA. Our collective failure to imagine how things could be different concern burning global issues such as how to fight the rise of anti-Semitism and the spread of Islamophobia; what to do about the pollution of our oceans and about drinking water shortage; the ways to embrace new technologies yet prevent encroachment on our privacy and freedom. Here we wish to highlight the issue of moral imagination (or the lack thereof), as capacity to think (Singer, 1999) and create (Narvaez & Mrkva, 2014) solutions to the most pressing and vexing problems we face (Johnson, 1993; Chappell, 2014). In so doing we wish to pay homage to the likes of Frankl (1959), Schumacher (1977), de Beauvoir (1949), Olson (1982) and Levinas (1985) who addressed the crises which

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3 the post WW2 generation faced as it was rebuilding itself from the ashes of Auschwitz, the  
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5 aftermath of colonialism, the challenge of women liberation and in facing the 'other'.  
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10 For organizational scholars like ourselves, who see institutionalization as a value-infused  
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12 process (Scott, 1987, p. 494) of meaning giving (Selznick, 1957, p. 17) and sense making  
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14 (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409), extending beyond the functional remit of the  
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16 organization, the current crises put our responsibility and integrity as researchers and  
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18 knowledge producers, square at the forefront of academic debates. Taken together, we felt that  
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20 these crises have called into question extant institutional and organizational paradigms, as well  
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22 as the theoretical frames we rely on in our teaching and research (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015). We  
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24 further argue that these crises have exposed the weaknesses of the dominant imaginaries  
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26 underpinning the symbolic norms they represent. In an era characterized by the proliferation of  
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28 populism and the normalization of xenophobia in political discourses and everyday life, the  
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30 responses to the crises we face seem increasingly inadequate. We must deploy different forms  
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32 of imagination collectively (Komporozos-Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015) for radical re-imagining  
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34 of current governance arrangements and ways of organizing.  
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42 The urgency to mobilize collective abilities of organizations in pursuing pathways that will  
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44 challenge dominant modes of mis-representation and loss of meaning, is self-evident. The turn  
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46 to ecological visions, cultural myths and spiritual narratives, as well as to philosophy, theology  
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48 and anthropology as foundational disciplines and to ethnography and storytelling as base  
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50 methodologies, marks the search for new ways and approaches to re-think and re-imagine, re-  
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52 write and re-examine the role of organizations, organizing and managing in society - past,  
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54 present and future. Metaphors, symbols, myths, stories and legends are important means for  
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56 meaning creation: they shape our imagination and help us represent the world and our  
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3 experiences that would otherwise be incomprehensible. Moreover, spirituality and religion are  
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5 in themselves a symbolic representation of worldviews, with storytelling a key mode for the  
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7 generation of reflection and experience going back to the dawn of (human) history (Greenblatt,  
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9 2017). Reaching across disciplines such as anthropology or studies of religion, we bring  
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11 together the broadly defined and interlocking fields of spirituality, symbolism and storytelling  
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13 into conversation, to propose an integrative approach for addressing these issues in the context  
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15 of organization studies.  
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21 The ubiquity of spirituality (Carrette & King, 2005) and the central role religion occupies in  
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23 the lives of so many people (Park, 2005) is mediated and evoked through symbols and stories  
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25 (Grant, 2001). Symbols such as metaphors are also pervasive in everyday language and thought  
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27 (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). In organizations we trace symbolic artefacts to unconscious  
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29 archetypes (Kostera & Kociatkiewicz, 2013) and images (Gagliardi, 2015), whereby  
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31 storytelling (Gabriel, 2000, Boje, 1991) is a primary mode of transmission.  
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38 The idea for this Special Issue emerged almost four years ago on the background of the global  
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40 crises we encounter. By bringing together these elements: spirituality, religion, symbolism,  
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42 ethnography and storytelling, we aim to capture the topics, frameworks and methodological  
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44 approaches which have until now been under-represented or misrepresented in mainstream  
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46 organizational scholarship, despite the growing interest in these fields. Furthermore, taken  
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48 together, we hope the debates presented here would bring fresh insights and novel  
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50 understandings to the challenges that we and our organizations face in the new era that has  
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52 dawned upon us, helping to re-envision ways out of the present mire.  
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58 **Spirituality and religion**  
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3 Spirituality and religion have enjoyed a comeback in the social sciences of recent, and  
4 consequently, they have started to make inroads into organization studies too<sup>1</sup>. Whilst  
5 recognized as foundation pillars of the social science disciplines: sociology (Durkheim, 1912),  
6 psychology (James, 1917), anthropology (Frazer, 1900) and economics (Weber, 1992/1905), the  
7 pivotal role of spirituality and religion in explicating core societal phenomena was  
8 considered passé by the second half of the last century, as secularization theory took hold.  
9 Posited as a necessary companion to global modernization, the secularization thesis was  
10 considered almost sacrosanct. With the progress of the Enlightenment project and modernity  
11 comes an inevitable decline in religiosity, it was argued, ultimately leading to the demise of  
12 religion itself. This position has changed by the turn of the century, as Peter Berger succinctly  
13 put it: “The world today, with some exceptions... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in  
14 some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and  
15 social scientists loosely labelled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (Berger, 1999,  
16 p. 3). Thus for example, the postsecular turn is seen to pose challenges to European feminism as  
17 it made manifest that the notion of agency, or political subjectivity, could be conveyed  
18 through and supported by religious piety, or even engaged spirituality (Braidotti, 2008). For  
19 Taylor (2007), religion’s central position in our lives has never really changed since the Axial  
20 age ushered in the major religions of the world (Arnason, Eisenstadt & Wittrock, 2012).

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47 Historically, spirituality was not distinguished from religiosity until the rise of secularism at  
48 the turn of the last century (Turner et al., 1995). Conceptually, spirituality and religiosity are

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. The establishment of the Management, Spirituality & Religion (MSR) Special Interest Group in the  
Academy of Management in 2001 <https://msr.aom.org>; the founding of the Journal of Management,  
Spirituality & Religion (JMSR) in 2004 and the creation of the International Association of Management,  
Spirituality & Religion (IAMSRL) in 2010 [www.iamsr.org](http://www.iamsr.org).

A Google Scholar search as of 01/01/2019 reveals that the keyword combination *spirituality and religion and organization* over the period 2010 to date, yields 42,200 results. The keyword combination *spirituality and religion and workplace* for the same period yields 18,200 results.

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3 thus often posited closely tied to one another, sharing common characteristics (Seybold & Hill,  
4 2001) yet seen as distinguishable entities (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1997). In a  
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6 ground-breaking study in the USA, a country with a high number of people identifying  
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8 themselves as ‘religious’ and a large number as ‘spiritual’, Zinnbauer et al. (1997) found that  
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10 self-rated religiosity and spirituality were “modestly but significantly correlated ( $r = .21$ ), and  
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12 most respondents indicated that they consider themselves both spiritual and religious (S+R,  
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14 74%)” (p. 561). Thus, both spirituality and religiosity can involve personal transformation and  
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16 the search for an ultimate truth. In particular, spirituality is harder to define across cultures, as  
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18 its characteristics are not easily agreed upon, and it may mean different things for different  
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20 people in different places (Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Accordingly, we define religiosity  
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22 as the communally held beliefs, rituals, knowledge, and practices that are related to the  
23  
24 commonly accepted notion of the sacred. Spirituality we define as a set of beliefs concerning  
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26 the individual’s subjective perception of their extended relationships, which may include their  
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28 construal of ‘the sacred’ or transcendent dimension of existence, i.e. an individual's convictions  
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30 about self, others, the community at large and the world, along with their values regarding  
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32 moral conduct derived from such convictions. In this definition we follow and expand Ashmos  
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34 & Duchon (2000), the most commonly used definition in the extant literature (Vasconcelos,  
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36 2018). Though the two concepts are often considered together, on balance religiosity has  
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38 received more attention in scholarly work than spirituality (Zimmer et al., 2016). For the  
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40 purposes of this paper, we treat them in unison.  
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51 Spiritual beliefs play a central role in the lives of religious adherents (Faulkner & De Jong,  
52 1966; Pew Research Centre, 2010) as well as the non-religious and atheists (Bullivant, 2013);  
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54 and are a prime indicator of an individual’s faith (Angelidis & Ibrahim, 2004) and ways of life  
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56 (Bellah et al., 2007). Belief in God(s) is the foundational spiritual belief that unfolds a universe  
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3 of related artefact beliefs, whether beliefs in the Hereafter, Paradise, and Hellfire (Badawi,  
4 2001; Kobeisy, 2004) or beliefs in karma and incarnation (Narayanswamy, Altman &  
5 Sengupta, 2018), for example. Importantly, these beliefs are not confined to followers of  
6 organized religion or established faiths. Thus, in the UK, where church attendance is in  
7 continuous decline and at an all-time low, belief in God and related artefact beliefs is  
8 nevertheless strong (Davie, 2015).  
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19 Ethical values, anchored in principles shared by most faiths, may be seen as a core cluster that  
20 amounts to a universal ethical code of conduct (Smith, 1992; Schwartz, 2012) and importantly  
21 to us here, may be extended to organizations too. Thus, for example, extant research has found  
22 an overlap between individual and organizational values (beliefs) that may be considered  
23 spiritual, as concerns the establishment of trust (Li, Bai & Xi, 2011); and of normative  
24 behaviour, as concerns propensity for innovation (Assouad & Parboteeah, 2018). With the  
25 inroads that the study of spirituality and religion has made into organization studies, we find at  
26 one end, scholarship on specific faith aspects of organizational life, such as the deployment of  
27 industrial chaplains at the workplace (Wolf & Feldbauer-Durstmüller, 2018); and at the other  
28 end, the import of religious practice into organizational life, like mindfulness (Vu & Gill, 2018)  
29 and discernment (Falque & Duraiu, 2004). Leadership, perhaps the most studied aspect of  
30 management in organizations, has seen the development of new constructs such as spiritual  
31 leadership (Fry, 2003) and servant leadership (Van Dierendonck, 2011), as well as inputs from  
32 the realm of spirituality/religion into extant constructs, such as transformational leadership  
33 (Pravichai & Ariyabuddhiphongs (2018). In practically all organization and management  
34 scholarly areas, attempts were made to employ the lens of spirituality/religiosity; in some:  
35 entrepreneurship (e.g. Hoffman & Shipper, 2018; Kovacs, 2019) and family business (e.g.  
36 Madison & Kellermanns, 2013; Mohapatra & Verma, 2018) more than others. In the field of  
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3 consumer behaviour (though not, strictly speaking, an organization studies domain),  
4 spirituality/religiosity correlates are considered fundamental (Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry,  
5 1989). It is no surprise therefore, that the idea of viewing the entire organization as a spiritual  
6 enterprise has been proposed, notably for faith-based organizations (Delbecq, 2010) though  
7 secular organizations too were found to be infused with spiritual characteristics (Fry & Altman,  
8 2013). It has been suggested that the spiritually based organization will not be a passing  
9 fashion, and ought to be an imperative for the third millennium (e.g., Vasconcelos, 2015).  
10 However, in spite of its intuitive appeal, the nature of the relationship between spirituality and  
11 religiosity and an individual's moral stand or an organization's ethical conduct (let alone  
12 performance), remains elusive (Craft, 2013; Longenecker, McKinney, & Moore, 2004;  
13 Marquette, Pavarala, & Malik, 2014; Parboteeah, Hegel, & Cullen, 2008; Weaver & Agle,  
14 2002) and potentially, aspirational (Koning & Waistell, 2012).

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33 Are spirituality and religiosity relevant to stakeholders in organizations? Most religions in the  
34 world teach a form of the "golden rule" – to treat others as you would have them treat you  
35 (Ramasamy et al., 2010; Smith, 2008; Weaver & Agle, 2002). The majority of religions also  
36 provide a system of norms and values, sharing a belief in God or gods as beings who care about  
37 morality and punish for transgressions (Calkins, 2000; Longenecker et al., 2004). However,  
38 despite these connections, the relationship between spirituality, religiosity and ethical  
39 judgment in organizational contexts is not straightforward, nor unidirectional. For example,  
40 some studies have suggested that spiritual individuals are more likely to perceive differences  
41 between right and wrong (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003), hold moral virtues (Kaptein, 2008),  
42 are more humanistic (Lefkowitz, 2008), encourage corporate social responsibility (Gond,  
43 Akremi, Swaen, & Babu, 2017) and are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours  
44 (Ghuman, Ryan, & Park, 2016). Other studies have found no significant connections between  
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3 religion and work values (Chusmir & Koberg, 1988; Craft, 2013) and contrary to implicit  
4 expectations, religiosity, as measured by both religious affiliation and religious attendance, has  
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6 not been found to predict un/ethical judgment (e.g. Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007). And yet  
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8 other studies have shown increased religiosity being associated with unethical judgment. Thus,  
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10 for example, it is argued that faith-based organizations may be more prone to fraud (Koerber &  
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12 Neck, 2006)<sup>2</sup>, that spiritual leadership may be corrupting (Krishnakumar et al., 2015) and  
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14 indeed that the entire workplace spirituality movement may have a dark side to it, detrimental  
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16 to both individuals and organizations (Lips-Wiersma, Lund-Dean & Fonciari, 2009).  
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24 Three recent literature reviews on spirituality and religion in organizations and work offer  
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26 opposing views. According to Tracey (2012) “management literature does not offer a clear  
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28 picture of the effects of religious beliefs on individual values, attitudes, or behaviors” (2012, p.  
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30 26), due in part to the reluctance of organization behavior/ organization theory scholars to  
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32 engage with the topic of religion (spirituality) (Tracey, Phillips, & Lounsbury, 2014). On the  
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34 other hand Vasconcelos (2018) point to a vibrant activity in the field, counting publications in  
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36 no less than 40 academic journals; and Houghton, Neck & Krishnakumar (2016) comment:  
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38 “the workplace spirituality construct has showed signs of moving into [a] second stage of  
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40 development... Measurement scales have been advanced and refined resulting in a flurry of  
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42 empirical research... In addition, researchers have begun to explore mediators of the  
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44 relationships between workplace spirituality and other constructs of interest. A few isolated  
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46 examples of workplace spirituality serving as mediator or moderator in models of the  
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48 relationships between other variables are now beginning to appear, indicating that the  
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50 construct’s development continues to progress” (2016, p. 198).  
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59 <sup>2</sup> But see the rejoinder by Albrecht (2007).  
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6 The difference in interpretation among these review articles lies in the body of literature they  
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8 reviewed. Tracey's focus on "the major journals that count for tenure at the leading business  
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10 schools" (2012, p. 38) excluded the principal journal dedicated to the topic - the *Journal of*  
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12 *Management, Spirituality & Religion* (Vasconcelos, 2018) that alone published over the period  
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14 surveyed by Tracey more than the 86 papers he examined. His review also ignored the *Journal*  
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16 *of Business Ethics* that over the period reviewed published over 40 relevant papers and a  
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18 similar number in the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, including four (!)  
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20 special issues, the earliest appearing in 1994. Similarly, the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*  
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22 and the *Journal of Management Inquiry* published more than 20 papers each during the said  
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24 period. And that is far from an exhaustive list.  
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31 Hence, when Tracey et al. (2014) lament on "the paucity of work on religion and  
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33 organization" (2014, p. 6) finding it "puzzling and unfortunate that management scholars have  
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35 so studiously avoided one of the most pervasive influences on organizations  
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37 [religion]" (2014, p. 4) they, alas, convey a somewhat misleading impression, which amounts  
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39 to an error of the third type: researching the wrong question with the right methods (Mitroff  
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41 & Silvers, 2009). Thus the critical question is not why "management researchers have not  
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43 explored the intersection between religion and organization in a more meaningful and  
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45 determined way" (Tracey, 2012, p. 1), but rather, why "*all the major journals that count for*  
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47 *tenure at the leading business schools*" (Tracey, 2012, p. 38; italics added) do not publish on  
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49 the topic. We propose therefore the following question: why is it that so little attention has  
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51 been devoted to these important issues in prominent and influential management and  
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53 organizational journals?  
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3 King (2008) offers an explanation. He suggests that engaging with such research is a high-risk  
4 career strategy for business and management academics, given the fields' emphasis on tangible  
5 output variables and since "the idea of studying a construct that is closely associated with not  
6 just the unknown but also the unknowable seems foreign and disconcerting to some" (2008, p.  
7 217). Hence, the mindful ambitious high-flying academic, targeting the top journals, may well  
8 steer away from entangling oneself in these matters. Vasconcelos (2018) hints at another  
9 possible explanation. His exhaustive search identified 882 published studies on spirituality, the  
10 workplace, management and organizing over a 16 years period (2000 - 2015) - none in top tier  
11 journals; which represent "encapsulated knowledge derived from research initiatives of a wide  
12 range of distinct areas such as religion, psychiatry, psychology, gerontology and  
13 nursing" (2018, p. 809) in addition to organization and management studies. Hence, the  
14 dispersion of knowledge among numerous outlets, many of them unknown and inaccessible to  
15 business and management scholars, does not facilitate the creation of a canonical body of  
16 knowledge that would confer academic 'respectability' and drive theorization. We propose two  
17 other possible explanations for the lacuna of publications in top tier business and  
18 management journals: an apparent reluctance of mainstream academic researchers to engage in  
19 religion and spirituality research, and the challenge of finding adequate methodologies to  
20 capture the essence of religiosity/spirituality in a work and organization context.

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47 The assumed reluctance of mainstream business and management academics to engage with  
48 religion and spirituality may be due to different reasons in different places. We speculate about  
49 three geographies noted by Vasconcelos (2018) for their lack of relevant research: France,  
50 China and the UK. In the case of France, secularism (*laïcité*) is a foundational principle of the  
51 Republic and in public affairs whereby academics (in universities) are public servants. In  
52 China, officially an atheist nation, religion is frowned upon. Hence in both countries engaging  
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3 in religion and spirituality research may be conceived as politically incorrect (in more than one  
4 sense). In the UK, positivist research in organizational spirituality and religion has fallen foul  
5 of the influential critical management movement (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014) due to the  
6 apparent “commodification and *appropriation* of matters spiritual within predominantly  
7 capitalist forms of organization” (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 258; italics in original). Since from  
8 time immemorial academic scholarship is bound to dogma, conditioned by peer pressure and  
9 subject to institutional scrutiny, the conservatism, inherent to top tier journals (Altman &  
10 Laguecir, 2012) may have enacted a gate-keeping role to deny access to this field’s  
11 scholarship.  
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26 Vasconcelos (2018) comprehensive review of the field notes the predominance of quantitative  
27 methods and the lack in longitudinal, autoethnography and experimental designs. Criticism  
28 has also been levelled that the domain is lacking in sound theoretical foundations (Parboteeah  
29 et al., 2008; Steffy, 2013; Weaver & Agle, 2002; Tracey, 2012). Quite possibly, the  
30 challenge this field is facing is in finding ways to embrace contributions from outside the  
31 social sciences. For example, we only see the beginnings of attempts to import from the vast  
32 field of theology into the discourse on workplace spirituality/religion (Tackney, 2018); and the  
33 scope to engage with anthropology as a bedrock for theorizing the interface of religion,  
34 culture and society, remains wide open.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the field may be conceived as yet  
35 theoretically underdeveloped, militating against publication in top tier journals.  
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51 Other aspects implicit to research in this domain may further impede the advancement of our  
52 knowledge. Enquiring about one’s beliefs may be sensitive and understandably subjects may  
53 be reluctant to reveal information they perceive as private and possibly discriminatory

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57 <sup>3</sup> See Asad (1993, 2003); Turner (2010); Hunt (2017); as well as anthropologists studying religious organizations  
58 (see Koning & Njoto-Feillard, 2017; Wiegele, 2005). Their studies problematize and illuminate local experiences  
59 of multiple modernities and the moral limits of modern-day capitalism.  
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3 (Alshehri, Kauser & Fotaki, 2017). Therefore, research into this area is likely to create social  
4 desirability biases and self-deceptions that may result in unreliable findings (Jones & Elliott,  
5 2016). Last but not least, the overwhelming majority of empirical studies are concerned with  
6 religious norms derived from Western mainstream Christianity. Other major religions, such as  
7 Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Eastern Christianity and Pentecostalism –  
8 remain understudied (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Jingjit & Fotaki, 2010; Syed & Van Buren,  
9 2014; Alshehri et al., 2017). We also know very little indeed about African and Afro-Caribbean  
10 religions as well as the spirituality of most other indigenous people in relation to work, the  
11 workplace, management and organizing.  
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26 Imagining new pathways for managing and organizing may imply going back in time, listening  
27 attentively to the wisdoms of the great religions and old folkways. Management and organizing  
28 are not new. They hark back some 10,000 years to the first settlements of *homo sapiens* and the  
29 cultivation of agriculture. Management and organising moved up step with the  
30 establishments of cities in the third millennia BC. The challenges we face today: coordination,  
31 competition, embracing change, power and resistance, have always been around us. Perhaps  
32 the prophet is right: ‘there is nothing new under sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Learning from the past  
33 may well be the best pathway into the future.  
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47 In conclusion, it would be fair to say that religion and spirituality have made significant  
48 contributions to organization studies in the past twenty years. It would be also fair to say that as  
49 yet it is unclear whether these would make lasting impressions. In any case, given that  
50 spiritual and religious beliefs have become recognized as pivotal in numerous societies (Pew  
51 Research Center, 2010), of relevance for a diversified workforce in a global world (Ghuman et  
52 al., 2016; King, 2008; Treviño, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) and since the intertwining of  
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3 the spiritual and the religious with the secular is fast becoming a hallmark of 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘post-  
4 secular’ societies (Molendijk, 2015), their contribution to organizational studies should no  
5 longer be ignored by top mainstream management and organization journals (Gebert et al.,  
6 2013; Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003; Longenecker et al., 2004; Tracey, 2012; Weaver & Agle,  
7 2002) - a deficiency this Special Issue aims to address.  
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### 17 **Symbolism and meaning making in organizations**

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19 Organizations exist as systems of shared meanings that are developed and sustained through  
20 the symbolic process (Smircich, 1983). Indeed, the notion of culture has been described as  
21 ‘consisting of symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and  
22 ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of  
23 daily life’ (Swindler, 1986, p. 273). The power of symbols and their significance lies in their  
24 ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning beyond their utilitarian value (for instance in  
25 consumer goods – see McCracken, 1986). Symbolism, alongside power, are the two major  
26 variables that pervade all social life (Hallett, 2003).  
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40 Organizational symbolism emerged from the ‘cultural turn’ in the study of organizations in the  
41 late 1970s and early 1980s<sup>4</sup>. Devoted to the analysis of organizations as ‘cultures’ characterized  
42 by distinct paradigms, symbolism developed in parallel with the research strand examining  
43 how cultural values shape organizational forms beyond the pursuit of their rational goals. It  
44 was closely linked to the postmodernist view of organizations calling for non-traditional  
45 positivist theories and methods (Alvesson & Berg, 1992) to not only capture their instrumental  
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57 The *Standing Conference for Organisational Symbolism* (SCOS) <https://www.scos.org/> with its flagship journal  
58 *Culture and Organization* has been pivotal in this movement, though recent years have seen a marked decrease  
59 of academic interest in the field (for a discussion see Gagliardi, 2007, 2015).  
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3 and economic aspects, but also their ideational and symbolic ones, using holistic and  
4  
5 interpretative research models (Gagliardi, 2015, p. 179).  
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10 Symbolism expresses the underlying character, ideology, or value system of an organization: it  
11 provides a prism through which organizational stakeholders can communicate their  
12 experiences, successful actions as well as dysfunctional aspects of organizational work  
13 (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980) integrating emotions, cognition and behaviour into shared  
14 codes, which undergird organizational culture and the organization itself (Raffaeli & Worline,  
15 1999). In organizational settings, symbols count as any event, relationship or object that  
16 conveys meaning, comprising physical artefacts, institutional routines and group interactions  
17 (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Symbols act both as carriers and repositories of meaning condensing  
18 organizational knowledge (Lemon & Sahota, 2004) for instance, through innovation narratives  
19 between organizational symbolism and studies of religiosity on the one hand and storytelling on  
20 the other hand. Symbolic interpretation has been used in developing an approach for  
21 assessing religion's influence on individuals' ethical behavior in organizations (Waeber & Agle,  
22 2002); and the link between symbolism and storytelling is also reflected in a growing interest in  
23 religion's meaning-making (Grant, 2001). Organizational symbolism has also contributed to  
24 legitimizing the narrative approach in organization studies by emphasizing the importance of the  
25 stories and myths produced in organizations to understanding core processes (Czarniawska &  
26 Gagliardi, 2007). Morgan's *Images of Organization* (1986) reinterpreted organizational  
27 social science and theories of organization from the perspective of metaphor. It has introduced  
28 several root metaphorical expressions that influenced subsequent developments in research on  
29 metaphors in organization studies (Cornelissen, & Kafouros, 2008; Jermier & Forbes, 2011;  
30 Örtenblad, Putnam, & Terhan, 2016). Over the years, many researchers used descriptive and  
31 critical approaches to understand how metaphors are employed in certain settings, focusing on  
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3 power, control, resistance, and related concepts (e.g., Höpfl & Maddrell, 1996; Martin,  
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5 Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2011).  
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10 Metaphors have been considered as normative constructs in organizational development and  
11  
12 planned change (e.g. Burke, 1992; Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011; Jacobs & Heracleous,  
13  
14 2006); and together with archetypes, metaphors have also been applied in the context of gender,  
15  
16 power and culture to better understand women's position in organizations and for addressing  
17  
18 the pervasive, elusive and ambiguous nature of gender in work settings (Gherardi, 1995, 2000).  
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20 The research on metaphors extends beyond organizational culture and symbolism to include  
21  
22 literature on organizational discourse (e.g., Örtenblad et al., 2016). Metaphors and other forms  
23  
24 of analogical reasoning are increasingly being seen as central to all aspects of theory  
25  
26 construction (Cornelissen, 2006, Cornelissen et al., 2011); they are now regarded as having  
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28 positive semantic qualities that grant them the role of developing imaginative thought trials,  
29  
30 mental experiments and iterative ways of seeing, sensing, conceptualizing and comprehending  
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32 organizational phenomena (Cornelissen, 2005).  
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40 While metaphors provide essential aspects of cognitive frameworks for organizational  
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42 members as mechanisms through which they see and construct organizational life, archetypes  
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44 help us to articulate issues for which we do not have specific language (Bowles, 1990).  
45  
46 Archetypes underlying deep structures can be thought of as interpretive schemes of shared  
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48 understandings that give meaning to experience and guide imagination of organizational  
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50 members (Greenwood & Hinings, 1993). Archetypes and metaphors may also direct us to the  
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52 underlying unconscious of an organization's dynamics (Koçoğlu, Akgün, & Keskin, 2016). In  
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54 that context, organizational symbols act as the sources of 'unthought known' (Dimond, 2008)  
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56 that is, they stand in for the knowledge that the individuals are unable to think about; while  
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3 analysis of the dominant metaphors in the public discourse, can be helpful for the revealing  
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5 and assimilating of unconscious content at the level of organizations (Bowles, 1990).  
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10 Another strand of related research focusing on the symbolic meaning of language emerges from  
11 the recent turn to Lacan's work in critically-oriented organizational scholarship (e.g.  
12 Stavrakakis, 2008; Driver, 2009, 2013; Vidaillet & Gamot, 2015; Arnaud & Vanheule, 2007)<sup>5</sup>.  
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14 Indeed, as Lacan put it "the unconscious is structured like the language" (Lacan, 1981, p. 20).  
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16 Central to Lacan's re-reading of Freud is the constitution of the subject through its (violent)  
17 entry into the language/the symbolic order expressed in a set of prohibitions and rules as the law  
18 (of the father)<sup>6</sup>. The subject recognizes himself/herself in relation to the symbolic order,  
19 acknowledging that we cannot exist socially outside of a system of symbolic signification: "the  
20 symbolic provides a form into which the subject is inserted at the level of its being. It's on this  
21 basis that the subject recognizes himself as being this or that" (Lacan, 1993, p. 179). There is a  
22 proliferation of articles using major aspects of his theories to analyse core organizational  
23 issues such as identity (Driver, 2009) and identification (Stavrakakis, 2008), leadership  
24 (Driver, 2013), resistance (Hoedemaekers & Keegan, 2010; Vidaillet & Gamot, 2015),  
25 gendered discourse (Kenny, 2009; Fotaki & Harding, 2013), or social enterprise (Kenny, Haug,  
26 & Fotaki, 2019).  
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47 A creative fusion of psychoanalysis, organizational narrative and storytelling (Gabriel, 1995) is  
48 another manifestation of organizational symbolism. Organizational stories and narratives are  
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54 <sup>5</sup> See for instance Special Issue in Organization *Jacques Lacan in organization studies* - a collection of articles  
55 applying Lacanian ideas in various empirical settings; for a further exploration of the use of psychoanalytic  
56 concepts in organization studies see Fotaki, Long, & Schwartz (2012) and Arnaud & Vidaillet (2018) tracing  
57 Lacan's influence in the field of organization studies.

58 <sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the application of Lacanian concepts of symbolic and imaginary see Fotaki, 2009,  
59 2010; and Driver, 2009, 2013 among others.  
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3 expressed as symbolic artefacts drawing on deep mythological archetypes. But they are also a  
4 vital part of an individual's and organization's sensemaking apparatus; as features of  
5 organizational politics representing attempts at control and resistance; as elements of individual  
6 and group identities; and as means for sharing, disseminating, and contesting knowledge and  
7 learning (Gabriel, 2000). The stories can be presented as archetypal tales, that is, as stories  
8 that touch profound aspects of culture and psyche (Kociatkiewicz & Kostera, 2013). The  
9 unconscious knowledge is also likely to play an important role as individuals translate  
10 innovation narratives in ways that activate imagination about the future while drawing on both  
11 memory and current experience (Bartel & Garud, 2009).  
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26 As the next section will discuss in greater detail, stories and storytelling are a form of reality  
27 construction. Their strength relies on constructing a commonality of meaning, but this also  
28 suggests that events and knowledge outside of such frame of meaning are evaluated and  
29 regarded from a common stance of the stories (Boje, 2001). As such, the plurivocality,  
30 alternative stories and the voices of the less powerful are excluded or silenced (Boje, 1995).  
31 Psychoanalytically inflected notions of fantasy and imagination (Stavrakakis, 2008; Fotaki,  
32 2010; Vince, 2018; Kenny et al., 2019) offer a promise for overcoming these challenges.  
33 Fantasy is indispensable for struggling towards a better future (Kenny et al., 2019) while  
34 imagination, which is both creative and self-creating, symbolic and material (Komporozos-  
35 Athanasiou & Fotaki, 2015), enables us to envision the shapes it might take. Weick (1989)  
36 highlighted the role of disciplined imagination for producing better but also useful theorizing,  
37 while Morgan (1986) stressed the importance of imagination in creating metaphorical images  
38 that drives theory construction. However, the usefulness of theorizing can be very limited if it  
39 is confined to the academic community and mainstream fields of knowledge. For scholars to  
40 fully claim their role as contributors to society, we must become part of the solution to the  
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3 multiple challenges we face. This, we suggest, requires developing our capacity of imagination to  
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5 research topics and issues including political and societal problems that matter to people within  
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7 and outside our research community and our own paradigmatic commitments.  
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### 12 **Anthropology, ethnography and storytelling**

14 Current times, characterized by multiple crises, call for sensitizing approaches that can move  
15  
16 beyond the technical and operational elements of organizing and managing; approaches that  
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18 offer us alternatives to re-think and re-imagine, re-formulate and re-examine the role of  
19  
20 organizations and the processes by which organizational actors imbue their actions/being with  
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22 meaning. The discipline of anthropology, and ethnography as its core methodology, are such  
23  
24 alternative approaches, their synergy is nicely captured by McGranahan (2018): “ethnographic  
25  
26 research is attentive to the actual conditions of life, rather than to laboratory-produced or  
27  
28 predicted conditions. It traffics in *stories* rather than numbers” (2018, p.5, italics added).  
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31 Storytelling was at the beginning, long before the written word was invented; much longer  
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33 before religion was canonized. Storytelling was the communication procedure for oral history, for  
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35 community bonding, for the first organized work, as we are told in the Babylonian myth of  
36  
37 Gilgamesh. Storytelling, if you will, is the first research method. Anthropology, where the  
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39 method of storytelling is most embedded, is possibly the oldest among the social science  
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41 disciplines, tracing its origins to Herodotus (Boas, 1904).  
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49 Over the years, ethnography (Kostera, 2007; Neyland, 2008; Rosen, 1991; Van Maanen, 1988;  
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51 Ybema et al., 2009)<sup>7</sup> and storytelling (Boje, 1991, 2001; Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 1991,  
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56 <sup>7</sup> In addition see, e.g. Ciuk, Koning, & Kostera (2018); Van Maanen (2011); Watson (2011); Yanow, Ybema, &  
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58 Van Hulst (2012) and Ybema et al. (2019) for an extensive overview of ethnographic work from its early  
59  
60 beginnings. Equally, see the debate in *Journal of Management Studies* on the role of ethnographic research in  
management and organization studies (Watson, 2011; van Maanen, 2011).

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2  
3 1995, 2000)<sup>8</sup> have been offering us novel ways of engaging with and examining the  
4 complexities of organizational life and the processes of narrative meaning making, as well as  
5  
6 illuminating the interconnectedness (often ignored) of organizations, and organizational  
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8 members, with their wider environment. Important in these developments has been the  
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10 ‘interpretive turn’ (hand-in-hand with the ‘linguistic turn’) in the second half of the twentieth  
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12 century, which (re)focused the attention to the centrality of meaning in human life, the  
13  
14 importance of language, and a reflexive stance on how knowledge is created. Yanow and  
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16 Schwartz-Shea (2006) explicate that the turn is both a turning away from and a turning toward;  
17  
18 “a turning away from [...] the idea of a social scientific practice in which humans are  
19  
20 conceptualized as objects” and “turning toward a re-humanized, contextualized set of  
21  
22 practices” (2006, p. xiv).<sup>9</sup>  
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31 Ethnography, through its close and personal engagement, and storytelling due to its value in  
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33 uncovering how we make sense, have delivered on this promise, even though recently both  
34  
35 were subject to criticisms for blind spots to which we will return below. Ethnographic research,  
36  
37 subscribing to a historical and culturally sensitive perspective, has shown to be able to make  
38  
39 explicit some of the more hidden aspects of organizations and organizing, including ambiguity,  
40  
41 complexity, emotions and power; as well as reveal the daily routines of organizational life  
42  
43 (O’Doherty & Neyland, 2019; Ybema et al., 2009). Storytelling research demonstrates how  
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45 organizations and organizational actors make sense of identities, enact change (power and  
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47 politics), express resistance, nurture belonging, share ridicule, let off steam and reduce the  
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55 <sup>8</sup> In addition see e.g. Boyce (1995); Brown, Gabriel, & Gherardi (2009); Colville, Brown, & Pye (2012); Whittle  
56 & Mueller (2012).

57 <sup>9</sup> Also in anthropology and ethnography, a ‘turn’ took place in the late 1980s with the ‘crisis of representation’;  
58 the essays in ‘Writing Culture’ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) sparked a debate on representing ‘the Other’ and  
59 ethnographic authority; as well as of the ethnographers’ ethnocentric lens (see also Cunliffe, 2010).  
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3 equivocality of organizational life (Beigi, Callahan, & Michaelson, 2019; Dawson & Sykes,  
4  
5 2019; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Van Hulst & Ybema, 2019)<sup>10</sup>.  
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10 Stories, notwithstanding some major differences on how these should be defined (see Beigi,  
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12 Callahan, & Michaelson, 2019 and Dawson & Sykes, 2019 for discussion about the differences  
13  
14 between the two core storytelling approaches of Boje and Gabriel), open “windows into the  
15  
16 emotional, political and symbolic lives of organizations” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 2) marking  
17  
18 organizations as storytelling systems and organization studies as a set of storytelling practices  
19  
20 (Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Storytelling research has not only been able to offer a counter  
21  
22 narrative to the overly positivistic narrative of management science (as pointed out by Rhodes &  
23  
24 Brown, 2005), but also to infuse a more critical voice, juxtaposing sensemaking with  
25  
26 subverting, communicating with manipulating, change and learning with challenging, power  
27  
28 with dissent and identification with alienation (Beigi, Callahan, & Michaelson, 2019). Indeed, if  
29  
30 we “are to take the lives of others seriously and sympathetically [...] and to engage with  
31  
32 lived experience rather than to abstract from it” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 182), we cannot do  
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34 without narratives and storytelling.  
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42 Whilst ethnography is “part of the staple diet of anthropologists and sociologists” (Cunliffe,  
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44 2010, p.226), anthropology seems to have mainly played a role on the sidelines of  
45  
46 organizational research; confined to the perception as the ‘mother’ discipline from which  
47  
48 ethnographic method was brought into the organizational studies field. There is however, good  
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50 reason, against the background of the multiple crises we face, to be more proactive in  
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52 embracing the discipline that asks questions such as “what is it that makes us human”, “what  
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58 <sup>10</sup> These four articles offer a wealth of resources on organizational storytelling as well as ways forward for the  
59 field.  
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3 is it that we all share”, and “what is it that we inherit from the circumstances of society and  
4 history”? (Engelke, 2017, p. 5). Not only does anthropology offer an holistic way of thinking and  
5 researching (which takes time), paying attention to, and integrating, both the ‘complex’ and the  
6 ‘particular’ (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013); it also strives to challenge and re-examine the ‘taken-for-  
7 granted’ through a contextual approach that focuses on actors and their voices (polyphony)  
8 within a wider milieu (Bate, 1997). It may be argued that of all main social sciences  
9 disciplines that inform organizational studies, anthropology is most attuned to  
10 incorporating a historical perspective against the others’ ‘here’ and ‘now’ propensity (Sarason,  
11 1981).  
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26 From the early years of the discipline anthropologists have always had an interest in  
27 organizations and organizing since “we live most of our lives within and among  
28 organisations” (Garsten & Nyqvist, 2013, p.1). Indeed the study of human organizing can be said  
29 to be core to anthropology. In their path-breaking paper, Nancy Morey and Fred Luthans (1987,  
30 p. 131)<sup>11</sup> present what anthropology has to offer to organization and management studies, starting  
31 with the now well-known story of the Hawthorne studies (the role of both Mayo and  
32 the anthropologist Warner in the success of the research and research outcomes). They divide  
33 these contributions into theoretical ones, such as “existence of parallel formal and  
34 informal organizations”, “participatory management’ and “worker morale”; and methodological  
35 ones, such as the “precise details and thoroughness in direct observation” (Morey & Luthans,  
36 1987, p. 130).  
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55 <sup>11</sup> The paper was reprinted in 2013 in the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* with commentaries in order to  
56 reflect on the treatment of the history of anthropological work in organizational studies, titled: “Reclaiming  
57 Anthropology: the forgotten behavioral science in management history”, the commentaries were provided by Fred  
58 Luthans; Ivana Milosevic, Beth Bechky, Edgar Schein, Susan Wright, John van Maanen, and Davydd Greenwood  
59 (*Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 2(1), 92-116).  
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3 Since the 1980s, we have seen new subfields emerging, such as Organizational Anthropology  
4 (Carsten & Nyqvist, 2013; Jordan & Caulkins, 2013; Wright, 1994) and Business  
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6 Anthropology (Jordan, 2012; Tian et al., 2013), the latter with its own journal, the *Journal of*  
7  
8 *Business Anthropology* (in press since 2012). These fields, instigated by anthropologists, show  
9  
10 that there are many synergies in the kind of organizations being studied, from corporations to  
11  
12 NGOs and indigenous organizations, as well as in terms of the research themes, which run  
13  
14 from internal organizational dynamics, to interorganizational relationships, and the interaction  
15  
16 between organizations and their wider context (Jordan & Caulkins, 2013). There are however  
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18 several important differences, relevant to our call for alternative approaches. Organizational  
19  
20 anthropologists demonstrate a greater interest in studying less mainstream organizations and  
21  
22 engage a longitudinal research frame (often in cultures other than their own), such as NGO-  
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24 church links (Kamsteeg, 1998), secret societies (Mahmud, 2013), or monasteries (Lohuis,  
25  
26 2013; Paganopoulos, 2010). At a more theoretical level one finds an emphasis on classical  
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28 anthropological issues, such as kinship (e.g. Verver & Koning, 2018), and rites of passage (e.g.  
29  
30 Popova, 2016) employed in current organizational and managerial research.  
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40 Still, there are hesitations (and institutional barriers) that seem to constrain a more fruitful  
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42 engagement between anthropology and organization studies; interestingly enough, in particular  
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44 due to the position and meaning ethnography takes in both fields. Although we are able to track a  
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46 long time engagement of anthropological research with organizational foci, debates regularly  
47  
48 flare up with regards to fieldwork (ethnography, participant observation) done by non-  
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50 anthropologists (e.g. Bate, 1997; Gaggiotti, Kostera, & Krzyworzeka, 2017). These include, the  
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52 neglect of long-term fieldwork, considered a necessity not only to understanding other  
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54 people's lives, but also to question one's own understanding of the world (Howell, 2017; Shah,  
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56 2017); the lack of a holistic perspective which "recognizes that we cannot understand one  
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3 aspect of social life in isolation from another” (Shah, 2017, p. 52); and the inseparability of  
4 anthropology from ethnography, or how fieldwork and theorizing are intertwined (Bloch, 2017;  
5 Howell, 2017).<sup>12</sup> Not many organizational ethnographers follow these principles, but the few who  
6 have, were to put their stamp and keep pushing the field forward through their  
7 ethnographic perspectives: Barbara Czarniawska, John van Maanen, Tony Watson, Sierk  
8 Ybema, to name some of our prominent contemporaries.<sup>13</sup> For them, as for mainstream  
9 anthropologists, ethnography is the doing, thinking, seeing, sensing and writing combined; it is  
10 therefore much more than a method (Gaggiotti et al., 2017; Watson, 2012) - it is a cosmology of  
11 research and theory development.  
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26 Organizational storytelling, and organizational ethnography (particularly through a close  
27 interaction with anthropology), we argue, thus have much to offer in addressing the  
28 complexities of contemporary organizational worlds and the many internal and external  
29 challenges both organizational members and organizational researchers are confronted with.  
30 Both approaches however, also have some blind spots and shortcomings that have recently  
31 been aired.  
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42 Some of the main concerns raised on storytelling as we know it today, include the omission of in  
43 situ, contextual or setting-specific considerations in storytelling (Van Hulst & Ybema, 2019;  
44 Luhman, 2019), a focus on time and temporality (Dawson & Sykes, 2019), and lack of attention  
45 to underrepresented groups and themes such as empathy, as well as a need to engage with  
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54 <sup>12</sup> Anthropologists do not all agree on this; Ingold (2008, 2017) argues that anthropology and ethnography have  
55 different aims and that ethnography is not the means to anthropological ends. He argues (2017, p. 21 italics in  
56 original), “To study anthropology is to study *with* people, not to make studies *of* them; such study is not so much  
57 ethnographic as educational”. While we acknowledge that such divergence of views exist, we part company with  
58 Ingold on this issue.

59 <sup>13</sup> Some of their main works are found in the reference list.  
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3 current developments in social media and contexts such as the post-truth era (Beigi et al., 2019). We  
4 address each of these in more detail below.  
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10 Van Hulst and Ybema (2019) make an ethnographically grounded argument for adding a  
11 missing layer to organizational storytelling, namely the setting (meetings rooms, canteens,  
12 workstations, closed door rooms) in which storytelling in organizations takes place. This  
13 illuminates the point that what is talked about by whom and to whom, matters; for instance, from  
14 private one-to-one conversations (closed-door talk) to a joke shared collectively (canteen).  
15 Their typology indicates that storytelling varies “considerably across settings within the  
16 organization” and that each setting has “its own combination of story tellability, story triggers,  
17 story(telling) forms and story work” (Van Hulst & Ybema, 2019, p.19). The theoretical  
18 implications of this setting-sensitive approach to studying storytelling lie in acknowledging  
19 that particular settings instigate particular talk (e.g. the intersection of discourse and setting) inviting,  
20 for instance, a more nuanced investigation of the situated performance of identity work in  
21 organizations. As said, the underlying method to reveal these nuances is ethnography, whereby  
22 the researcher spends time in the organization; and by following and engaging with people, can  
23 ‘witness’, first hand, the storytelling in multiple settings<sup>14</sup>. The anthropology of storytelling  
24 argues that it is the cultural relevance of the story as exposed via characters, plot, theme - that  
25 informs us why a particular story appeals to a particular audience (Maggio, 2014).  
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49 Organizational storytelling research is also judged to have a rather linear conception of time (and  
50 structure; the past, present, future sequence). This, argue Dawson and Sykes (2019),  
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58 <sup>14</sup> An alternative approach, is to reconstruct the ‘ex situ’ collected stories via an archaeological method, much  
59 akin to how an archaeologist would infer meaning from past artefacts (Luhman, 2019).  
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3 seriously inhibits our understanding of organizational sensemaking as well as the  
4 accommodation of 'multiple accounts' and 'multiple times'. A change from retrospective to  
5  
6 prospective sensemaking would require some conception of non-linearity, as would the way  
7  
8 people story their lived experiences under changing circumstance due to "digital technologies and  
9  
10 the global convergence of universal standard time" (Dawson & Sykes, 2019, p. 109). Due to  
11  
12 technological developments and innovation, there is furthermore scope to delve deeper into social  
13  
14 media storytelling and storytelling manipulation, particularly salient in the post-truth era.  
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16 Questions are also raised as to the inclusivity of organizational storytelling research, about the  
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18 voices of underrepresented identities such as disabled workers and LGBTQ+ (Beigi et al.,  
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20 2019). Beigi et al (2019) also propose exploring the impact of storytelling at a more emotional  
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22 level (organizational empathy), for instance via fictional storytelling and the relevance of  
23  
24 classic stories and myths for contemporary, political sensitive, organizational circumstances.  
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26 Storytelling remains an important approach to explore how people make sense of their  
27  
28 experiences, more so during times of upheaval and change. Some of these newer storytelling  
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30 developments, in addition to exposing the value of combining storytelling, ethnography and  
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32 anthropological sensitivities, are especially suited to address core concerns that permeate our  
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34 times, such as insecurity, inequality and precarity.  
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45 Organizational ethnography too is undergoing important new developments, pulling the field in  
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47 different directions. One urges us to reclaim the discipline's roots of social imagination, of 'being  
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49 amazed by the world': "a task of great importance and urgency in times of interregnum, when  
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51 new solutions and even institutions are vitally needed" (Gaggiotti et al., 2017, p. 327). The other  
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53 is pushing in the direction of the unknown territory of an ethnography of objects and non-humans  
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55 in order to "push at the limits of our current paradigms in management and organisation  
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57 studies" (O'Doherty & Neyland, 2019, p. 13). Both have merit. Showered with  
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3 breakthrough technology such as algorithms, bitcoins, and drones, the question indeed needs to be  
4 asked how ethnography and storytelling can help us grasp and represent these. Depending on what  
5 is investigated, the “complex embedding of organisations in society makes an isolated one-site  
6 and in-situ focus next to impossible” (Schubert & Rohl, 2019, p. 177). A ‘post-reflexive  
7 ethnography’ is suggested as ‘solution’, in which “there is no divide between theory and practice,  
8 or representation and reality, which remain the dominant tropes for ethnographers keen to find a  
9 method that permits latitude for their own interpretative efforts and reflexivity” (O’Doherty &  
10 Neyland, 2019, p. 12). This does not imply however, that the traditional in situ and long-term  
11 engagement with social actors is no longer needed or relevant. It is, and ethnography  
12 permits us to “being perpetually pulled beyond the limits of one’s own taken-for-granted  
13 world” (Narayan in McGranahan, 2018, p. 7). However, alternative modes of  
14 organizational ethnography, enabled due to digital developments and electronic accessibility, are  
15 coming to the fore, such as participatory organizational ethnographic documentary-making and  
16 associated ‘witness’ thinking (the focus being on ‘with’). With filmmakers,  
17 organizational researchers and participants joining a common reflexive space, the ethnographic  
18 documentary can expose, in novel ways, the “inevitably affective and embodied character of  
19 organizational life [...] through analysis which stresses human sensitivity, feeling and  
20 emotion” (Hassard, Burns, Hyde, & Burns, 2018, p. 1417).

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47 An ongoing and unsettled matter in discussions on organizational ethnography and  
48 ethnographic based storytelling, concerns packaging these approaches into a generalized  
49 qualitative research method; a danger also witnessed in organization research (Gaggiotti et al.,  
50 2017) whereby time to conduct long-term participant observation or fieldwork in general,  
51 striving for total immersion in search of a holistic understanding, is excused due to practical and  
52 institutional barriers. This raises the question whether organizational researchers should  
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3 accept limitations in their ethnographic research or abandon it altogether; or, perhaps, challenge  
4 disciplinary confines and institutional barriers by questioning our own cultural mores in  
5 research, writing and publishing. A starting point would be the provision of adequate space in  
6 journals to present the richness of ethnographic and storytelling work.  
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14 To address the acute crises of today, instead of self-referential conversations on ‘fashionable’  
15 topics in closed epistemic communities, we need research that pushes and crosses the  
16 boundaries: disciplinary boundaries, ‘valid’ methods boundaries (inherently an  
17 epistemological question). An organizational VUCA<sup>15</sup> world, such that we find ourselves in,  
18 surely negates a ‘business as usual’ approach; nor should it condone a ‘business research as  
19 usual’ attitude.  
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### 30 **The content of the Special Issue**

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32 This Special Issue offers an eclectic mix of the issues and approaches discussed above; and is a  
33 product of much deliberation. Many excellent articles on different aspects of religiosity and  
34 spirituality, symbolism and storytelling, are not included in this collection. We had to choose  
35 from among 100 articles submitted. The first criterion for choosing an article for review was how  
36 it addressed any of the three topics in the context of organization studies scholarship; hence  
37 we excluded many excellent articles in spirituality or religiosity on the basis of their limited  
38 relevance to debates in organizations. Our preference was for articles that successfully integrated  
39 spirituality (religion), symbolism and storytelling or ethnography. The second criterion was  
40 how important is the topic for scholars outside our field of organization studies and how  
41 persuasively was it presented. Finally, we wanted to include topics that were novel,  
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59 <sup>15</sup> Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).  
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3 and/or intriguing. The first round of selection led to a decision to review less than one third of all  
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5 submissions with five articles making it to the final round.  
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10 The article on symbolic construction of contemporary cultural heroes by Garcia-Blanco  
11 examines the role of archetypes in leadership by comparing and contrasting two prominent  
12 public personas that have captured the public imagination: Julian Assange and Mark  
13 Zuckerberg. Both have been in the limelight since their founding and running of WikiLeaks and  
14 Facebook respectively, over the past fifteen years; and by all signs they will continue to feature  
15 prominently in the public eye for some time yet. Assange and Zuckerberg, Janus-like, on the face  
16 of it antagonistic figures, in reality complimentary heroes/villains. Theirs is an ongoing  
17 contemporary saga.  
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30 This is followed by the article on ‘the magical world of Santa’ by Palo, Mason and Roscoe, who  
31 explore the myth of Santa Claus, and how the performative power of this myth sustains and  
32 organizes a market in which tourists travel to visit Santa at his ‘home’ in Finland for a single  
33 day. They consider how, as a model of reality, myth becomes materialized, organized and  
34 preformed into markets. Their contributions lie in empirically linking a myth  
35 (conceptualized as a locution created through second-order semiological system) to a market, and  
36 offer ‘translocution’ as a new analytic category to account for the laborious organizational process  
37 of talking myth into a series of ‘magical’ performatives. Doing so, they reveal how accounts of  
38 performativity may shed critical light on late capitalism’s capacity to create value out of the most  
39 ephemeral of resources, myth. Their paper is an excellent example of how myths are translated  
40 and integrated into the stories and ‘worlds’ of others, that is, how myth becomes performative.  
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3 Staying in the magical realm, in the next article, Ganzin, Islam and Suddaby develop the idea of  
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5 ‘magical realist thinking’ to better understand how entrepreneurs navigate risk and  
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7 uncertainty in their daily experiences. This magical realism is a form of spiritually charged  
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9 sensemaking that describes an orientation to future decisions that combines realism with  
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11 moments of spiritual resilience in the face of risk. The study is based on life-story research  
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13 conducted among Canadian entrepreneurs and presents three cognitive orientations that  
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15 collectively combine to capture a magical-realist worldview as they each integrate somewhat  
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17 paradoxical themes of belief in fatalism and agency, past and future, and science and magic.  
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19 Magical realism in the context of entrepreneurial cognition, as argued by the authors, involves a  
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21 category of sensemaking in which scientific and magical cosmologies usefully coexist; the  
22  
23 conclusion is that spirituality plays a critical but largely unrecognized role in entrepreneurial  
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25 cognition. The paper raises some important questions as to how cosmological views of one’s  
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27 actions may sideline conventional accounts of time in current debates on retrospective and  
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29 prospective sensemaking.  
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38 The penultimate article by Brummans, Hwang and Cheong report on the findings of their  
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40 ethnographic investigation of a Buddhist NGO organization in Taiwan, examining how a terse  
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42 retelling of an inspirational story encapsulated in a mantra, contributes to materializing and  
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44 reproducing of its ethos and worldview. This is achieved by encapsulating an inspirational  
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46 story in a relatable, appropriable way, by developing a model explaining the processes by  
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48 which this occurs. The study indicates, how even the most faithful recitation of a mantra always  
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50 implies a form of appropriation by organizational leaders, employees, and volunteers, as well as  
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52 non-members. They are all shown to choose to creatively weave the specific mantra phrase into  
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54 their accounts to accomplish their specific goals in a given situation. As such it provides  
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56 guidance for future studies to investigate more deeply to what extent mantras help promote the  
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3 circulation of an organizational culture in which dissent and conflict are often suppressed or  
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5 avoided.  
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10 The final article by Deslandes, offers a theoretical contribution to developing the contours of  
11 *weak management* through the study of theological *oikonomia* in the work of postmodern  
12 theologians Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo. The essay provocatively argues that stripping  
13 *oikonomos* of its cognitive omnipotence will ultimately curtail its power (all italics in the  
14 original). Mobilizing this lesser power, which is also a principle of self-limitation, will then  
15 open a new different interpretative path to the notion of management, by taking it out of the  
16 realm of strategy, control, and so on – basically, that of power – and by adding an element of  
17 doubt and unease. The study makes a contribution to addressing the hegemonic claims by  
18 management; but whether this is the only way for organizational scholars to make a positive  
19 impact on society is open to debate.  
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35 Combined, these articles exemplify new ways in which both researchers and the researched  
36 imagine and/or re-imagine the task of organizations, the pathways to organizing and ways of  
37 managing in this brave new world of ours. We hope that having read our exposition, readers will  
38 feel empowered to engage with the themes and the methods presented here; which we believe  
39 open promising routes to a richer, more nuanced understanding of the challenges our societies  
40 face. We invite you to join the narrative of this Special Issue, that will take you from the lives of  
41 heroes/villains Julian Assange and Mark Zuckerberg to the performative myth of Santa Clause in  
42 Finland, through the magical realism of Canadian entrepreneurs to a Buddhist NGO in Taiwan  
43 and a contemplation on the future of power and management. Have a safe journey!  
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