Generative Scholarship Through Prospective Theorizing: Appreciating the Roots and Legacy of Organization Development and Change to Build a Bright Future

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Abstract

How can Organization Development and Change (ODC) research and practice help create healthy, vibrant, and humane organizations and communities? This has been a guiding question for the field of ODC throughout a year-long series of activities (e.g., design meetings, webinars, and informal dialogues) linked to the 50th anniversary celebration of the ODC Division of the Academy of Management. In this paper, we provide our own reflections on this unfolding dialogue by proposing that ODC's future can be bolstered by leveraging its legacy and historical strengths as the basis to engage in a systematic approach for doing prospective theory-building (Cooperrider, 2021), particularly on grand challenges like the transition to the Anthropocene. That is, we advocate for building theory that focuses on intentionally co-creating a better future rather than take it for granted or merely describing (and projecting) the past. In doing so, we believe ODC scholars and practitioners will be better equipped to create what we refer to as generative scholarship and write the next chapter for ODC as a revitalizing force in the world.

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Strengths and Legacy of ODC

"Organization development has been, and arguably still is, the major approach to organizational change across the Western world, and increasingly globally" (Burnes & Cooke, 2012, p. 1395). The origins of ODC can be traced back to the late 1930s to the pioneering work of Kurt Lewin, which sought to improve the human condition by resolving different forms of social conflict (e.g., racial, religious, marital, or organizational), especially for minority and disadvantaged groups (Burnes, 2004). He believed that group learning—particularly through democratic participation—was key because groups create the social context from which a person builds (or restructures) his/her perceptions, feelings, and actions (Lewin, 1948). Driven by the popularity of T-groups (Lewin, 1948), the rise of action research (Rapoport, 1970) and participative management (Argyris, 1955), as well as different theories and practices (e.g., socio-technical systems, double loop learning, process consultation, and managerial grid) that were aimed at creating more humane and effective organizations, some scholars have suggested that the 'golden age' of ODC was the 1960s and 1970s. By that time, ODC had become seen as an antidote to the traditional bureaucratic, control-oriented leadership approaches that had been dominating management theory and practice (Burke, 2011).

The plotline of ODC's history becomes fuzzier after the 1980s, with disputes about the vigor and contribution of the field after its early prolific decades. Despite these debates, there has emerged general agreement about (at least) four legacy-features of ODC (Burnes & Cooke, 2012; Bushe & Marshak, 2009). First, ODC has been built upon a commitment to pursue behavioral and systemic change through *human and democratic values*. Historically, ODC has aimed at moving beyond efficiency and productivity to create—participatively—healthy and humane organizations and communities (Burke, 2011; Burnes & Cooke, 2012). Second, following Lewin's (1951) famous dictum "there is nothing so practical as good theory," ODC has been committed to *work that is useful for both theory and practice*. For decades, ODC has contributed to closing the research-practice gap through methods, procedures, and studies aimed at enhancing both academic rigor and practical relevance (e.g., action-research, action-science, and engaged scholarship) (Coghlan, 2011; Van de Ven, 2007). Third, ODC has been *concerned with building capacity* to support the development of a social system (i.e., team, organization, or community) from within. Finally, ODC has been *committed to the creation of better collective futures* through large-scale, multistakeholder participation and partnerships (Emery & Trist, 1965; Gray, 1989). This specific feature of ODC work has been translated to other disciplines (e.g., dispute resolution) and has helped to broaden the view of effective organizations as interconnected systems (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015).

Drawing upon these four legacy features of ODC, we turn to describing how these strong roots might bear new fruit in ODC research and practice for the 21st century. In the next section, we propose that ODC may be revitalized by playing a pivotal role in mitigating the causes and dynamics of the global ecological crisis.

The 'Great Acceleration': The Anthropocene as the 21st Century Enabling Context for ODC

The second half of the 20th century was characterized by an unprecedent improvement in our quality of life measured by different aggregated indexes (visit www.gapminder.org to see these global trends in numbers) (Rosling et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the enhancement of our quality of life also produced (or came at the price of) major alterations to the Earth's ecosystems on a global scale (e.g., atmosphere, surface waters, and land) (IPCC, 2021). The impact has been so significant that scientists propose we have entered a new geologic epoch labeled the Anthropocene (meaning the "age of humans"), acknowledging climate change as an existential threat for future generations (Steffen et al., 2015).

While the modern-day imprint of humans on Earth's ecosystems can be traced back to the rise of the industrial revolution, after World War II (WWII) there was an exponential change in the structure and functioning of Earth. As socio-economic development has grown (see Figure 1), we have seen increased environmental degradation. The changes observed after the 1950s have been described as the "Great Acceleration" (Steffen et al., 2015), now with visible effects world-wide, such as extreme climate
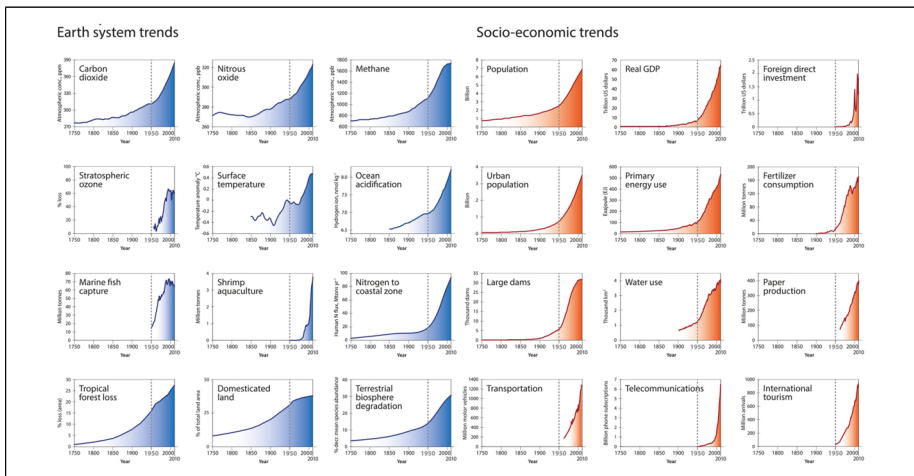

Figure 1. The "great acceleration" graphs for the trajectory of the anthropocene: trends from 1750 to 2010 in indicators for the structure and functioning of the earth system, and globally aggregated indicators for socio-economic development.
Source: Steffen et al. (2015).

events (e.g., historically high temperatures in the summer), an increasing pace of natural disasters (e.g., wildfires and floods), and a global epidemic. Alarmingly, there is compelling evidence that we are exceeding several environmental limits (or planetary boundaries) within which human society can safely operate (Rockström & Klum, 2015), thus the calamities we have experienced in 2020–2021 are predicted to be more common and intense in the near future (IPCC, 2021).

The colossal challenges before us as a global community have been well-documented by scientists (e.g., the 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change confirmed the severity of the problem) (IPCC, 2021). Why, then, have our responses to these challenges not been timely, systematic, nor implemented at an adequate scale? One plausible explanation that has been gaining acceptance in recent years is that the scope of global problems is too psychologically distant for business leaders and global decision-makers. In other words, individuals perceive the global crises we face as "a set of uncertain events that may occur far in the future, impacting distant places and affecting people dissimilar to themselves" thus negating individual motivation to take action in addressing them (Jones et al., 2017, p. 331). We propose that recent extreme climate events, and especially the collective experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, have reduced the psychological distance of global problems and have increased the level of awareness around the need to act (now) to assure the viability of human society (at minimum) and create a thriving future for all (at best).

Drawing on the legacy features of ODC described in previous section, this context offers a great opportunity for the field to lead the development of theory and practice to guide humanity towards a flourishing future. Just as WWII sparked the development of cutting-edge innovations within the social sciences, which eventually gave life to ODC as a field, we believe that the Great Acceleration—within the Anthropocene era—can serve as a punctuated equilibrium moment for ODC to be a revitalizing force in the world, leading a new wave of innovation and global regeneration. To further explore this proposition, we turn our attention to how Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987) as a theory and methodology of generative scholarship can provide a path forward in dealing with the Great Acceleration through prospective theorizing.

Generative Scholarship Through Prospective Theorizing: An Opportunity to Revolutionize ODC

The magnitude of the global challenges that the Great Acceleration involves is a compelling call for academics to take an active stance on helping move organizational systems from reducing harm to create healthy, regenerative, and thriving environments both for people and the planet (Pavez et al., 2020). In our view, this goal can be reach by engaging in what we refer to as generative scholarship, which we define (inspired by Cooperrider, 2021) as the unleashing of current knowledge and ideas, grounded research, and theoretical imagination to co-envision, co-open, and co-create new and better possibilities to enliven human organizations—within their interconnected ecosystems—and building a flourishing world.

The notion of generative scholarship is certainly not new. For instance, it is a core component of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), which seeks a fresh understanding of human, organizational, and institutional dynamics that explore the world though the lenses of abundance, resilience, compassion, and regeneration. It is also a homecoming to the original animating spirit of ODC, as it echoes Lewin's original aim to help improve the human condition. However, as we are the first generation experiencing the extreme effects of the Great Acceleration, we will need to tackle emergent, complex, uncertain, and global problems as a pervasive element of our daily lives. In doing so, it is important to engage in generative scholarship through what is referred to as *prospective theorizing* (Cooperrider, 2021); that is, a systematic approach to conceive a future that does not (yet) exist, in order "to create new future visions—strengthened through theory—that open up radically new prospects for human agency to shape the world" (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2021, p. 2).

AI and Prospective Theorizing: An Unfulfilled Promise

Prospection refers to the mental simulation (and evaluation) of possible futures (Seligman et al., 2013). Although ancient philosophes (e.g., Aristotle) wrote about the importance of prospection for living better lives and creating better societies, it has only recently become a focus of study as a central organizing feature of human cognition, affect, motivation, and behavior. This pioneering work in the field of psychology, suggests that individual behavior is not the result of past histories and present circumstances. Instead, it can be driven by prospective images of the future (Seligman et al., 2016). Such work reverses our current understanding of how temporal dynamics influence individual behavior, because it supports the notion that the future is not an amalgamated result of present actions, but rather the present is an unfolding result of how we mentally simulate the future and bring it into reality.

In contrast to other fields of research, ODC scholars have embraced prospection as an important aspect of change theories; from the early work of Fred Emery, Eric Trist, and Russell Ackoff on organizations as purposeful systems (Ackoff & Emery, 2005) to a more recent work on teleological change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). ODC's approach to prospection, however, has been primarily focused on understanding how to create more effective change interventions, and as a systematic approach for embracing future-forming theory building (i.e., prospective theorizing) has been lacking in most organization and management literature. Consequently, we must ask "how can we study, conceptualize, and theorize what is not (yet) observable and does not (yet) exist?" (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2021, pp. 1–2).

We argue that the philosophical, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings for doing prospective theorizing already exist in the original conceptualization of AI (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). For example, in a just released re-publication of his original dissertation, Cooperrider (2021), one of the founding thought-leaders of AI, states: "My overarching aim with the dissertation was to propose the vision and conceptual logic of Appreciative Inquiry ("AI") as a research methodology whereupon the knowledge interest was not intervention but a new form of future-forming or

prospective theory. The theory building's primary task would be one of anticipation and projecting possibilities for betterment" (p. 4). Unfortunately, the proliferation of AI within the field of ODC has often resulted in its oversimplification (or even misunderstanding and misapplication) as an interventionist methodology, while its original invitation to reimagine action-research as a truly generative, present-from-the-future proposition has often been neglected. Drawing on its original aim, Table 1 summarizes the core features of AI's original conceptualization as a systematic approach to embrace prospective theorizing.

As both a philosophical stance and methodical approach to organizational change, AI has further tilled the soil of ODC to embrace the notion that the future is a collective co-creation. As we move deeper into the Anthropocene (IPCC, 2021), the need for ODC's enhanced capacities for prospective theorizing will only grow (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2021). Thus, the time has come for ODC to fulfill the promise that AI has long encouraged and move toward prospective theorizing as a vital contribution of our work to both organizational and management research. In the next section, we propose a framework for how to use AI as a basis for prospective theorizing.

AI and Prospective Theorizing in Practice: The IDEAS Framework

Grounded on the original conceptualization of AI, we articulate five pillars to support researchers' engagement with the creation of generative scholarship through prospective theorizing. In doing so, we depart from the popular 4-D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny)—a reductionist view of AI as an ODC intervention methodology—to propose instead a new framework aimed at leveraging the power of ideas and prospective imagination as building blocks of generative scholarship. This five-pillar framework is organized under the acronym IDEAS: Inspiring, Discovering, Envisioning, Activating, and Savoring. Described further below and visualized in Figure 2, we conceptualize that each pillar represents a unique mode of prospection that dynamically interplays with every other—rather than being a sequential process of steps to be executed, providing a comprehensive approach to prospective theorizing. They are each an invitation to ODC scholars and practitioners to see, inquire, and "be" with organizational systems in new ways.

Pillar 1: Inspiring. Building relevant research in the Anthropocene era requires a search for the highest life-generating potential of the system under study (e.g., organization, community, or even society as a whole). This task implies moving beyond the question of "What I am passionate about (or what is intriguing to me)?" We must instead inquire into "topics related to questions from the future and for the future" (Cooperrider, 2021, p. 27). As such, the core question for this pillar becomes: "What is wanting to be born in the system (under study) to become a positive social force in the world?" The challenge of this pillar is twofold. First, a scholar needs to connect with, or develop, an appreciative eye—the capacity to sense the inner potential of system before it is fully deployed (Thatchenkery & Metzker, 2006). Second, to fully appreciate what

Table 1. Appreciative Inquiry as an Approach to Engage in Prospective Theorizing. Source: Adapted From Cooperrider (2021).

	Description	Opportunities for Scholars & Practitioners
Philosophical basis	AI proposes that organizational systems —just as any other form of life—are 'miracles' that can never be fully understood. Thus, they should be appreciated as ever-evolving entities that are continually 'becoming' the future we collectively envision. AI is an invitation to seriously consider the mystery of existence, so that we can engage in a form of "being in the world" that helps connect to the life-generating essentials of social existence.	• Adopting appreciation as lenses to see and/or interpret the world. • Being genuinely curious about how to apprehend, in all forms, the fullest, most meaningful, and highest life-generating potentials in individuals and systems that lead to the best future possibilities.
Epistemological basis	AI's epistemology is grounded in social constructionism, which portrays our reality as made or invented rather than given or taken for granted. It suggests that knowledge and theories are based on implicit metaphors, assumptions or images that lead us to see and understand a phenomenon in a certain way. Thus, AI invites us to harness the generative potential of a theory by asking questions that can lead to metaphors or images of reality aimed at harnessing the highest and better opportunities for life and living.	• Understanding organizations as interpretive or meaning-making systems, where the capacity to accomplish its full potential is dependent on the questions we most persistently ask. • Designing and asking appreciative questions aimed at helping human systems (e.g., teams, organizations, or communities) to challenge the status quo, create life-enhancing narratives or metaphors of their world, and open the possibility of embracing a better future.
Methodological basis	AI is conceived as a mode of action-research that intends to discover, understand, and foster the most dignifying, humane, and life-enhancing social-organizational order. It can also be understood as a theory of intentional collective action designed to help evolve the normative vision and will of a human system (e.g., group, organization, or society). From a practical standpoint, it helps articulate a future story of prospective possibility by embracing four complementary processes: (1) grounded observation, (2) vision logic, (3) collaborative dialogue and choice, and (4) collective experimentation.	• Conducting a grounded observation of the best of "What Is" (with all stakeholders of a system). • Embracing a co-created vision logic to generate ideals of "What Might Be." • Developing collaborative dialogue to generate consensus about "What Should Be." • Facilitating processes of collective learning/experimentation to help the system experience "What Can Be."

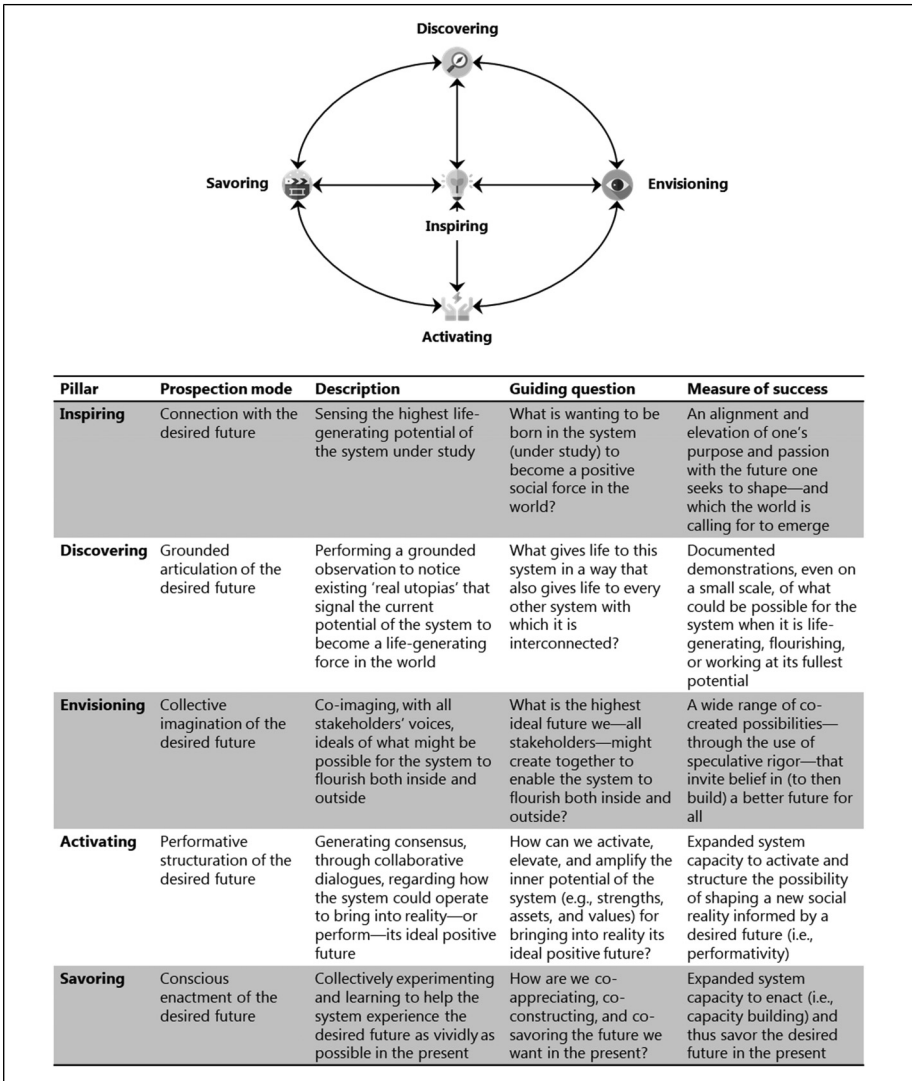| Pillar	Prospection mode	Description	Guiding question	Measure of success
Inspiring	Connection with the desired future	Sensing the highest life-generating potential of the system under study	What is wanting to be born in the system (under study) to become a positive social force in the world?	An alignment and elevation of one's purpose and passion with the future one seeks to shape—and which the world is calling for to emerge
Discovering	Grounded articulation of the desired future	Performing a grounded observation to notice existing 'real utopias' that signal the current potential of the system to become a life-generating force in the world	What gives life to this system in a way that also gives life to every other system with which it is interconnected?	Documented demonstrations, even on a small scale, of what could be possible for the system when it is life-generating, flourishing, or working at its fullest potential
Envisioning	Collective imagination of the desired future	Co-imaging, with all stakeholders' voices, ideals of what might be possible for the system to flourish both inside and outside	What is the highest ideal future we—all stakeholders—might create together to enable the system to flourish both inside and outside?	A wide range of co-created possibilities—through the use of speculative rigor—that invite belief in (to then build) a better future for all
Activating	Performative structuration of the desired future	Generating consensus, through collaborative dialogues, regarding how the system could operate to bring into reality—or perform—its ideal positive future	How can we activate, elevate, and amplify the inner potential of the system (e.g., strengths, assets, and values) for bringing into reality its ideal positive future?	Expanded system capacity to activate and structure the possibility of shaping a new social reality informed by a desired future (i.e., performativity)
Savoring	Conscious enactment of the desired future	Collectively experimenting and learning to help the system experience the desired future as vividly as possible in the present	How are we co-appreciating, co-constructing, and co-savoring the future we want in the present?	Expanded system capacity to enact (i.e., capacity building) and thus savor the desired future in the present

Figure 2. IDEAS framework: five pillars for embracing generative scholarship through prospective theorizing.

the future is calling for, the researcher needs to immerse him/herself in the system to embrace what Scharmer (2009) refers to as "presensing," which means "to sense, tune in, and act from one's highest future potential—the future that depends on us to bring it into being" (p. 8). These two capacities require the researcher to be involved in a process of deep listening that goes from the individual (me) to all the voices that

configure the system (stakeholders) and eventually to a unified sense of interconnected-ness (all of us) that enable us to merge one's passion with the future one seeks to shape.

Pillar 2: Discovering. Discovering refers to a process of grounded observation that seeks to capture the potentialities of the present through the discovery of 'real utopias' (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2021), which are demonstrations, even on a small scale, of what could be possible for the system when it is life-generating, flourishing, or working at its fullest potential (Cooperrider, 2021). However, to solve the challenges of the Anthropocene era, the core question for this pillar evolves AI's original guiding question: "What gives life to this system when it is as its best?" to instead become, "What gives life to this system in a way that *also* gives life to every other system with which it is intercon-nected?" This evolved question invites us to go deep into the idea of generative scholar-ship by recognizing that we are really one interdependent system and opens the pathway to the possibility of building a regenerative and flourishing world.

Pillar 3: Envisioning. Envisioning embraces a vision logic aimed at co-imaging, with the whole system of stakeholders, ideals of what might be possible for the system if the 'real utopias' that were previously found are expanded and enhanced to become the current form of operating (Cooperrider, 2021). This pillar reminds us it is important to ask bold questions that can overcome the rifts and politicization and help connect the whole system with solutions that not only reduce harm but also create a thriving world in the future (Pavez et al., 2020). Thus, the core question for this pillar becomes: "What is the highest ideal future we—all stakeholders—might create together to enable the system to flourish both inside and outside?" From this overarch-ing question flows a myriad of specific inquiries we might ask, such as: How might we identify and foster management practices that are "net positive" in their impact, not just within the walls of the organization, but beyond? What would organizational life look like if the reality of biological and sociological interdependence guides every decision? The outcome of this process of inquiry cannot be tested with current logics of theory building or against the empirical present. Instead, it requires a new methodological toolkit to achieve "speculative rigor," which involves a process of disciplined imagi-nation that goes beyond of what is feasible and probable to what is desirable (Gümüsay & Reinecke, 2021). A measure of success, then, is whether the system can envision— collectively—a wide the range of possibilities to create a better future for all.

Pillar 4: Activating. This pillar involves developing collaborative dialogues aimed at generating consensus about how the system *should* operate to bring into reality the most highly positive future (previously co-imagined). It implies activating the hidden potential of the whole system and the generative capacity of the research process (in the present), which is accomplished by creating narratives, metaphors, and social practices that might help backcasting the future into the actual experience of (all) the actors that compose the system. The core question for this pillar becomes: "How can we activate, elevate, and amplify the inner potential of the

system (e.g., strengths, assets, and values) for bringing into reality its ideal positive future?" Here, a measure of success is not the precision of estimates or the elegance of causal models but relates to the idea of *performativity*, which is defined as "the constitution of new worlds through their articulation" (Garud & Gehman, 2019, p. 680). In other words, the theoretical value of this pillar is how the system can activate the possibility of shaping a new social reality informed by a desired future. In the age of the Anthropocene, this pillar can provide organizational systems a perceptual and contextual frame, some presumptions of logic, a shared value-system, and a novel language to stimulate the path for becoming a life-enhancing and re-generating social force in the world (Cooperrider, 2021).

Pillar 5: Savoring. The final pillar involves facilitating a process of collective learning/ experimentation that helps the system experience the desired future as vividly as possible. That is, to savor the future in the present. In doing so, it is key for the researcher to work with the system not only to practice new behaviors and create new social structures that shape the new (and desired) reality, but to also help actors attend to, generate, maintain, or enhance the new 'real utopias' that start to emerge as the system bring the future into reality. The essence of this pillar is to co-explore, co-understand, and co-create concrete pathways that mobilize the diverse groups of actors to the co-construction of a desired future. Thus, the core question for this pillar becomes: "How are we co-appreciating, co-constructing, and co-savoring the future we want in the present?" Similar to early ODC work, this pillar aims to intentionally build capacity within organizations, but also expands the scope of capacity building to leverage the strengths of the system in a way that enables it to adapt and meet the challenges of today while simultaneously co-imagining and co-creating new and better futures for the entire global system of which we are all a part. Through such work, ODC can be a much-needed spark of hope and possibility in an otherwise overwhelming world.

Concluding Remarks

This article aims at contributing to the conversation of how to make ODC more relevant and impactful. Just as WWII sparked the development of bold innovations in the field, we believe that the Great Acceleration, within the Anthropocene era, can serve as a punctuated equilibrium moment to position ODC (again) as a revitalizing force in the world. The strengths and legacy-features of ODC can certainly serve as a firm foundation to address this challenge, but we need to add a systematic approach for prospective theorizing. AI, as a research method, was originally conceived to do exactly that. Thus, we invite ODC scholars and practitioners to enliven AI's original depth to bring into being new and better futures for humanity. This movement can significantly enhance the capacity of ODC to produce what we refer to as generative scholarship, where theory "should be judged not by its mirroring capacity, but by its overall anticipatory, expressive, and generative capacity" (Cooperrider, 2021, p. 14). In sum, we invite the field of ODC to revitalize its generative impact—and help create healthy, vibrant, and humane organizations and communities—by embracing prospective theorizing.

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