

HOW TO BREAK THE MOULD: RE-IMAGINING MULTIMODAL ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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HOW TO BREAK THE MOULD:

RE-IMAGINING MULTIMODAL ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT STUDIES

Abstract. In this essay, we take the burgeoning scholarship on *multimodal* approaches to the study of *organization and management* as our point of departure to explore substantial limitations hindering a *genuinely* multimodal understanding within our discipline. We problematize how existing *academic conventions* (a) limit our *research agenda* and thus the choice of relevant phenomena, scholarly topics, research questions, and empirical designs; (b) restrict the conceptual and empirical toolbox within the *research process*, so that researchers are only insufficiently able to explore and exploit opportunities afforded by multimodality; and (c) narrow down the channels for *scholarly communication*, including the distribution of findings and knowledge transfer. Subsequently, we outline three promising ‘shifts’ – i.e., towards research as *creative endeavor*, research as *encounter*, and research as *material practice* – that we believe may successfully pave the way to fully unleash the potential of multimodality in organization and management research.

Keywords. organization and management; multimodality; conventions; research agenda; research process; scholarly communication

INTRODUCTION

On a spring day in Italy, I drove to the famous furniture-making district in Perignano to conduct interviews with a high-end design company that had produced some contemporary pieces nowadays exhibited in international art museums such as the MOMA in New York. Sufficiently ambitious, but at the same time conscious of my limited understanding and repertoire given the focal research setting, I arrived at the company site to discuss the creative design process and the success behind their iconic objects. As I was meeting with the designers, I started to feel a certain ‘imperfection’, struggling to convert my in-situ experience into conventional academic thinking and terminology. Only gradually, however, did I realize that I was confronted with multiple issues. I could not wriggle out from the inability to develop representations of the gamut of experiences and interactions and translate them into scholarly concepts and schemata. As conversations unfolded, I was not able to assign a specific theoretical ‘label’ to the themes that popped up. Was that designer now talking about sense-making processes, or about knowledge sharing within the design team, or about identity issues? In addition, I had the feeling that any attempt at classifying the vivid lived experiences in conceptual terms was already circumscribing my observations. In other words, I felt restricted in my ability to conceptually frame what was going on in a way adequate to the subject matter. As my site visit continued, I realized that another challenge was that I could not fully comprehend and grasp the designer’s embodied knowledge and his aesthetic experiences; it seemed that my scientific language was insufficient to fully understand and appreciate his creative sensibility. During my write-up later that day, it soon became clear that the central methodological and epistemological problem was translating the rich process of artistic inspiration and idea generation I observed into a meaningful academic text. How could I research and theorize something so genuinely ephemeral and embodied with the verbal vocabulary available in our field of scholarly inquiry? And it was at this point that I also realized that I was confronted with an even more frustrating issue: how to communicate what I had seen and learned to my co-authors (and eventually our readers)? As they asked me about the setting, I realized that I was not really able to explain what had emerged from my conversations on the ground. Certainly, my research notes were not doing justice to the complexity of my visual impressions as well as the multiple layers of material and spatial perceptions during the experience. My researcher identity had been vacillating under a series of inabilities – the inabilities to see, to grasp, and to communicate all relevant issues and insights.

Our introductory vignette vividly illustrates several substantial limitations hampering the recently burgeoning multimodal scholarship in organization and management research (for overviews, see Bell et al., 2014; Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Höllerer et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2013). In our experience, these are common struggles affecting all aspects of research projects; alas, they are rarely discussed openly, since institutionalized conventions in academic research normalize scholarship as *writing*. The unfortunate outcome, we contend, and will unpack in the

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following, is that multimodality remains a (niche) sub-field of organization research when it should be *at the core of all engagement with organization(s)*.

We therefore wish to take this opportunity to *speak out* about the largely underexplored opportunities of the ‘multimodal turn’ in our domain of scholarly inquiry. We start by outlining the self-inflicted challenges that we cement by unreflectively reproducing limiting conventions; we then sketch a programmatic shift towards conceiving of organization research as genuinely multimodal.

PROBLEMATIZING CONVENTIONS IN SCHOLARLY INQUIRY

Multimodality is commonly understood as “the phenomenon that all communication integrates a range of meaning-making resources, that is images, words, sound, etc.” (Höllerer et al., 2019; 24) because “communicative situations (considered very broadly) [...] rely upon combinations of different ‘forms’ of communication to be effective” (Bateman et al., 2017; 7). Beyond such basic definition, precise understandings of multimodality vary across approaches (e.g., Hiippala, 2015; Ravelli et al., 2023). For our purposes, these finer distinctions are secondary, because we (a) see value in all approaches, depending on the specific research aims; and (b) focus on the basic argument that *any* organizational phenomenon is inherently multimodal, independent of the theoretical approach.

Since existing research (e.g., Cartel et al., 2018; Höllerer et al., 2018a; Islam et al., 2016; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011) strongly supports this basic premise, we contend that organizational scholarship is an inherently multimodal endeavor. However, while we observe a proliferation of conceptual and methodological approaches to multimodality (Boxenbaum et al., 2018; Höllerer et al., 2019), the multimodal turn seems to remain focused on phenomena and data, with few but notable calls for harnessing multimodality more broadly (e.g., Dane and

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3 Rockmann, 2021; Langley & Ravasi, 2019; LeBaron, 2017; Lehtonen & Putkonen, 2023;
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5 Pollock, 2022; Swedberg, 2016).

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7 We see one reason for this skewed engagement with multimodality in current academic
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9 conventions that are partly unsuitable for – or even detrimental to – multimodal work. Note that
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11 we do not claim that conventions *per se* are problematic. As Kelemen and Bansal (2002) argue,
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13 they are particularly important in diversified research fields such as management, since they
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15 provide clearly articulated practices and standards that offer a foundation for integration and
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17 legitimation. However, they also create limitations (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013; Daft and
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19 Lewin, 1990) and, when adhered to in unreflective and inflexible ways, prevent us from
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21 unleashing the full potential of multimodality. In the following, we elaborate on significant
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23 constraints created by three types of conventions.
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30 31 **Conventions limiting our research agenda**

32 33 *Why we need to envision organization research multimodally*

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35 The opening vignette expresses our discomfort with the inability to adequately ‘see’ the full
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37 relevance of multimodality in organizations. When we fail to grasp multimodal cues that are
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39 crucial for field actors, or when we disregard non-verbal traces of meaning in textual data, are
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41 we really studying our phenomena holistically, or are we artificially stunting our research to
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43 make it fit established ways of thinking?
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47 Previous work has shown that engaging with multimodality challenges the very way we
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49 ask questions, the conceptual constructs we use, and the scope of our research agendas (e.g.,
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51 Barry and Meisiek, 2010; Christiansen, 2018; Comi and Whyte, 2018; Davison and
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53 Giovannoni, 2023; Gümüşay et al., 2018; Höllerer et al., 2018b; Quattrone et al., 2021). As a
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55 twist of the proverb: If you have an assortment of hammers (i.e., ways of thinking in verbal
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57 terms), you will become very sophisticated in driving in different types of nails – but you will
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3 overlook activities that require completely different tools. Without acknowledging the full
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5 spectrum of modes – and their interactions – we miss opportunities for capturing elusive or tacit
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7 knowledge (Torald et al., 2018), acknowledging previously hidden or underexplored
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9 phenomena, and drawing from such resources for theory building. Against such backdrop: Can
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11 organization research that is unable to grasp the intricacies of multimodal reality offer adequate
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13 theories of organization(s)?
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17 We suggest that calls for phenomenon-based research (e.g., von Krogh et al., 2012)
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19 cannot be properly heeded without a genuinely multimodal perspective. Additionally, as Literat
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21 and colleagues (2017: 8) suggest, “multimodal scholarship has the potential to offer
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23 transformational political possibilities”, that is, support the push towards more ‘emancipatory’
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25 styles of theory-building (Cornelissen et al., 2021) that criticize theoretical categories and
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27 underlying assumptions, emphasize a different stance and involvement of researchers, and
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29 argue for viable alternatives.
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36 *What prevents us from envisioning research multimodally*
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38 The significant increase in publications (e.g., Hammersley, 2011) combined with tendencies to
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40 achieve commensurability with existing knowledge impedes the development of novel avenues
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42 for organization research, creating obstacles for innovative perspectives that do not
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44 immediately resonate with established disciplinary agendas. Institutionalized conventions
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46 incentivize scholars to perceive phenomena through the ‘lenses’ that they were socialized into.
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48 This leads to a repetitive trend in confirming what was already discussed in previous studies:
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50 the so called ‘*footnote-on-footnote*’ effect (Daft and Lewin, 1990). Additionally, pressures to
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52 compete on the job market disincentivize risk-taking. Legitimacy requirements prompt us to
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54 signal adherence to our communities’ standards, creating isomorphic tendencies (e.g.,
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DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in the choice of topics and perspectives across the collective research agenda.

Since it is easier to validate and expand knowledge that has come to be generally agreed on rather than ‘change the conversation’ (Healey et al., 2023), scholars tend to ‘translate’ their multimodal impressions into verbal form to integrate them into theories based on a verbal understanding of organizations and management. This reduces multimodality to an ‘add-on’ and a ‘steppingstone’ for verbal theorizing, rather than a starting point for radically different understandings of organization(s). The verbal remains the ‘baseline’, and other modes are only valuable insofar as they can eventually be verbalized. Since organizational realities are inherently multimodal, the temptation to bracket what cannot be verbalized becomes a substantial impediment for the creation of new conceptual and analytical insights, thus closing opportunities for theory that is less detached from the phenomena experienced by actors in the field and more relevant to organizational practice.

Conventions limiting the research process

Why we need to conduct organization research multimodally

The opening vignette also argues that we need multimodal approaches to better grasp, analyze, and theorize our observations. Throughout our engagement with multimodality, we always felt that it should be about more than just data – a way of thinking, of engaging with the social and organizational world. As long as we keep translating or ‘resemiotizing’ (Iedema, 2003) multimodal realities during the step from empirical observation to analysis and theory development, we impoverish our insights. Why do we acknowledge that actors in the field experience and manage the world multimodally, but still unduly restrict our own research designs?

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Recent calls to learn from the realm of arts (e.g., Bagnoli, 2009; Linstead, 2018) emphasize how multimodality provides unexpected revelations on the research setting, particularly on affect and aesthetics. This enables us to identify additional features of organizations and organizing. But more conventional questions can also benefit from multimodal perspectives. Barker and Jewitt (2022) stress the importance of tactile cues in communication and develop an analytical strategy for grasping experiences of touch across the production process. In this way, multimodality can further deepen theoretical accounts of the role of material objects (see also Shortt and Izak, 2020) and technology (see also Leonardi and Barley, 2008). Even the analysis of mostly verbal data can benefit from visualizations to support interpretations of empirical findings (e.g., Langley and Ravasi, 2019). Accordingly, we strongly suggest complementing research *on* multimodality with research *through* multimodality.

What prevents us from conducting research multimodally

Conventions of data collection and analysis promote validated techniques, templates and heuristic devices. They encourage structure and routines (Kelemen and Bansal, 2002), which become integrative to the research process. One problem is that most research relies on the ability to store data for repeated access. Some phenomena are ephemeral, such as smell and touch; their multimodality eludes common storage techniques such as field notes and audio-recordings (but see Riach and Warren, 2015). Additionally, the increasing regulation of ethical approvals has also created more rigid procedures, which are often experienced as a bureaucratic hurdle (Truman, 2003) and are not (yet) geared towards the collection of ephemeral traces of organizational life, which cannot always be easily foreseen.

These conventions exist in some opposition to genuinely multimodal organization research. While different forms of ethnography (e.g., LeBaron et al., 2018; Pink, 2007) have become very adept at capturing multimodality, they usually require eventual verbalization –

which means that the particularities of non-verbal modes are lost at some point (but see Bezemer and Mavers, 2011). Additionally, ‘ways of knowing’ that cannot be expressed in written words are not yet legitimate enough to be featured in the methodology sections of our publications, excluding rich traditions of non-verbal knowledge (e.g., Mills & Dooley, 2019). Despite common usage of sketches, drawings, and physical arrangements to support interpretation (e.g., Höllerer et al., 2019; Ravasi, 2017), existing conventions are woefully insufficient for the generation of theory that cannot ultimately be verbalized. Even visual models need to be extensively discussed in verbal form, which often reduces them to boxes and arrows that barely add value beyond the written word.

Conventions limiting the communication of research

Why we need to disseminate organization research multimodally

A third frustration expressed in the opening vignette concerns our inability to appropriately express multimodal insights to others. After all, even if we succeed in making our research agendas and processes more multimodal, what good will that do if we cannot communicate the multimodal aspects of our emerging knowledge to audiences?

Goldberg (2010: 379), who developed multimodal and multimedia strategies to express his findings on Hurricane Katrina, contents that “what is said and how [...] began very quickly to dictate a different way of thinking about the subject matter, about the possibilities of representation, implication, intimation and conclusion”. Multimodal genres of communication are not only different ways of providing the same content; they enable alternative forms of argument characterized by a different logic, innovative forms of mobilizing and articulating evidence, and, more generally, ways of integrating structure, style, and content in designs that may be more appropriate for multimodal insights. In other words, they are a substantial resource for ‘writing differently’ (e.g., Gilmore et al., 2019; Grey and Sinclair, 2006).

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3 In discussing Goldberg’s work, Jakubowicz and van Leeuwen (2010) therefore highlight
4 how multimodality provides opportunities to (a) engage audiences more interactively; (b) mix
5 emotion and creativity with the standards of academic texts; (c) allow for combinations of
6 scientific argument and activist vision; and (d) support abstract arguments with more extensive
7 and detailed documentary evidence. This, we suggest, may also enhance ways of learning from
8 our work, as multimodal resources have repeatedly been shown to improve knowledge transfer
9 in the classroom (e.g., O’Doherty, 2020; Shams and Seitz, 2008).

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21 *What prevents us from disseminating research multimodally*

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23 Kelemen and Bansal (2002: 99) acknowledge that conventions have implications for “the ways
24 in which the research is set up, carried out and written up”. Conventions are palpable in writing
25 standards that provide clues for thinking and elaborating research. Material restrictions of
26 publishing (e.g., article formats, word limits, forms of integrating non-verbal content) have
27 repercussions for the types of knowledge that can be included, and the forms of analysis that
28 can be verbally explained. This tends to perpetuate established positions and favors conformity
29 and bite-size, incremental, ‘next-step’ research. It is easy to forget that the ‘scientific article’ is
30 itself a social construction (Cornelissen et al., 2021) that emerged under specific historical
31 circumstances and was – during its infancy – far from being unanimously celebrated (Csiszar,
32 2018).

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Multimodal formats beyond the combination of written text and abstract figures are not
currently considered to be ‘proper’ academic knowledge dissemination and are often denied the
academic accolades that come with top-tier journal publications (but see Dane and Rockman,
2021; Pollock 2022). There are as yet no established criteria for reviewing the quality of
multimodal publications, and the application of standard criteria reduces the degree of novelty.
Accordingly, we cannot fully avoid “trying to write like everyone else”, which “restrict[s] the

range of our inquiries and speculations” (Van Maanen, 1995: 139). Practical problems exist in the form of copyright issues for the reproduction of multimodal material, or the restrictive character of established citation rules. How, for instance, can we adequately ‘cite’ pictures or video displayed in previous academic publications – or an interactive module that allows readers to access and browse research findings through different paths?

SHIFTING ORGANIZATION RESEARCH TOWARDS MULTIMODALITY

Up to this point, our essay followed the very conventions we criticized. One drawback is that we had to illustrate a genuinely multimodal set of concerns (envisioning, conducting, and disseminating research) with a monomodal (i.e., written) vignette. What if we introduced these concerns in a different way?

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

We collaborated with a visual artist to retain some multimodality in the introductory vignette. After quite some conversation and discussion, the artist came up with Figure 1. While this variant clearly lacks the precision and narrative consistency of the verbal one (see also Meyer et al., 2018), it reveals a messier, in certain ways more accurate, reconstruction of the first author’s experience in situ. The guiding principle is the near impossibility of turning creative multimodal moments (hatching from eggs, manifesting as swirls, materializing in design objects) into written ‘book knowledge’. This exercise suggested a series of ‘shifts’ in conceiving of organization research that can pave the way for multimodality as a constitutive principle rather than a stream of research, with the potential to offer new angles and initiate new conversational directions (Healey et al., 2023). These shifts also support moving our discipline towards increased *multimodal literacy* (e.g., van Leeuwen, 2017) and an appreciation of

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3 ‘strong’ multimodality’ (Zilber, 2018), that is, understanding modes as equally important and
4 inherently entangled in most aspects of organizational realities. Table 1 summarizes the
5 arguments which are elaborated below.
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17 **Shift #1: Organization Research as Creative Endeavor**

18 A first shift in thinking involves understanding organization research as an inherently creative
19 endeavor, or project, aimed at developing “new ways of showing and knowing” (LeBaron,
20 2017: 1), prompting scholars to re-examine their self-understandings, voice, and role in
21 processes of knowledge production. It bears resemblance to what Bell and Willmott (2020)
22 describe as ‘research-as-craft’, a way of knowledge production based on embodied and
23 imaginative knowing with openings towards politics and ethics. Such focus on expanding –
24 rather than refining or confirming – knowledge can harness the complexities of phenomena,
25 thereby positioning the multimodality of the social world front and center (e.g., Jakubowicz and
26 van Leeuwen, 2010). It also emphasizes multimodal creativity in forms and content of
27 theorizing (e.g., Langley & Ravasi, 2019; Swedberg, 2016), paving the way for more inclusive
28 and emancipatory theories (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2021).
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44 The multimodal vignette is an attempt to frame the struggles outlined in the introduction
45 multimodally, thereby capturing the proposed shift to creative engagement. Such shift
46 challenges limitations in *envisioning* research multimodally, as it moves the focus from
47 established schemata to unexpected knowledge potentials inherent in multimodal research
48 settings. By training our gaze on the ‘unspeakable’, we acknowledge potentially important
49 aspects of organizational reality outside of established expertise. It further legitimates
50 overcoming limitations in *conducting* research multimodally by demanding innovative
51 methodologies suitable for studying hitherto unacknowledged traces of organizational life and
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3 motivating the use of multimodal assemblages (e.g. mind maps, sketches, drawings, recordings
4 of research meetings, etc.) for theory crafting. Finally, it pushes against limitations in
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6 *disseminating* research multimodally, since idea(l)s of creativity and craft are antithetical to an
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8 understanding of organization research as purely “a science of verbal reports” (Daft and Lewin,
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10 1990: 3).
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17 **Shift #2: Organization Research as Encounters**

18 The second shift entails bringing researchers closer to others’ multimodal expertise. Our own
19 collaborative research (AUTHOR’S REFERENCE) has shown that the production of artistic
20 work during the research process may allow informants to ‘act back’ on the artist’s drawings,
21 exploring whether they feel their lived experiences are authentically represented. Thinking of
22 research as encounters also foregrounds questions of voice and agency. Collaborative designs
23 (e.g., Lehtonen, 2020; Lingard et al., 2015; Skjælaaen et al., 2020; van der Vaart et al., 2018)
24 bring the multimodal expertise of informants at eye level with academic accounts. This
25 promises to expand the multimodal toolbox for evoking, eliciting, and engaging meanings,
26 especially regarding more ephemeral modes such as touch (e.g., Barker and Jewitt, 2022) and
27 smell (e.g., Riach and Warren, 2015; Gümüşay et al., 2018). Emphasizing encounters also
28 facilitates appreciative engagement with multimodal perspectives from the Global South
29 (Alcadipani & Islam, 2017; Barros, 2018; Barros et al., 2024) and indigenous multimodal
30 knowledges (Mills & Dooley, 2019).
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48 Our revised vignette is a product of an encounter between researchers and artist that
49 included both serendipity and mutual appreciation. Such encounters help overcome limitations
50 in *envisioning* research multimodally by allowing us to shift our gaze and interrogate our own
51 expertise in relation to alternative ones. They also mitigate limitations in *conducting* research
52 multimodally by foregrounding alternative epistemologies and methodologies. Our analytical
53 toolbox may benefit substantially from deeper and more diversified understandings of how the
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multimodal world is experienced and made sense of. Research-as-encounter further lifts limitations in *disseminating* research multimodally. While our expertise is in writing, artists, craftspeople, and other collaborators can inspire us to communicate our insights in multimodal forms that are more adequate for expressing different knowledges, and for reaching more diverse audiences.

Shift #3: Organization Research as Material Practice

The final shift suggests a stronger acknowledgement of research as embodied practice that encounters, manipulates, and creates artifacts of various materialities (from physical objects to virtual interfaces). Traditions that stress the prevalence of artifacts as pillars of the social world (e.g., Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2013; Nicolini et al., 2012; Miller, 2005) and research suggest multimodality as an inherent aspect of organization research. This highlights the professional gaze (Styhre, 2011) as both material and cultural technique and understands scholarly publications as artifacts, which legitimates new multimodal genres such as film (e.g., Miko-Schefzig et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2018) or graphical formats (e.g., Lehtonen & Putkonen, 2023; Schiemer et al., 2021). Such shift aligns with existing agendas to free academic knowledge production from mainstream conventions (Gilmore et al., 2019; Pullen, 2018).

Our multimodal vignette is itself an artefact, but it also references other artifacts (such as sofas, books, and eggs). It illustrates a push against limitations in *envisioning* research multimodally by instantiating our core concern as an amalgam of words and pictures. It also foregrounds practices of materializing research problems in multimodal form. Further, a focus on material practices challenges limitations in *conducting* research multimodally. If the creation and manipulation of artifacts is at the core of methodologies, we need to better account for the multimodal affordances of the tools (analog and digital) we use for sorting, coding, and interpreting data, including our own sensory apparatuses. Finally, such shift expands the set of genres for *disseminating* research multimodally, putting the spotlight on ways of presenting

research in an evocative (and not just informative) way and of facilitating audiences' empathetic engagement (Nair et al., 2018).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The world of organizations and management is inherently multimodal; alas, most of our scholarly engagement with it is not. This alone should make us wonder. The past two decades have seen a gradual rise of visuality and multimodality in our discipline. This is commendable and an important step forward. However, the multimodal turn – so we fear – is at risk of halting halfway through. Multimodality must not remain something we study, external to our own discipline; instead, it needs to inform studying and publishing as well. In other words, the ways in which we *envision*, *conduct*, and *disseminate* our research need to become inherently multimodal. The study of multimodality in organizations needs to become a multimodal study of organizations.

While there is some laudable progress in this direction, we fear that efforts remain somewhat isolated, focusing on individual practices and losing the bigger picture. This leads to 'band aid' and 'patchwork' solutions that treat the symptoms more than the overarching malaise. To be clear, this requires a political as well as a scholarly program. On the scholarly side, we need to further develop our multimodal literacy as individuals and as a discipline to fully account for and utilize the multimodal resources and affordances at our disposal. On the political side, we need to re-think our taken-for-granted conventions, rules, and infrastructures in ways that support, rather than limit, opportunities for unleashing the potential of multimodality. This includes technical, administrative, and legal infrastructures, specifically tools for storing and analyzing visual material, ways of citing visual data, and ethical guidelines that protect research subjects but account for the instability, uncertainty and elusiveness that characterize multimodal research.

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Such program necessitates substantial shifts in how we conceive of organization research. Our suggestions are hardly exhaustive, and additional efforts are probably necessary. The good news is that all suggestions are rooted in lively ongoing conversations. If joined together and brought into a constructive dialog with established conventions, they may transform our discipline in yet unimagined ways.

For Peer Review

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FIGURES AND IMAGES

Figure 1: A Multimodal Version of the Introductory Vignette



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Table 1: Overview of Shifts and Their Relevance for the Three Key Limitations

	<i>Envisioning</i>	<i>Conducting</i>	<i>Disseminating</i>
<i>Shift #1: Creative Endeavor</i>	Expands the gaze to unexpected multimodal realities.	Supports multimodal methodologies and creativity in theory crafting.	Encourages creative and multimodal forms of communicating insights.
<i>Shift #2: Encounter</i>	Taps into alternative gazes and perspectives on multimodality.	Foregrounds multimodal thinking in alternative forms of expertise.	Offers additional multimodal communication skills
<i>Shift #3: Material Practice</i>	Emphasizes multimodal aspects of engaging with phenomena.	Reveals multimodal affordances of analytical tools and practices.	Normalizes multimodal publication genres.