The lens of theory: Seeing better or differently?

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Abstract

Purpose: This article explicates the notion of using a "theoretical lens" to interpret research data, which has grown increasingly common in recent decades, often without a second thought about the implications of use of a mere metaphor in the pursuit of truth. Poets may not question that metaphors reveal truths, but should social scientists accept that?

Design/methodology/approach: It looks first at what theory means, then – and in greater detail – what the metaphor of a lens entails.

Findings: Drawing on the base analogy in optics, it identifies four mechanisms through which theory might act as a lens – adjustment, correction, distortion, and augmentation-suppression, with examples based on theories of business strategy and organisation studies.

Originality: It argues that if some theories try to help us see better, others push us to see differently, with implications for the practice and teaching of research methods.

Research implications: These four mechanisms involve two different ways of seeing – better and differently. With adjustment and correction see better what is, or perhaps what was. With distortion and especially augmentation-suppression, we see differently, which helps up imagine what might be, or what we might have overlooked. They help us escape narrow silos of thinking. Researchers and students alike need to be aware of all four lens of theory and be ready to experiment.

Article type: Short Note on Methods

Keywords: lens, theory, social science research, metaphor, truth

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Introduction

Discussions of research methods – in business and management and many other disciplines – often start or end with a statement about theory. Journal articles are frequently accepted or rejected based on their theoretical contributions. Often – and increasingly so – scholars employ a particular metaphor to discuss it: that "theory" is a "lens".

Google Scholar lists more than 80,000 examples of work using the expression "theoretical lens", many of them in the title; more than 4,000 use a near equivalent, "philosophical lens". One of the articles applies the "Hospitality Metaphor" (explicitly a metaphor) as a "theoretical lens" (implicitly a metaphor) to explain something else (adoption of information technology). In doing so, it promises a "clear understanding" of a complex process (Saccol & Reinhard, 2006). There may be nothing wrong with this analysis. But let's remember that metaphors promise only similarities, and not more. Using one metaphor to explain how another metaphor works begs questions, including one about how the lens itself affects perception of the original object of interest.

Niederman and March (2019) illustrate how scientific usage of the term "theoretical lens" has exploded in the past three decades, discussing how seldom authors who use the term explain what they mean by it. While their paper focuses on information systems (and let's remember that "focus" is part of the "lens" metaphor), it takes a broad view (an aspect of the "lens" metaphor) using journals across a range of disciplines. It finds no clear understanding of the term. Niederman and March (2019, p. 16) argue that the "lack of clarity interferes with the readers' ability to discern with clarity what the authors' intentions are in choosing to use the term". "Clarity", too, is surely a dimension of the "lens" metaphor.

Building on the Niederman and March empirical analysis, this paper takes an interpretive approach to making sense of this confusion, how it arises, and its implications for research and researchers. Let's look first at the question of theory itself, how it seems to be used, and why it is often a puzzle to novice researchers and perhaps experienced old hands as well. We'll then turn to the idea of the lens, what lenses do, optically, and from there find our way into the metaphor, before making some observations (a metaphor involving a lens, of the eye and of any optics we add to it) about its implications for research. Considering the various ways that the lens metaphor functions can help researchers and students alike escape the trap of narrow approaches to claims we make for truth.

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The puzzle of 'theory'

A student asks, "What do you mean by theory?" It is a good question, one that many lecturers seem to stumble over as the lay out the objectives of the research methods they are trying to teach. When the question comes from a mature student, say, someone studying for an MBA after years gaining practical knowledge, the challenge takes on another dimension: What *use* is it?

Dennis Tourish (2020, p. 99) sparked considerable controversy with an article protesting about the poor state of management research that ignores serious issues facing society in favour of producing "convoluted, pretentious and long-winded prose to at least create the illusion of 'theory development.'" Jean Bartunek responded with a combination of delight and dismay. Yes, management research should focus on real-world problems. But hadn't Tourish slipped in a bunch of theory, in a convoluted, pretentious way, when he used the word "performative" three times without explanation? And this, she wondered: "Is theory only supposed to be instrumental and utilitarian? Or can it be much more?" (Bartunek, 2020, p. 223).[1]

Their contretemps is one of a stream of expressions of puzzlements that scholars have expressed (e.g., Biggart, 2016; Cornelissen, Höllerer, & Seidl, 2021; Grimmel & Hellmann, 2019; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995) as they seek a way to climb out from Plato's cave, from ignorance into the light, with changes in the perception of what is real. But these discussions, fascinating as they are, fail to end a student's confusion over the differences (if any) we see between "concepts", "constructs", "frameworks", "models", "logics", how we "unpack" things with them, and – most importantly – what "theory" itself is. How do these ideas help us develop an *argument* that will explain, illustrate or illuminate a problem? How do they help us predict what will happen next, or at least anticipate what might?

The philosopher Stephen Toulmin (2003) laid out the basic three elements of any argument: the grounds, the warrant and the claim. The grounds are the evidence, facts, data. To build a strong argument, we must make every effort to identify the grounds, but we know from experience it will probably be incomplete and flawed. The claim is the conclusion we present, the clause that follows "therefore". The warrant is the tricky part, the soft connective tissue between grounds-evidence-facts-data and claim. Sometimes it is logic. At other times, we use hypothesis as the warrant of a more tentative claim. We might then test it to create new grounds for the next argument. Sometimes it is a natural, socially constructed, or moral law, a precedent, a theory, even. One way to think of an argument is as a syllogism: *If this, and this*

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(and this and this), then that really must, probably, well, possibly, be the case. We might need several types of connective tissue to make the pieces of an argument hold together.

Might we be better off, then, worrying less about theoretical contributions, or even theory, and think instead in terms of "warrants"? Bartunek's appeal for "much more" in management research as well as usefulness can be accommodated in the broader sweep of presenting arguments and using a variety of ways to get there. Tourish might agree.

The 'lens' problem

Explication of the "lens" metaphor, now increasingly commonplace in the discourse of research, involves a further set of steps, especially now that it has wormed its way into the training of new scholars. In discussing a solution to problems of reliability and validity, a popular business research methods textbook recommends that researchers stand back and analyse "through a more objective, theoretical lens". Elsewhere in that book students are urged to consider their research questions through a "philosophical lens" (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012, pp. 352, 161).[2] A book on research in history states that, "As a lens", particular methods "force the scholar to expand their vision". "Time," it says, "is the lens through which historians construct their objects of inquiry" (Gunn & Faire, 2016, pp. 76, 260-261). A law textbook states that in adopting a different lens, "empirical data took on a different meaning" turning "failures" into "success stories" (Crawford & Carruthers, 2017, p. 291). But consider this: What is a lens, and how does it relate to what we mean when we use it metaphorically to discuss the approach to research?

In optics, the term lens has a specific meaning, it is "a piece of transparent material (such as glass) that has two opposite regular surfaces either both curved or one curved and the other plane and that is used either singly or combined in an optical instrument for forming an image by focusing rays of light" (Merriam-Webster dictionary[3]). The lens of the eye itself bends the light coming into pupil so it can hit the retina and transmit the data to the brain to decipher into an image of the object in view. It inverts the image, and the brain then turns it back to something pretty much like the object itself. That is, the lens *adjusts* the data the eye receives to fit the limitations of the eyes' receptors.

When most people get to the age of about 40, however, the lens of the eye begins to deteriorate, especially when looking at objects close to us. So, we add another, external lens to bend the light so that it can be bent again by eye and still come up with the image – reading glasses. As the deterioration continues and begins to affect other distances we move to

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bifocals, then varifocal lens. A similar approach is used for cases of astigmatism. That is, the lens second, external lens reshapes the data to *correct* a mistake with the observer's own ability to perceive. Eyeglasses or contact lenses give us a picture truer to reality than what the eye on its own can produce.

We use other types of lenses as well. The telescope and the telephoto lens on a camera use a combination of lenses to make distant objects appear to be close. It reduces the size of the frame in relation to the object and shortens the depth of field so we can see details we might miss with the "naked" eye. The wide-angle lens does the opposite. It broadens the frame and lengthens the depth of field so we can see better the context of the object in view. Both types share a common characteristic: They *distort* the data they receive so that we can perceive some aspect of it – detail or context – the eye on its own cannot.

There is another type of lens, however, derived from another definition of lens: "a piece of glass or plastic used (as in safety goggles or sunglasses) to protect the eye" (Merriam-Webster, again). In optics, these are called filters and are often used in combination with lenses. The ultraviolet and blue filters protect the eye from damage of short wave-length light. But they also allow us to see with greater definition, for example, reducing haze and sharpening the contrast at the edges of one cloud against another in an otherwise bright sky. Without the filter, the merely *adjusted* or *corrected* image would leave the cloud only vaguely defined against the sky. Filters operate by reducing the data received, allowing us to see something that – in one definition of truth – is not really there. Filters *augment* some aspects of the image by *suppressing* others.

To summarise, lenses affect our perception through four distinct mechanisms: adjustment, correction, distortion, and augmentation-suppression. While each is subject to error and even introduces it, they each provide distinctive paths in the search for truth.

Metaphorical lenses of theory

Using this perspective (another component of the "lens" metaphor), let us consider the mechanisms through which philosophies, hypotheses, concepts, constructs, law, models, frameworks, or warrants more generally guide the search for some version of truth as we apply theory to research. To do so, we'll examine how each physical mechanism might be applied in the metaphorical sense of guiding research. What assumptions does each involve? What challenges does each present to the pursuit of knowledge?

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Adjustments

The human eye is the outcome of an evolutionary process of a physical instrument of several distinct pieces that translate incoming light and focus it on light sensors so the brain can do its work of interpretation. Let's leave aside the old philosophy chestnut of how we know that. There does appear to be a consensus that the relationship of object to image is reliable, in that a lot of people measure the same things independently of each other. The outcome is an image that seems to look a lot like the physical object observed.

A lens made of theory would adjust things in this way. We have experience of the world and experience of theories, models, concepts, etc., that seem to help us explain, predict or make sense of what we see. Profit is the difference between revenue and cost. Organising creates efficiency and the boss knows best. Such theories are taken for granted, not in need of explanation, adhering to what philosophers call the coherence theory of truth. They work, well enough. We can test them repeatedly, measure their statistical significance, and come up with conclusions that are reliable. But not perfect. We then wonder about whether a better sampling approach might increase the significance. We posit randomness (another theory) to compensate for the errors. But the results are good enough. Most of the time.

Corrections

Eyeglasses help us offset the effects of an eye that isn't quite as perfect an instrument as those that other people seem to enjoy. Their lenses correct the view, so the brain can calculate something that corresponds more nearly to what other people see: the correspondence theory of truth. Correspondence facilitates meaningful conversation.

The equivalent in a theoretical lens is something that we add to our common-sense theories that helps us make better predictions. An example is perhaps worthwhile. In the early decades of 20th century, the finance department of the DuPont company in Delaware came up with a handy tool – they deduced a theory – that explained how measurements of operations, like the size of inventories and unit production levels, could be transmogrified into return on equity (Dale, Greenwood, & Greenwood, 1980; Johnson & Kaplan, 1991). It seemed perfect, and many other companies implemented it, too. Business schools taught it, and in so doing gave a strong push to the discipline of management accounting. A complementary theory emerged at about the same time, Frederick Taylor's famous scientific management, which showed how organisation design and processes create efficiency through reducing the craft and increasing the mechanisation of human labour (Taylor, 1915).

But these approaches weren't all that good at making predictions. Something was wrong with the lens. In the DuPont case, if you add another lens, the time value of money (Fisher, 1907), and then another, time it takes for decisions to translate into actions (Checkland, 1981), you get a much better result. Predictions become much more accurate. Management accounting surges again, but so too does another large set of theories: systems thinking. But by failing to consider the effects of rival firms soon it needed another correction. Competitive strategy is born (Porter, 1980). Taylor's case was undermined by looking with a different lens at what happened in practice, rather than his theory.

Distortions

Telephoto and wide-angle lenses bend the light in ways that reduce the correspondence of the image to object observed. They distort the image, but in ways that are useful, provided that the observer accepts that correspondence has been lost.

A theoretical lens can distort our view of the world too. By zooming in on a business process we can see detail that was hidden from the normal, common-sense understanding. The first step in building the DuPont Analysis was like a telephoto process. It identified precisely which levers the business needed to pull to get inventory turned into dividends to shareholders. Having achieved that, DuPont zoomed back to a normal view and let the machine make money. When the machine didn't make as much money as predicted, companies zoomed back in to diagnose the problem and added the corrective lenses. The process focuses on the near-context by ignoring the not-so-near. In organisation studies, the predictions of Taylorism broke down as well, leading scholars to work with practitioners to find out why. Though there is some doubt now about it (Bruce & Nyland, 2011; Levitt & List, 2009), the famous "Hawthorne" studies of manufacturing zoomed in on workers themselves and claimed that managerial attention paid as big a role as designing work processes modelled on machine design (Mayo, 1930). Humanistic management comes to the fore, at least in legend. (For a worked example of distortion, see Box 1.)

---------- Insert Box 1 about here ----------

We see the equivalent of wide-angle lenses in theories about resource dependency (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and the effects of institutional constraints and enablers (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). An extreme version are theories involved in the practice of scenario planning (Schwartz, 1991; van der Heijden, 1997). We imagine futures, several of them, with different consequences for the business environment, futures we can imagine but which we doubt will

come true. We imagine our business operating in those hostile and benign settings and see whether the path forward, testing for resilience again adversity, rather the predicting outcome. We assess potential risks, rather than trying the calculate the reward. In organisation studies, we can think of Geert Hofstede's pioneering work on socio-cultural influences on work performance as taking a wide-angle approach. Deeply embedded cultural norms and practices can override the efforts of management to spread corporate culture through the organisation (Hofstede, 1980). If we squint, we can see theories of strategy blurring into those of organisation design and organisational behaviour.

The value of theoretical lenses that distort comes, therefore, not from the correspondence with the perceived world, but instead from seeing what the theoretical equivalent of the naked eye cannot see. These theories help us to imagine a truth that might be, something we have overlooked or undervalued, not merely to see what is – or is apparent.

Augmentation and suppression

Adjustments, corrections and distortions all involve bending the light. Lenses that filter use quite a different mechanism, one that consciously strips some of the light away, light that blocks out what is happening with other wavelengths. In doing so, the filter redirects our attention. It changes the perception of the object observed. Insofar as we then interpret perceptions, rather than the thing itself, it changes the thing we see.

Theories can do something similar. Let's return to the DuPont and Taylor cases and the history of their progress into the complex understanding we now have of how businesses "really" work – that is, at the intersection of strategy and organisation. The wide-angle view of resource dependency or institutional constraints on human agency helped businesspeople understand why their decisions didn't always work. If we then strip out agency entirely and posit a world in which actions are entirely determined by context, we come up with a bleak picture. We don't wish to accept it, but it warns us against hubris and instructs us in humility. If the resource base determines profitability, then the CEO may not make much of a difference. Any old fool can run the business. Or better put, the business can run itself. Maybe he doesn't deserve to be paid so much. If institutional forces predominate, our dominance within the industry could collapse with, say, a change of regime. Any old fool could run us out of business.

Such warnings are worthwhile for setting internal expectations of risk and vulnerability, even if their assumption of environmental determinism is false. Even if we decide to stick to

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the less extreme theoretical assumption – one that says that human agency is possible – warnings that it need not be possible can lead us to new theory. Call it managerial discretion (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Williamson, 1963), which can help us see the circumstances in which agency of the CEO might indeed make a difference, and those when it might not.

The problem of truth, the value of argument

Honest research – research that doesn't set out to manipulate facts for some sort of personal gain – is a pursuit of truth. But truth is itself a contested concept. Are we seeking an understanding, a mental picture, that corresponds to what exists in the real world, outside? Are we instead seeking coherence, an understanding that fits with all the other things we know? Or is "truth" a plural noun, that is, are there several, even many equally valid truths about the phenomenon we see? These three varieties vastly understate the ways in which we understand what is true.

In the practical world of business, there often is not the time or the interest in pondering the implications of such a debate over metaphysics and epistemology. What practitioners want is a theory that works – a lens that helps them see something they can use. Businesspeople are often – unknowingly – pragmatists. William James (1907/1955) asked us to consider not Truth but what he called "true beliefs". A belief is true if it is not contradicted by subsequent events. We only know the truth after a long time, that is, long after we have had to decide. Seeing may mean believing, but belief is not (yet) truth. Each decision is thus best thought of as an experiment.

If so, then research aims to reduce the level of doubt, letting the experiment bring us closer to point when belief might be considered true, or more nearly so. To do that, researchers build arguments, from evidence (grounds) linked by theories, concepts, logics, etc. (warrants) to the claims. Claims are, however, always tentative, awaiting a new argument that shows them to be false (Popper, 1935/2002), when we look again at the quality of the evidence and the correspondence, coherence, or pluralism of the theory.

Experiencing the lens

For a long time in my own research, and in my reading of the research of others, I viewed theory through only two of its lens mechanisms discussed here: adjustment and correction. Basic theory adjusted the data that came to my view, giving them a shape that the apparatus of my brain could process into sense. Subjected to verification (through replicability) and

validation (peer review), that was as close to truth as it could be, I thought. Scepticism arose as I grew less confident in how well my internal processes of sensemaking were. (Waning powers of analysis, growing doubt about the quality of knowledge that adjustment and correction afforded, both?) I sought stronger theoretical justification before I was willing to assign the term "truth" to what I had seen.

With scepticism came recognition that there could be value in distortion. The "telephoto" aspects of theory helped to see things that were hiding in plain sight. The "wide angle" aspect helped to make connections to other parts of the system in which the object participated. Yes, the image was imperfect – and intentionally so. But if I recognised that intent, I could probably compensate for it. I could mentally recalibrate the data into an interpretation that added to understanding and gave a stronger link to some underlying truth, as well as seeing the separate truths in the foreshortened or distanced versions of the object.

---------- Insert Box 2 about here ----------

But the greatest sense of enjoyment arose when – for individual projects, on smaller, less obvious phenomena – I started to apply theoretical filters to those theoretical lenses I already possessed. I'd take a theory from one field – for example, aesthetics – and apply it to data from another seemingly unrelated field – the work of boards of directors – and then shut out the others. (For elaboration, see Box 2.) Or philosophies of state-building and political order applied to shareholder relations. I had already processed the data through normal corporate governance lenses of adjustment, correction and distortion – agency, stakeholder and stewardship theories. Now I deliberately suppressed the claims I had previously made, which augmented data I had previously passed over. Then, sometimes, a new image would appear, an interpretation I hadn't noticed before, or had noticed but hadn't processed into sense. The object then revealed its definition from other aspects of the field with which it blurred when viewed only through normal, and normalising, lenses. The outcome? New insights, but not necessarily capital-letter Truth.

Implications

What does this analysis of the roles that theory plays teach us about our practice, as researchers but also as teachers of management studies and research methods? First, it helps us to understand how central theories are to research: We come to research with embedded ideas about how the world works, metaphorically, the native lens of the eye. Those theories

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become heuristics, and we need to be aware of the biases that accompany them – and remember every so often to question them. ("Every so often" can also mean "always".)

Second, the four mechanisms through which theory works come with two different kinds of effect. Adjustments and corrections let us see better, which usually means that we check (some of) our biases at the door in the pursuit of a truth that corresponds with the world we see. They help us see what is, or perhaps in a constantly changing world, what was. Distortions and augmentation-suppression demand that we see differently, experience things we can't see even with the corrective lenses. They help us imagine what might be. With distortions, we need to remember to make mental recalibrations as we seek to return to correspondence-truth. But augmentation-suppression makes us see differently in more profound ways. We enter an augmented reality, one that reminds us of the pluralism of truths. Such ventures are infrequent, perhaps, but sobering. They provide humbling examples of how fragile our favourite, deeply embedded theories can be.

Remembering to attempt to see better most of the time and differently some of the time will help us to stay humble in the pursuit of truth. It will also help us stay humble when students get confused about how to use theory as they identify the grounds, select the warrants that allow them to make their claim. Seeing the various roles that theory can play can help us all to build better arguments.

Towards (tentative) conclusions

Theories used for the purposes of adjustment and correction strive to help us see better. They posit a truth, out there, knowable if not yet known. If we see what we think we see, then we adjust our perceptions to what we think we ought to be seeing, validating, and seeking replication. The resulting truth both corresponds to what's out there and coheres with what we have held to be true.

Doubt creeps in, however, as the facts don't always line up. Mere adjustment doesn't work. We correct theory, adding "if" clauses to the syllogism, elaborating the argument, narrowing the claim. We engage in this using a positivist approach, in the spirit of Auguste Comte (1858), though often these days by making claims of certainty in the space he kept open for doubt.

Theory that intentionally distorts our view demands that we see and then think differently. As long as we don't fool ourselves into believing that the resulting image corresponds to the one Truth, theories that distort encourage us to consider that truth might be pluralist, not

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unitary, that there are more ways than one to skin a cat, or to skim off profits. They prepare us to deal with uncertainty by making us more sensitive to the possible effects of change. They help us to interpret possibilities because they cannot themselves make truth-claims.

Theory that filters our experience takes that idea of difference further. It augments some of what we see by suppressing other, possibly contradictory evidence. It affords interpretation. A textbook might use the term hermeneutics or phenomenology. It makes no grandiose claim of Truth. But it does ask us to think differently, very differently, about the object of our attention. We might then attend to other matters, things we would overlook, ignore. In doing so, it helps to save us from ignorance, in the sense of suppressing the less obvious to the advantage of what we think we know.

Combining lenses, experimenting with one, adding another, discarding them and trying yet another is, then, not frivolity in the pursuit of truth. It is merely, honestly, *philosophically* a pragmatic approach.

The famous psychologist Kurt Lewin (1943, p. 119) famously wrote: "There is nothing more practical than a good theory." Which in a pragmatist's worldview is true, until it isn't, I think.

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[1] Bartunek's rejoinder to the Tourish paper alludes to the 1970 Norman Whitfield/Edwin Starr anti-Vietnam War song that starts, "War! Huh. What is it good for? Absolutely nothing!".

[2] It is worth noting that a more recent edition – 2019 – of the Saunders et al. book dropped the expression "theoretical lens" in favour of "standpoint". However, it kept "philosophical lens".

[3] Merriam-Webster dictionary online https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lens).

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Boxes

Box 1: Looking for 'loyalty'

Theory affords a wide-angled view (distortion) in the hunt for explaining why the UK's Stewardship Code for investors fell well short of the policymakers' aspirations. Papers on investor behaviour often allude to two modes of action: voice and exit. Investors could engage with company managements, vote their shares, and try to influence the company's direction, or they could sell shares and invest their funds elsewhere (e.g., Admati & Pfleiderer, 2009; Goodman, Louche, van Cranenburgh, & Arenas, 2014; Jackson, 2008). The voice-exit dichotomy derives from a famous analysis of political choice (Hirschman, 1970), but that book has three elements in its title, not two. Scholars have ignored "loyalty".

What makes someone loyal? Could it come from the responsibility that arises from psychological ownership, which Pierce and Rodgers (2004) and others see as accounting for the higher productivity among employees who get share options? Hernandez (2012) identifies psychological ownership as an antecedent of stewardship behaviour among managers. What about investors? McNulty and Nordberg (2016) try to locate loyalty among the possible attitudes of investors and find the link back to psychological ownership. What they identify is a path strewn with obstacles.

Box 2: Boardroom art

In my "spare" time – or better put my most important time – I chair the board of a large provider of social care to adults with learning disabilities and mental health problems, some quite elderly. In March 2020, a newly appointed CEO attended her first meeting with the charity's board amid reports of covid running rapidly through the population, with devastating effects on the old and vulnerable. Italy was in lockdown. Britain was days away from it.

The all-non-executive board dug into our collective and individual memories to try to find something that might help the senior management cope with the storm that was, with certainty, coming. Nothing. We were helpless, useless. As we dispersed after a frustrating three hours, realising we might not see each other again for months, the head of the organisation's finance committee, turned to us all as he left the room.

"Great meeting!" he exclaimed, without a hint of irony. Everyone agreed. *Why?*

In the months of lockdown that followed, I groped for an answer. I thought about the paintings on the walls of the boardroom of a very large, listed company where I had once worked. I thought about the art at our charity's boardroom – the creations of the people living in our care. I wondered, what did that art signify? What messages did it send, subliminally, or indeed by staring us in the face? I forced myself not to think about agency, stakeholder or stewardship theory (suppression). I turned to a treatise on aesthetics that had stood, unread, on my bookshelf for decades: John Dewey's Art as Experience (1934/1958). I thought only about the satisfaction we useless directors had found in that final in-person meeting (augmentation). You can read more in this paper: Nordberg (2021).

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