

## (A)Symmetries@work

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School of Business and Economics

**(A)SYMMETRIES@WORK**

# ***(A)SYMMETRIES@WORK***

**Prof. dr. Simon B. de Jong**

*Inaugural Lecture  
June 29, 2018*

*School of Business and Economics  
Maastricht University*

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*Dear Rector Magnificus,  
Dear Dean,  
Dear family and friends,  
Dear colleagues and distinguished guests,*

Symmetry (and the related concepts of equilibrium, harmony, or balance) seem to be fundamental features of the world around us. For example, research in biology shows us that species try to adapt to their surrounding and, when the environment is stable, this can result in relatively unchanging systems for millions of years. Physics informs us that each action has an equal reaction, bestowing an overall stability to the universe. Chemistry reveals that many processes are reversible, such as the switching between molecular and supramolecular chirality. Consequently, symmetries appear to be all around us and it might therefore come as no surprise that the social sciences have also investigated this phenomenon in order to further understand why - and when - societies, economies, organizations, or teams are in balance.

Within the field of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management, the interest in symmetries has resulted in much research on averages or mean scores. A stream of research has asked questions akin to; *“How do employees, on average, react to certain leadership styles? Or, how do certain HR practices affect the mean performance of employees?”*. Such research has provided many important insights, yet its focus came at the price of often overlooking the potential interesting aspects of asymmetries; such as when respondents *do not* agree in their views on the team’s leadership or when there are different perceptions between leaders and followers on the level of performance achieved. With the advancement of theoretical knowledge and the rise of more sophisticated analytical techniques, there has been an increasing interest in investigating asymmetries in recent years. This has led to various calls to further understand asymmetries, for instance in employee identities at work (e.g., Meister, Jehn, & Tatcher, 2014), work relationships in social networks (Labianca & Brass, 2006), or group decision making (e.g., Brodbeck, Kerschreiter, Mojzisch, & Schulz-Hardt, 2007). In this inaugural lecture, I would like to discuss this topic of symmetry and asymmetry, while at the same time give you some insight into my past scientific work - done with various scholars from a range of backgrounds - as well as give you an impression of my plans for the future.

Yet, before continuing, I would like to take a step back, because understanding the tensions between asymmetries and symmetries is in some ways more complex in the social sciences than in the natural sciences, as the latter can be considered to contain relatively 'hard' paradigms, while the former tend to have 'softer' paradigms (e.g., Goshal, 2005). This does not mean that the natural sciences do not have any 'soft' issues, as it has since long been recognized that they do (e.g., Hedges, 1987), nor that there are no variations *within* the social sciences (e.g., Shaw, Tangirala, Vissa, & Rodell, 2018). What it does mean is, simply put, that there are numerous factors in the social sciences which could potentially influence the phenomenon of interest; and that there all sorts of combinations how these factors can interact; and that there can be many feedback loops; and that there are many ways to measure the topic of interest, although measuring it very precisely can be very challenging. To give you an example why it is important to recognize this 'softness': imagine that business or economic scholars find a new model which improves company or stock performance. Many actors in society would then have an interest to adopt these new insights, yet adopting these insights might change the situation and possibly invalidate the new model (or affect it to some unknown extend). Another example is that building practical interventions or policy implications on the results of a singular study can sometimes be done in the natural science, yet this is not considered to be 'best practice' in the Evidence Based Management movement within the social sciences (e.g., Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009), because due to the 'softness' mentioned earlier each social scientific study is likely to have its strengths and limitations. It is therefore more advisable to use the cumulative knowledge in a field, as for instance encapsulated in meta-analyses or systematic reviews. Naturally, the above also applies to my own studies (which I will be discussing later on). Given the mixed audience of today I thought it would be prudent to highlight this first asymmetry – namely the asymmetry between the nature of research in the natural and social sciences and the meaning one can attribute to a single study. To deal with this matter, I will highlight 'sets' of studies and focus on their interrelations in this lecture.

Another unique, but related asymmetry, arises from the fact that the social sciences investigate aspects of *human* behavior and *social* interactions; something most of us do each and every day. To the general public, this can make the outcomes of social scientific studies seem quite straightforward and logical 'post hoc'. And, people might wonder why the research

was necessary in the first place, by arguing that this was all common knowledge to start with. Reflecting on this I thought that, *IF* I am going to explain my past and future research, *THEN* it might be nice to avoid such contemplations in the audience and I will therefore illustrate why the prior reasoning is often flawed. Suppose that we conducted research in which it was found that balanced work relationships lead to *MORE* helping amongst coworkers, because some people then give help and it is this help which subsequently invites others to provide help in return. On the face of it, this finding appears to make common sense and one could say we already 'knew' this by invoking the Dutch saying "*wie goed doet, wie goed ontmoet*". This roughly translates to the English saying "*do good, and good will come to you*". However, *IF* the research we conducted would have found that there would be *LESS* helping in these relationships, this would also appear to be 'logical' to causal observers and they could try to emphasize their point by invoking the Dutch saying "*stank voor dank*" or the English saying "*no good deed goes unpunished*". As this example hopefully illustrates, common knowledge tends to hold opposing – and often incompatible views – yet this only becomes apparent after critical and thoughtful reflection and scrutinizing the available empirical evidence. Hence, to find out *WHEN* the positive or negative outcomes occur and to find out *WHY* this is so, the scientific method needs to be applied; as sayings and common knowledge tend to be remarkably silent about moderating (or contextual) effects as well as mediating (or process) effects. It is thus *here* where we encounter our second asymmetry, namely between the complex – yet more detailed – knowledge within the social sciences and the straightforward – although often more vague – common knowledge in society and at work. I will return to these more practical matters at the end of this lecture. But, for now I hope that this example illustrates why theory and empirical findings are so crucial for deepening our understanding of social phenomena, as the routine way of thinking we tend to do in our daily (working) lives often fail to be sufficiently critical and rigorous to allow us to separate which outcome is more probable than another.

The tension between asymmetries and symmetries will be a red line weaving through this lecture, however – before I dig into the scientific research my co-authors and I conducted in the past years – I thought that many of you might be interested to hear about two other key asymmetries in today's event; namely that while this inaugural lecture will be about 45 minutes long, the reception following it will almost be *TWICE* as long. And, since about 1/6 of

this lecture has already passed, I can inform you that you are making steady progress toward this asymmetrically larger part of today. Thus, although perhaps some of you already 'knew' this based on famous sayings, I thought it would be prudent to point out to the more skeptical members of the audience that your good deed of listening *will* eventually be reciprocated.

### PAST RESEARCH

My initial interest in symmetries and asymmetries started during my PhD in which I build on the work of one of my advisors, Prof. dr. Van de Vegt, on Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1959). This theory is used for understanding and managing tasks and jobs of individuals and teams. Questions which this theory and research attempts to address are for example; *"should people in teams work more together, or more individually, for completing their tasks and goals?"*. In the early days of this theory, there were debates how many dimensions of interdependence one should consider, but eventually research settled on two main dimensions, namely task and outcome interdependence (e.g., Wageman, 1995). Task interdependence can be defined as the amount to which an individual needs to exchange resources with other team members and thereby captures the mutual or average exchange within interactions (e.g. Brass, 1981). Outcome interdependence can be described as the extent to which significant consequences of work are contingent on the collective performance of tasks (e.g., Wageman, 2001) and subsequently revolve more around rewards and recognition.

The question which then followed was; *"should high task interdependence be matched with high outcome interdependence or with low outcome interdependence?"*. On the one hand, a *congruence* argument could be raised, stating that when team members need each other to complete the tasks successfully, one should match this by an equal amount of outcome interdependence to ensure that there will be no negative intra-team conflicts or fights over who gets individual rewards. On the other hand, a *complementarity* argument could be made, reasoning along the lines that people need to be individually motivated as they might otherwise lower their efforts for the team tasks. In other words, when task interdependence is high, one should have low outcome independence to avoid issues of social loafing (e.g., Ringelmann, 1913). And, when task interdependence is low, one should have high outcome interdependence to keep team members focused on the team instead of only on

their own tasks. If this was a lecture to students, I would now ask everybody to raise their hand to see how many of you think the congruence or complementarity argument is the most important. Since today's event does not allow for this – given the great asymmetry in me doing all the talking and you doing all the listening – I will refrain from doing so. Yet, in your mind please take a moment to select one of these two options you think research has shown to be most applicable. I can assure you that research has quite clearly shown that either congruence or complementarity is more suited, so the often used 'it depends' third option will not suffice as an answer in this instance.

Now, with respect to the answer: ... a considerable amount of research has found that ... – and I now advise you to look at your neighbors to see if you can spot what their answer would have been – ... the congruence argument is more appropriate (e.g., Saavedra, Earley, & Vandyne, 1993). So, high task interdependence should be matched with high outcome interdependence (and low with low). Often when I do this exercise in classrooms the opinions are divided roughly 50 – 50 between the two options, and if you could not deduce your neighbors answer just now, it might be interesting to ask during the reception. For those of you who want to practice their scientific skills, you might want investigate if you can find a similar 50-50 distribution by asking a representative sample. Yet, I can imagine that there might be some asymmetries hiding here between my own ideas of '*fun things to do at receptions*' and most of you in the audience. So ultimately, I leave this decision to you.

Coming back to the scientific findings discussed earlier, the advantage of the insight that the congruence approach is most suited is that it provides clear practical advice for designing and rewarding teams, while also providing a way for comparing teams to each other and giving ideas on how to improve them (e.g., Van der Vegt & Van der Vliert, 2002). Yet, akin to many other fields, this area of research traditionally focused mostly on *average* levels of the main variables, thereby implicitly assuming that team members would either *all* be highly task dependent upon each other or *all* lowly task dependent. But, in many teams such symmetry is unlikely as there are often many differences amongst team members, for example in their knowledge, information, and access to materials and/or resources. Although asymmetries had been theorized in the early works of Thibaut and Kelley, detailed empirical research on them had not been conducted until relatively recently.



## Horizontal asymmetries

And it is here where my first research into asymmetries started (De Jong, Van der Vegt, & Molleman, 2007). In short, for our first study we collected data about the dyadic work relationships of employees in a range of sectors and were able to show that: A) asymmetries exist and can be measured in real business teams, and B) that these asymmetries are important because they can shape the amount of trust and helping behavior amongst two team members. Thereby this research gave a first indication that only looking at averages, or symmetries, might no longer be fully appropriate as important processes and mechanisms are then overlooked. A key mechanism why asymmetries were deemed to be important was because they would create differences in power between individuals (Emerson, 1962). In short, the person who needs *MORE* from the other person than vice versa, is *LESS* powerful as they have to ask the other person for their permission to use the required resources or information. Consequently, these first results supported the idea that power and dependence are (inversely) related and that ignoring asymmetries might overlook important power dynamics at work.

In subsequent studies we then investigated if asymmetries would also have effects beyond the detailed relational-level and we found that this was indeed the case, as asymmetries might also affect how satisfied individual team members are with their jobs (De Jong & Bal, 2014). This study was also the first to connect the new dimension of asymmetrical task dependence to one of established dimensions, namely to (average) task interdependence. We found that asymmetries related positively to an individual's job satisfaction when that individual had many interactions and exchanges within the team (i.e., had high average task interdependence), yet this relationship was negative for individual's who were relatively isolated at work (i.e., had low average task interdependence). In another study, we investigated if asymmetries would also affect teams as a whole and could potentially affect team performance (Van der Vegt, De Jong, Bunderson, & Molleman, 2010). In this study, we also connected asymmetries to the other dimension of interdependence theory, namely outcome interdependence. Interestingly, this revealed that asymmetries in task dependence might be a double edge sword, because if teams had many asymmetries and leaders provided individual-focused feedback, team performance was found to be lower. In contrast, asymmetries led to higher team performance when leaders provided group-focused feedback.

Our study also showed *WHY* this was the case, as the downside of individual-focused feedback was that it limited intra-team learning because in these situations the less asymmetrically task dependent – or more powerful team members – did not share their knowledge and expertise with their colleagues. Hence, viewed together, this line of research revealed that asymmetries exist and can have both negative as well as positive effects on work relationships, individuals, and teams. Building further upon this, we set-up an organizational-level study to find out if these effects might even shape organizational performance (De Jong, Kunze, & Bruch, 2017). Investigating more than 8000 employees from 67 companies, we found that in organizations characterized by many asymmetries between employees, the intra-organizational trust climate can become compromised, subsequently leading to lower organizational performance. Yet, if the organization provided so-called *high-commitment HR practices* – which focus the powerful on collective outcomes instead of on gaining personal gains – then asymmetries did *not* negatively affect organizational performance.

Besides indicating that asymmetries in task dependence are something to take into serious consideration for scientific research, these studies also provided ways for practically dealing with asymmetries; namely by encouraging leaders to give group-focused feedback (instead of individual-focused feedback) and by indicating that HR professionals should implement collective-focused high-commitment HR practices in organization characterized by many asymmetries amongst workers. The prior conclusion of research that task and outcome interdependence need to be congruent with each other can now thus be further specified, by stating that when there are asymmetries in task dependence it is wiser to err on the side of creating (too) high outcome interdependence instead of risking (too) low outcome interdependence.

Besides this research on asymmetrical task dependence, we also explored other horizontal ‘asymmetries’. For example, with Prof. dr. Bal and other co-authors, we conducted research into the aging workforce and particularly how to use HR practices to keep employees interested in working past their retirement age (Bal, Kooij, & De Jong, 2013). At first glance, a relatively obvious asymmetry in this seems to be the difference between younger employees (who are stereotypically assumed to more motivated and healthy) and older employees (who in some stereotypes are assumed to be less motivated and healthy). Yet, thinking more

critically on this 'common wisdom' it becomes apparent that this is often *not* the case, as young people can be unmotivated and/or ill and many older workers are very motivated and/or healthy. Therefore, we argued that it is not age that is the most important factor to look at, but that it is more important to investigate if employees are dealing with some form of deficiency which requires them to adapt themselves and/or their work. We found that some HR practices – namely so-called developmental HR practices, which focus on learning and growth of employees – are beneficial for *all*, yet that other HR practices – namely so-called accommodative HR practices, which focus on adapting the work environment to deal with declines in employee health or abilities – only work for specific employees and depend on the particular adaptation strategies employees had chosen. Hence, this research started out to address a 'asymmetry' in the workforce amongst employees of different ages and health, yet simultaneously reveal another 'asymmetry', namely between two types of HR practices and the different effects they have on employees. These 'other asymmetries' will be the focus of the next section.

### **Vertical asymmetries**

So far I focused mostly on asymmetries between fellow co-workers, or one could say, *horizontal* asymmetries amongst peers. Yet organizations are not only characterized by these horizontal relationships, but also tend to have *vertical* relationships, such as those between managers and employees. My co-authors and I have also investigated various forms of (a)symmetry, (im)balance, or (dis)harmony in vertical relationships. One example of this, was our study into the different effects of different types of HR practices as I discussed at the end of the last section. Another example, is our research that build upon the theoretical work of Dr. Raes and colleagues from Maastricht University (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011), in which they theorized that there are important differences in the interactions between Top and Middle Managers. Expanding on that foundation, we wondered if *employees* could also be affected by the behavior of the Top Management Team (TMT). Again, in a regular lecture I would ask for your opinion, but for now please make a choice in your mind; *"do you think that employees can be affected by what happens within the boardroom amongst the TMT members themselves? Or do you think that this is too far away from daily working live to have any real impact on employees?"*.

We conducted a study with over 5000 employees and the results showed that the more harmonious the TMT worked together, the more productive and energetic the organization and its employees were (Raes, Bruch, & De Jong, 2013). Thus, it appears that horizontal harmonious, balanced, or symmetrical teamwork *inside* the boardroom can have a vertical effect by shaping the work experiences of employees *outside* of the board room. So we could introduce a new saying: “*what happens in the board room, does NOT stay in the board room*”.

We also investigated other forms of asymmetries in leadership, namely if the amount of heterogeneity or variance in leadership across the organization would affect that organization’s performance. Our study of 107 Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises showed that organizational performance was indeed affected when there were asymmetries in the leadership styles within the organization (De Jong & Bruch, 2013), with the highest organizational performance found in organizations which have a high average level of transformational leadership and a high homogeneity of that leadership. So, this again indicates how important it is to try to include *all* employees and to focus on joint collective outcomes. As another illustration of how asymmetries might affect leadership, we investigated if *the concept* of transformational leadership was as homogeneous as was often assumed or if there might be difference within the dimensions underlying this concept as some emerging studies were suggesting at that time (e.g., Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). In short, we found that some dimensions had a positive effect on the organization the higher their *average* levels where – these were the so-called collective-focused leadership behaviors. While other leadership behaviors – the so-called individual-focused leadership behaviors – had negative effects on the organization when they were *differentiated* amongst employees. Importantly, these negative effects became *even more negative* if the organization focused on individual rewards and bonuses by giving contingent rewards (Kunze, De Jong, & Bruch, 2016).

Hence, linking all of this to the previously discussed potential negative effects of asymmetries amongst employees, there again seems to be some need for caution for implementing a too strong focus on individuals, as this might heighten differences amongst people too much. In conclusion, similar to horizontal asymmetries, vertical asymmetries also seem to pose somewhat of a ‘double edged sword’ and I would thus suggest to handle them with care if you would happen to encounter any asymmetries in the future.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Besides continuing to research this ‘two-sidedness’, another aim for my future research is to link the various topics discussed above in order to ‘cross-fertilize’ the different theoretical perspectives. For the future I hope to continue to work together with my current co-authors, as well as with my new colleagues at Maastricht University, on such topics. To give you some more insight I will give a short description of some projects; with Dr. Mammassis and Dr. Kostopoulos I am investigating what the key mechanisms are of power asymmetries at the department or unit level. With Dr. Akkermans and Prof. dr. Bal I am investigating how variations in the social context can shape employee experiences at work. With Dr. Nikolova and Dr. Griep I am researching how differences in Leader Communication Tactics might affect employees during changes at work. And with Dr. Raes and Prof. dr. Kunze, I am studying in more depth how the balance *within* Top Management Teams might shape employee perceptions *of those* teams. Given the increasingly competitive nature of scientific publishing I unfortunately cannot reveal too much about these ongoing projects, yet I hope these short examples give you *some* idea of how we plan to combine the various perspectives and approaches in the future. At the same time, I hope that by addressing my inability to provide you with more insight also helps to raise awareness for the increasing imbalance between the ideal of freely sharing scientific information and the expanding range of stakeholders who have (commercial) interests in compartmentalizing this knowledge. In my opinion, this particular asymmetry should be lowered in favor of the former.

Besides continuing to collaborate with my current co-authors, I naturally also plan to set-up studies with my new colleagues at the *Organization & Strategy Department* as well as those from *the School of Business and Economics* and others at Maastricht University. Building upon my earlier discussions, I hope to investigate various horizontal and vertical symmetries and asymmetries by linking my areas of expertise with those of my new colleagues. There is one particular topic which I would like to highlight as it has a long tradition at Maastricht; and that is the investigation of how processes evolve over time. Below, I will draw upon the work of the late Prof. dr. Roe (2008) to argue that – besides continuing to study more traditional “*what is*” research questions, it is also important to study “*what happens*” over time.

## **Temporal asymmetries**

At present, most of the research within Organizational Behavior and HRM has taken a cross-sectional perspective, which means that data were collected at only one point in time. And, our own research often also took this approach. While many things can be learned from cross-sectional studies, some things cannot – or at least not as rigorously or as in-depth. For example, it is most difficult to see how processes evolve over time with cross-sectional research, and therefore it is often recommended to test processes with longitudinal datasets (i.e., datasets which contain multiple time points). Yet, getting these datasets is very time and labor intensive, making them difficult to acquire for scholars who only have limited time available for research. Additionally, many employees and organizations are reluctant to participate in what seems to be answering the same questionnaire multiple times. Due to all of this, and the associated complexity of analyzing these complex datasets, longitudinal research has been scarce not only in our own research, but also in social scientific research in general. Building upon the tradition and expertise of the O&S department, we plan to conduct more longitudinal research in the future. We hope to work together on this with (local) organizations in Limburg and the surrounding areas, as well as organizations located further away; and one concrete way of doing so is via UMIO activities (which is our new executive branch at SBE). More insight into what happens with key processes over time – and why certain management interventions do (or do not) work – is not just very valuable for scholars, but also for others such as managers, consultants, policy makers, and employees.

To give you some short examples; with Dr. Guenter and Mr. Reissner we are currently exploring the intricacies of how, when, and why some employees dare to speak up when they see room for improvement in the organization, while others do not dare to do so. With Dr. Hamstra and Ms. Gutermuth we are studying the differences between men and women and their reactions to, and adoptions of, goals; and one interesting question would be to see if men and women differ over time in this. With Dr. Santos and Mr. Van Rensburg we are contemplating to study how individuals and teams arrive at a similar, or symmetrical, views of the various knowledge, skills, and abilities within the team and why sometimes these views differ asymmetrically. And, as a last example, with Dr. Kensbock I hope to investigate how some team members become embedded in groups, whilst others remain more isolated. These short examples hopefully give a glimpse of the range of research we are doing – and are

planning to do – within the ‘O’ or ‘Organization’ part of the O&S group. Of particular interest to me would be to see when – and why – some temporal processes take a certain form and timing for *some* employees, while the form and/or timing would be different for others. In other words, do employees similarly – or symmetrically – develop certain views over time or do they develop differently – or more *asymmetrically* – over time? Although we can probably find many sayings which would indicate that the future answers to these questions were quite ‘logical’ and ‘common sense’ in hindsight, it is quite difficult to decide ‘*a priori*’ which of these saying holds more true. Therefore, I think that finding out in more detail when this is – or is not so – creates value for science and practice alike.

## PRACTICE

And that brings me to the last topic of today, namely practice. Up until now, I have spent an asymmetrical amount of time discussing past and future scientific research and in order to regain some balance in this lecture I will now shift focus towards more practical matters. One thing which has always struck me is that many students (and sometimes faculty as well) forget or overlook that working in large (multinational) companies is not the only ‘real world’ in practice. For example, in The Netherlands the majority of private-sector jobs are in Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises<sup>1</sup>. And to add to this, I personally like to entertain the notion that what we do at universities also qualifies as being part of the ‘real world’. An indication of this is that the average faculty member performs many tasks which overlap with jobs in other sectors. To name a few, this includes being a researcher, lecturer, supervisor, coach, mentor, committee member, panel member, reviewer, (associate) editor, group or department (vice-)head, consultant, director, trainer, fund or grant manager, sparring partner, administrator, alumni manager, policy maker, and – depending on one’s views – entertainer. Other similarities between academia and other sectors include the increase in ‘flex workers’ in recent years<sup>2</sup> and the increasing number of people experiencing burnout. A difference is that the burnout percentage in the educational sector as a whole is higher than any other sector, according to the new figures from CBS and TNO<sup>3</sup>. Although these insights and many others –

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/rapporten/2017/11/17/jaarbericht-staat-van-het-mkb-2017/5738+EZ-De+staat+van+MKB-2017v5.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/08/weer-meer-vast-werk-maar-flexwerk-groeit-harder>

<sup>3</sup> <https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83157NED/table?ts=1527583944138>

such as from reputable sources as the FNV<sup>4</sup>, VSNU<sup>5</sup>, and the VAWO<sup>6</sup> – are publically available, the perception of how important these insights are still varies amongst policy makers, managers, employees, and other stakeholders; why this is the case – and how these asymmetries might be resolved over time – might therefore be a worthwhile area of investigation with clear practical benefits for *all* of the ‘the real worlds’. Much is already known about reducing burnout and increasing well-being<sup>7</sup>, yet scholars recently observed that more scientific insight into interventions would be beneficial (e.g., Maricutoiu, Sava, Butta, 2016), and if universities would take the lead in this it could create new ‘best practices’ which could then be applied to – or be ‘valorized’ in – other sectors.

This brings me to valorization and, in my opinion, perhaps one of the best *Unique Selling Points* (USP’s) of universities it that they are uniquely able to provide the benefits of theory-driven empirical research; which not only gives clarity on *WHAT* to do, but also *WHEN* and *WHY* to do that. For business problems which are relatively small and mundane, ‘standard’ solutions might be enough. And, for those issues a look at the best-practice and case literature might be sufficient to get some insights how others fixed similar problems, and one can then creatively ‘borrow’ from those insights. Yet, when the problems do not go away after such interventions, a deeper understanding why those supposedly similar solutions do not work might be needed and it is especially here were theory-driven empirical research can shine in my opinion. But, this can be hard to achieve. For example, for quite some time scientific (e.g., Barney, 1986) and practical publications<sup>8</sup> have commented that one of the most important, but also the most challenging, things to get right is organizational culture and trust. They are difficult to build, yet easily lost. Now I can hear some of you think; “*but this is common knowledge, don’t you know the Dutch saying: “vertrouwen komt te voet en gaat te paard” (or in English “trust comes on foot, but leave on horseback)”*”. I would agree with these sentiments, were it not that many organizations seem to ignore this ‘common knowledge’; which is

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fnv.nl/over-fnv/nieuws/nieuwsarchief/2017/januari/Werkdruk-medewerkers-universiteiten-ongezond-hoog-2/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vsnu.nl/werkdruk.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vawo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/VAWO-Brochure-werkdruk.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-at-work\\_tcm18-40863.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/health-and-well-being-at-work_tcm18-40863.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/where-has-all-the-trust-gone\\_2012-sop\\_tcm18-9644.pdf](https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/where-has-all-the-trust-gone_2012-sop_tcm18-9644.pdf)



surprising as even online business sources, such as Forbes<sup>9</sup>, continue to highlight that trust and culture are crucial and that it might even become *the most important* competitive advantages in the future, as capital and technology are easier to acquire nowadays.

To illustrate with a real case, let's take a look at the space industry. Although United Launch Alliance (and its parent companies) have launched rockets for many decades, it took the new culture of SpaceX to revolutionize rocketry; and SpaceX is currently not only the most innovative, but *ALSO* the cheapest *AND* the one who can launch the heaviest payloads. Undeniably SpaceX has unique access to some forms of capital, yet one cannot say that their competitors, such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin, are particularly 'cash-strapped'. In addition, several of the key technologies of SpaceX were built upon NASA's Delta Clipper programme of the 1990's and those technologies have been widely known since, yet remained unused. In short, there thus appears to be an increasing asymmetry between the diminishing value of capital and technology on one side, and the increasing importance of correctly engaging the workforce so that an effective organizational culture arises, on the other side. But, despite many attempts to convey this message, this particular 'rocket' seems not to have landed in all organizations and hence this might also be an area where universities and other organizations might help each other.

To end the practical section, I would like to reflect by posing the question; *"is there perhaps something that is holding managers and organizations back?"*. As we recently wrote, one important driver might be the (implicit) philosophical assumptions held (e.g., Bal & De Jong, 2017), as they might bias us to overly favour a few individuals or targets at the expense of the greater good. To illustrate, when maximizing short-term results for a select group of stakeholders becomes overly important, such as when trying to maximize profits in order to please speculative shareholders, other stakeholders might ultimately pay the price – including employees and customers, but ironically also other shareholders such as (public) pension funds. In hindsight, there was perhaps some wisdom in the saying *'penny-wise, but pound-foolish'* (or in Dutch *"goedkoop is duurkoop"*), as it already suggested that there is an asymmetry between the things which seem the easiest or cheapest in the short term and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/larryalton/2017/02/17/why-corporate-culture-is-becoming-even-more-important/#40ac4f4069da>

those that are important and valuable in the long run. I would argue that working together with companies on understanding – and then dealing with – such implicit assumptions and beliefs, holds the potential to also contribute to ‘all of the real worlds’.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is not only our own research on various horizontal and vertical types of ‘asymmetries’ – based on multiple samples, multiple levels of analysis, multiple theories, and multiple analytical procedures – that supports the adaption of more holistic collective-focused leadership styles and more ‘benign’ commitment-based (HR) practices, there are various other lines of research which seem to converge towards similar conclusions (e.g., Larking, Pierce, & Gino, 2012; Rickards & Moger, 2000). It would be my expectation that the more we unearth (implicit) assumptions of (a)symmetries in our theories, concepts, and models – and the more we realize that those (a)symmetries might be a double edge sword – the more we will (re-)discover the value of benign and collective-focused factors. Treading this balancing path between symmetry and asymmetry is perhaps not the easiest path to take for researchers, employees, leaders, and organizations and it is tempting to fall back to the ‘penny wise’ safety of short-term thinking, narrow targets, and easy ‘standard’ solutions. Yet, when we *do* acknowledge the possible richness hiding in (a)symmetries, and then match them with appropriate levels of collective-focused and benign systems, extraordinary outcomes are within our reach. Moreover, instead of overly focusing on WHAT to do, we could ask more often HOW, WHEN, and WHY to do it. And, instead of focusing on WHO will benefit, we could ask more often WHO might lose and assess what the *total* costs would be. In my opinion, theory-driven empirical research, and the scientific method in general, can play an important role in this by putting current practices and common wisdom under close scrutiny.

In the end, I realize that only time will tell if the ideas presented during this lecture will have come to fruition. When that time has come, I hope that: A) the effects are positive, B) they are high on average, and C) are also quite homogenously distributed amongst all those involved – be it scientists or practitioners, managers or employees, students or non-students, corporations or society at large – because I would uphold that in our academic work we should not favor any of these too asymmetrically.

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Het einde van deze oratie is bijna aangebroken en om nog wat balans te scheppen in het taalgebruik van vandaag, zal ik het dankwoord in het Nederlands doen. Ik wil echter beginnen met een waarschuwing, want sommige van u zullen een zekere onbalans ervaren ten opzichte van uw eerdere interacties met mij, omdat ik het dankwoord vandaag *kort* zal houden.

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Ik heb gezegd.

*Maastricht, 29 Juni 2018.*

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