Check for updates

Group & Organization Management
2024, Vol. 0(0) 1–12
© The Author(s) 2024

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/10596011241304161
journals.sagepub.com/home/gom


Imagine How Future Workplaces Could Be: Introducing Fictional Science to Organizational Behavior

P. Matthijs Bal[1], April Liu Griffin[2], Mehmet A. Orhan[3], and Yvonne Gerarda Theodora van Rossenberg[4]

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of fictional science to the field of Organizational Behavior. We outline its necessity and the intended benefits for the field. Organizational Behavior is a scientific discipline which has limited experience with imaginative reasoning in the field and, thus, the envisioning of what could be, and how workplaces could be designed in the future. Fictional science, as the imagined, made-up scientific thinking and argumentation, holds the possibilities for such imagination. It, therefore, offers academics and practitioners the means to postulate possible futures for workplaces and, thus, the potential to bring about positive change to workplaces. We also explain the importance of form, and the role of the literary in fictional science. The essay finishes with examples of how fictional science has been used in the past, and how it could be used in the future.

[1]University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK
[2]University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK
[3]Nyenrode Business University, the Netherlands
[4]Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
P. Matthijs Bal, University of Lincoln, Lincoln International Business School, LIBS, Brayford Wharf, Lincoln LN6 7TS, UK.
Email: mbal@lincoln.ac.uk

Keywords
Fictional science, organizational behavior, imagination, positivism

Introduction

As scholars in the field of Organizational Behavior, we are used to thinking about the key elements that make up workplaces and how we can explain human behavior in work contexts. As academics, we write about these issues in journals and books. However, such work usually reflects the current status of human behavior in organizations, and often remains constrained to the requirements journals put on authors to write about their work. This is unfortunate, as this does not easily open up ways for imaginative, future-oriented thinking and writing in Organizational Behavior. The central question of this essay is what can be done to create more pluralism and creativity in Organizational Behavior (OB), including the ways we conduct and write about our research, and the way through which we think and write about the design of future workplaces. We will advocate for the concept of 'Fictional Science', which provides a unique way of conducting research more creatively, in which *imagination* is central to the process of academic knowledge production. Fictional science enables us to write about what is *not* there and what *may* happen in the future, rather than trying to explain what has been in the past and is in the present (usually done through positivistic research). We explain why we need fictional science, what it is and what it is not, and what we can do with it in our field (and beyond).

Why Fictional Science?

Fictional science may sound like a *contradictio in terminis*, as science is supposed to produce truth statements, while fiction constitutes the opposite, denoting that which is not (yet) real. However, the fictional is already part of science, in the theories and models we develop. For instance, Phillips (1995) elucidated how science has incorporated both fictional non-narratives (e.g., theories and models), non-fictional non-narratives (e.g., data), and non-fictional narratives (e.g., case studies). Yet, science has not really integrated fictional narratives into its corpus (despite some notable work from scholars such as Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges, 1997, 1999; Yiannis Gabriel, 1995, 2000). This is too restrictive, as the distinction between fiction and non-fiction may be arbitrary. The fictional element of academic knowledge production (i.e., theorizing) may be much more interlinked with the empirical part of knowledge production (i.e., measurement and analysis) than we would like to admit (see e.g., Baruch, 2023). Hence, the fictional is already embedded

within our work, and the concept of fictional science explicitly argues for the valuing of imagination in our field.

In OB, research and academic publications are primarily about what happened rather than about what will or may happen. Conceptual models are constructed to represent truths from the past, and (quantitative) research already has many difficulties in predicting that past, usually with limited success: the explained variance of moderators usually revolves around 1–2% of the variance in outcomes (*cf:* Aguinis et al., 2005). Large sample sizes make such small effects significant, but they hardly matter in reality. Why do academics persist in trying to explain the past, even when they have so little success? Why would we (as scientific community) not try to explore possible futures, and more specifically, try to envision possible scenarios that could unfold in the future, aiming at more humane, eco-centered, and non-capitalist workplaces? This would make our research and thinking more relevant (without projecting the same normative neoliberal views upon society and individuals; Bal & Dóci, 2018). Currently, it is not happening, as academics lack the instruments or the motivation to do so. Edmondson and McManus (2007) emphasized the relevance of 'methodological fit', or the consistency between research questions and methods. As OB is primarily quantitatively orientated, only one type of research produces methodological fit (i.e., research questions around causal relationships between variables). To be able to respond to research questions about nascent topics, or topics that do not even exist yet, we currently do not have many methodological tools available. Moreover, having been educated and socialized into the style and form of academic writing and thinking as dictated within OB (Bal et al., 2024a, 2024b), academics can no longer truly think 'outside the box'. The box is a cage, and offers no simple escape. This is why fictional science offers a radical alternative – a parallax view that moves radically beyond the truth-fiction binary (Kilroy, 2019).

There is a risk that fictional science can be perceived as functioning in ways similar to science fiction, which is about bringing scientific knowledge into fiction (being future-oriented, and about the prediction of likely or possible futures). However, fictional science moves in the opposite way, by bringing fiction into science, and therefore the two types can inform and strengthen each other. Instead of presuming one possible, generalizable universal truth, fictional science recognizes the many existing truths that co-exist, many of which cannot be measured even in their absence of existing (yet). In this sense, fictional science allows us to theorize about that which is not there (yet), and provides a way to write about possible futures, imagination, dreams and particularistic, individual truths. For instance, the choice to frame 'performance' as the central criterion of OB (Dalal, 2005) is not merely given and

objective, but an explicit choice by the research community due to ideological beliefs within contemporary capitalist society (Bal, 2020; although performance is not only prioritized within Capitalism, but also within Communism for instance). However, it does not inform us about how workplaces could be designed to be more dignified, equal and sustainable (see, e.g., Bal et al., 2019).

Fictional science is the science of what *could* be and what unfolds through the process of imagination. It may include scenarios of likely and unlikely possibilities and the ways through which they may be achieved. It may include scenarios of possibilities, or how academia encourages imagination of how future workplaces may be designed. It is science, or the systematic study of the behavior of people, but made up rather than evolving around study of what has happened in the past. Structured thought, just as important to non-fictional science, underpins the notion of fictional science. However, structured thought is insufficient; fictional science, just like any fiction, is about imagination, involving thought, reason, emotion, feeling, and bodily sensation (Antonacopoulou, 2022; Cunliffe, 2022). Fictional science, therefore, encompasses the scientific inquiry into the unknown, and the notion of how people, including academics, may contribute to building a future workplace that is focused on the goals we set for ourselves as humanity, such as more dignified societies and workplaces (Kostera & Pirson, 2017). In the context of climate change, social inequalities, authoritarian populism, racism, and misogyny, academics do not have to sit idle and merely observe what is going on in workplaces and society. Fictional science offers the possibility for academics to offer alternatives, to picture a future workplace that may contribute to the dignity of people and the planet (or avoid harm without having to wait to collect data). However, many academics will opine that it is not the duty of academics to present views on how workplaces could be designed, and that it distracts from the idea of science as looking for 'objective truths' and the objective investigation of what is taking place in organizational life. It may be even called 'ideological' and 'normative' when academics suddenly start to talk about how workplaces *could* look like, rather than objectively assessing workplace behavior.

Yet, what about the 'practical implications' sections in academic papers? Is the core purpose of such sections not to convey to managers how workplaces *could* be redesigned such that they become more productive (and generally more efficient and aligning with neoliberalism; Bal & Dóci, 2018)? It is even more puzzling as it is known that most practical implications sections will never actually be read by practitioners, and so is not the emphasis on practical implications in academic papers indicative of the ideology adhered to? However, this ideology is more implicit and hidden, and appeals to the social

engineering fantasies of academics – that 'technical' solutions can be offered through practical implications to improve organizational functioning (*cf.* Bal & Dóci, 2018).

Fictional science provides the possibility for real and meaningful engagement with the actual workplaces of today and the need for more humane workplaces of tomorrow. To be able to envision such workplaces, meaning may be found in imagination. Yet, imagination does not emerge naturally and needs education, knowledge, collaboration, and dialogue (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2018). It may be complex to imagine what is *not* there yet, and hence the need for the introduction of fictional science. Fictional science opens up the possibilities for imaginative reasoning in OB for the visualization of futures and scenarios, and above all, the possibilities to dream and to imagine workplaces that are actually contributing to both people and planet, and not merely places of destruction of humaneness, planetary resources and dignity.

The Essence of Fictional Science

Fictional science is the act of writing and creating scientific knowledge-based and imagination-based fictional stories. This can manifest through different media, including writing, video, visual arts or other means. These allow academics to create systematic and structured thought through observation and experimentation. It is based on the notion of producing knowledge about what does not yet exist, and to do this, is to create fictional stories. These stories stem from individual or collective imagination, but can also be grounded in values that guide academics at work (Bal et al., 2019).

Fictional science may offer new avenues for imagination, projecting the future, and translation of agency and activism into the field. It does not disregard all that has been published in the past, yet it overcomes this through careful reading, and even more so through careful writing. It enables one to pay respect to everything that has been published, yet it also liberates the academic to imagine, to think and feel and dream about academic activism to contribute to better workplaces. It holds the promise of reversing the implications of research into the very starting point of what one intends to achieve. It involves 'imaginization' (Morgan, 1997; Tateo, 2020), or the notion that images and stories can aid scholars to form images of the future and how a future for workplaces and individuals can be pictured that is truly dignified, equal, and contributing to positive change in society (see, e.g., Bal et al., 2019).

For example, would it not be appropriate to raise concerns about the use of Artificial Intelligence in recruitment and selection due to its ethical

implications and inherent biases—especially before companies fully adopt it? Would it be harmful to offer a scholarly critique when ethical violations are evident and do not necessarily require validation through data collection? Is it too difficult to envision the limitations and challenges that new technologies might bring to the workplace as a foundation for developing new theories? Fictional science could allow scholars to critique these advancements and imagine solutions before they are widely adopted. In so doing, we may establish frameworks that anticipates issues, rather than merely responding to them once they have been fully implemented in practice.

Imaginary Forms

The content of fictional science is not all that matters, as the form does too. Both are highly interdependent in creating strong and impactful fictional science, and in fact they cannot exist exclusive of each other in producing fictional science. In academia, where one particular form is reproduced continuously (Bal et al., 2024a, 2024b), it seems as if there is only one optimal way of conveying scientific knowledge (i.e., the highly structured journal paper format). Fictional science opens up possibilities for the integration of the *literary form*. It is not without reason that fiction is automatically linked to novels and film – as the combination of the fictional (i.e., a story i.e. made up) with the literary opens the way for the grandiose and the sublime, and may prove to be relevant over centuries of readership. It is in the fictional narrative that we learn about the 'true' state of humanity, a glimpse into human behavior that cannot be grasped through logical and rational argumentation. For instance, it is not surprising that Franz Kafka is often mentioned in relation to absurd bureaucracy, as his stories elucidated the workings of bureaucracy in a way scientific research struggles to do. Fiction is also able to present the human being as a complex character, never neither good nor bad, but as really existing people beyond and above the possibilities of rational scientific argumentation.

Fictional science, therefore, offers the possibility of the literary form and its integration into science. As form is important, authors will have a wider choice as to how they present fictional science, and how to make an impact on readers, and to convey a meaningful message. Fictional science, however, is not elevated beyond the usual criteria we use to assess the quality of scientific work. Fictional science can be critiqued, can be responded to, and can be inspirational (e.g., Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022). It presents a toolkit that is currently rather unavailable to OB. Many academics may feel uncomfortable with the literary form of fictional science, as they will have been raised and educated in the hegemonic scientific form of expression, in which rational,

normalized, thinking is central. Nobody can be forced to like fictional science or to write fictional science themselves. However, it offers possibilities for engaged scholarship, activism, and inclusion of a much more diverse group of academics into the discipline, and not merely those who are able to produce the hegemonic stylistic expression. Ideas can change the world, and as any educator or any academic who ever presented something to an audience knows, it is not just the content that matters, but also the way through which ideas are expressed. The literary has the potential to reach the heart and not just the thinking parts of our brains. Science is just as much a matter of the heart as it is of the brain; it is not without reason that academia used to be a calling, as people chose an academic life because they experienced a need and duty and perhaps even a passion (in its double meaning, including the suffering) to engage in scientific research. This heart can be reached through many ways, and it is unimaginative that this can only be done via the formulaic, rational, expressions we are used to.

While OB may lack a tradition of fictional science, adjacent fields have more experience with experimental forms of writing, such as the Writing Differently Movement shows (Boncori, 2023), which is about embracing feminist perspectives in a neoliberal academic world using different ways of doing research and writing. Another example is the paper by Kociatkiewicz and colleagues (2022), in which they argue against the 'ghost of capitalism' that haunts business schools, and which needs to be 'exorcized'. Their paper is basically a form of fictional science in which fiction (the archetypal ghost story) is integrated with our contemporary reality of life in the business school into a story of how 'that which must not be named' (i.e., capitalism) is problematized in a unique way, offering possibilities for imagination of business schools that not merely promote the growth of financial capital.

Another recent example of fictional science concerns the story of Professor Dean Sackker (Orhan et al., 2024), a fictional character who has become the supreme ruler within the field of Management and Organization Studies in 2074. This absurd, dystopian story about an academic field that destroys itself from within through the rise of the 'most excellent scholar' who dominates the entire field, shows how contemporary practices are problematic from a variety of perspectives, including the hypercompetition, inequalities, the emphasis on publication outputs, and cronyism present in contemporary academia. Through presenting a possible fictional scenario about how the field may evolve over the upcoming five decades, the authors show how existing practices may become more and more absurd, and at the same time, call for responses to avoid such unlikely yet not impossible future. The authors follow philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2024), who calls for

public intellectuals in proposing any alternative to the current system to analyze anything that could possibly go wrong. The dystopian story about the supreme ruler Sackker shows what could possibly go wrong in academia, thereby illuminating what might happen if present conditions spiral into a dystopian future, calling for radical action and fundamental reform of our academic system (*cf.* Bal et al., 2019). In all, these examples of fictional science show their unique contribution and their potential for progressive research and academic work.

Implications

What can researchers, but also practitioners do with fictional science? First, fictional science helps to broaden the notion of what it is to be an 'academic', and thereby to envision not only what is, but also what 'can be'. But how can researchers engage in fictional science? First, researchers can think and dream about what they really value in academic work, and what makes our jobs meaningful. Fictional science may then be used to create stories of how future workplaces may look like. Researchers may construct such stories (using text, video or other media), to convey to people (e.g., other academics, students, practitioners, or the general public) possible alternatives. These stories may be entirely self-constructed, based on earlier stories, or modern interpretations of existing stories. To do so, academics can create images of what we would like to achieve in the future, or develop stories of what should be avoided (e.g., Orhan et al., 2024). Such stories may provide spiritual growth, self-development and general inspiration.

Practically, academics may engage in a process of free writing as discovery. While usually academic writing is purpose-based (i.e., to write a paper to be published with a specific journal, and thus compliant with the requirement of the outlet), fictional science frees itself from such restrictions, and calls for academic to first write without constraints, in a way that suits the personality and personal preference of the author(s). This writing can be perceived as a liberating form of self-expression, which enable the author to find meaning through the process of writing itself. Such writing does not have to be value free, but can be conducted one the basis of personal and academic values (e.g., the prioritization of human dignity; Bal et al., 2019, 2023), and based on one's experiences, expertise and skills as academic – in this way writing fictional science is not disconnected from one's academic identity, but central to it. Such liberated writing may enable self-reflection and reflexivity, new ideas, a vision of what we ought to do (in times of global climate crisis and instability), and a stronger connection of our personal with our academic identities.

Even more practically, fictional science could be perceived as an integral part of academic work itself. Conceptualizing, defining and theorizing are central aspects of academic work, which contain a level of fictionality (in postulating that which does not exist). In such acts, writing fictional science may support these processes through informing a value-based interpretation of this work. When one engages in theorizing, one is essentially using fictional ways of structuring and making sense of human behavior, or the seemingly randomness of human existence (Bal et al., 2023). Theorizing in this regard is not a neutral act, but a deliberate way to translate this randomness into meaning – a process that may be inspired by fictional science. Theorizing through fictional science opens up the way to the imaginative, beyond the boundaries of the existing into the unknown – that which *may* be. In plain words, it is no longer necessary to theorize all human behavior at work in relation to performance and utility, but we could theorize about the phenomenon of human behavior itself, without linking it directly to some organizationally-relevant outcome. Seeing the fiction in theory opens the way to theorize about possible outcomes, such as dignity or sustainability (Bal et al., 2023). Fictional science thus becomes a way to write about human behavior at work to restore or protect dignity and ways through which humanity could work towards such aims.

Journals (editors) may also create more space in journals for such creative and alternative ways of expression. Fictional science does not invite itself to appear or be welcomed in conservative academic journals, and could be seen in more innovative platforms and media, including video, podcast, and social media. Nonetheless, given the hegemonic status of academic journals for scientific credibility, it would be good if there is space of fictional science into our journals, to show its validity as form of academic communication. Finally, fictional science may also be used in organizations, where stories of how workplaces could be designed may prove inspirational in transforming organizations to become more viable, sustainable and dignified (Bal et al., 2023). Academics, artists and others may use fictional science to create impact and change stories in the world outside academia, and provide inspirations for organizations, managers, workers and other stakeholders.

Conclusion

Should this piece end with a discussion of the practical implication and logical conclusion? Ending a novel with a chapter in which the main story plot is summarized and lessons learned for the readers are presented sounds somewhat absurd. If fictional science is taken seriously, then the need to end in

a conventional way would undermine its very message. What fictional science means to academics and academia, and to practitioners, is not on us to dictate, but to leave to the readers themselves. Dismissing or ignoring the very notion of fictional science, or the notion of imagination more generally, is always an option to anyone pursuing the 'objective study of human behavior in the workplace'. Yet, it also offers a broadening of the very space of what science does for society. We articulate such an endeavor, and any reader is encouraged to take away from the piece what they want to.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

P. Matthijs Bal https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6955-2837
Mehmet A. Orhan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7093-4085
Yvonne Gerarda Theodora van Rossenberg https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1776-4029

References

Aguinis, H., Beaty, J. C., Boik, R. J., & Pierce, C. A. (2005). Effect size and power in assessing moderating effects of categorical variables using multiple regression: A 30-year review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *90*(1), 94–107. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.1.94

Antonacopoulou, E. P. (2022). Partnering for impact: A grand challenge and design for co-creating a just, resilient and flourishing society. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *58*(4), 571–594.

Bal, M., Brookes, A., Hack-Polay, D., Kordowicz, M., & Mendy, J. (2023). *The absurd workplace: How absurdity is normalized in contemporary society and the workplace*: Palgrave MacMillan.

Bal, P. M. (2020). Why we should stop measuring performance and well-being. *Zeitschrift für Arbeits-und Organisationspsychologie A&O*, *64*(1), 196–215.

Bal, P. M., & Dóci, E. (2018). Neoliberal ideology in work and organizational psychology. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology*, *27*(5), 536–548.

Bal, P. M., Doci, E., Lub, X., Van Rossenberg, Y. G., Nijs, S., Achnak, S., & De Gieter, S. (2019). Manifesto for the future of work and organizational psychology. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology*, *28*(3), 289–299.

Bal, P. M., Van Rossenberg, Y., & Orhan, M. (2024a). On reproduction of form in work and organizational psychology: How predefined forms stifle academic knowledge production. Paper under review.

Bal, P. M., van Rossenberg, Y., & Orhan, M. A. (2024b). *Manifestation of academic rackets in management research through early career sessions at academic conferences*. Management Learning.

Baruch, Y. (2023). *HARKing can be good for science: Why, when, and how c/should we Hypothesizing after Results are Known or Proposing research questions after Results are Known*. Human Resource Management Journal. *in press*.

Boncori, I. (2023). *Researching and writing differently*: Policy Press.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2022). Must I grow a pair of balls to theorize about theory in organization and management studies? *Organization Theory*, *3*(3), 26317877221109277.

Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1997). *Narrating the organization: Dramas of institutional identity*. University of Chicago Press.

Czarniawska-Joerges, B. (1999). *Writing management: Organization theory as a literary genre*. Oxford University Press.

Dalal, R. S. (2005). A meta-analysis of the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and counterproductive work behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *90*(6), 1241–1255. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1241

Edmondson, A. C., & McManus, S. E. (2007). Methodological fit in management field research. *Academy of Management Review*, *32*(4), 1246–1264.

Gabriel, Y. (1995). The unmanaged organization: Stories, fantasies and subjectivity. *Organization Studies*, *16*(3), 477–501.

Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fictions, and fantasies: Facts, fictions, and fantasies*. OUP Oxford.

Kilroy, R. (2019). A theatre of shadows: Saving, critiquing, psychoanalyzing Žižek. *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, *13*(2), 1.

Kociatkiewicz, J., Kostera, M., & Zueva, A. (2022). The ghost of capitalism: A guide to seeing, naming and exorcising the spectre haunting the business school. *Management Learning*, *53*(2), 310–330.

Kostera, M., & Pirson, M. (2017). *Dignity and the organization*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Morgan, G. (1997). *Imaginization: New mindsets for seeing, organizing, and managing*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Orhan, M. A., Bal, P. M., & van Rossenberg, Y. G. (2024). *Rise of the most excellent scholar, demise of the field: A fictional story, yet probable destiny*. Culture and Organization.

Phillips, N. (1995). Telling organizational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organizations. *Organization Studies*, *16*(4), 625–649.

Rhodes, P., Mihalits, D., Lättman, K., Rodax, N., Hornung, S., Chistensen, A. B., & Botelho, V. (2018). Hidden present, visible absent in the City of dreams: Assembling the collective imagination. *Human Arenas*, *1*(2), 151–165.

Tateo, L. (2020). *A theory of imagining, knowing, and understanding*: Springer Nature.
Žižek, S. (2024, August 20). *Zizek We need a global restructuring?* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyT29Z4fYpc

Submitted Date: November 17, 2023
Revised Submission Date: November 14, 2024
Acceptance Date: November 14, 2024

Author Biographies

P. Matthijs Bal learned more about human nature from Dostoyevski than from Zimbardo. Academic work psychologists are not good with fiction and fear the literary, and Bal's mission has become to reconcile the soul with the study of human behavior at work through the literary. In fiction truth is found, and his work attempts to open up new ways for imagination in the field.

April Liu Griffin is passionate to make academic a more inclusive and supportive place. She imagines people within this environment develop appreciations not only for academic capabilities but also relationships with each others, and how we support each other to accomplish our goals. While acknowledging challenges, she believes the power of building supportive relationships will make academics' experience worthwhile and blissful.

Mehmet A. Orhan is a dreamer of a more inclusive, healthy, and transparent academia while challenging the perverse norms of scholarship. Despite his usual pessimism, he holds a naïve hope for an academic future that exceeds the current boundaries of hierarchy and exclusivity. He imagines academia as a space where voices of all colors thrive, and ideas are valued for their merit, regardless of who generates them or the form and venue in which they are presented.

Yvonne Gerarda Theodora van Rossenberg strives to make academia more sustainable, driven by her core values: dignity, equality, collaboration, responsibility, and making a difference. Whilst challenging the structural barriers she is also currently seeking to survive the exorbitant mental and physical strains as a newlywed, pregnant, neurodiverse, 40-year-old, female, first-generation academic.