



From Impact to Impacting: A Pragmatist Perspective on Tackling Grand Challenges

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Abstract:	Scholars have long sought to impact management practice. However, the current conceptualization of impact is grounded in dualisms, separating researchers from managers, means from ends, and thought from action. Such a dualistic understanding of impact hampers researchers' and managers' ability to achieve impact. Nowhere is this issue more acute than in the context of grand challenges, which require researchers and managers to work together closely. As a way forward, we propose a pragmatist perspective on impact, where impact is not seen as a one-time, unidirectional event, but rather as a relational and recursive process. By overcoming dualisms in traditional approaches to impact, pragmatist impacting can help advance progress on grand challenges and our current understanding of cocreation. In this paper, we illustrate pragmatist impacting and reflect on its opportunities and challenges through our experience at Innovation North, an innovation lab that brought together researchers and managers to cocreate a systems innovation process.

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3 **FROM IMPACT TO IMPACTING:**
4 **A PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE ON TACKLING GRAND CHALLENGES**
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**FROM IMPACT TO IMPACTING:
A PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE ON TACKLING GRAND CHALLENGES**

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long sought to impact management practice. However, the current conceptualization of impact is grounded in dualisms, separating researchers from managers, means from ends, and thought from action. Such a dualistic understanding of impact hampers researchers' and managers' ability to achieve impact. Nowhere is this issue more acute than in the context of grand challenges, which require researchers and managers to work together closely. As a way forward, we propose a pragmatist perspective on impact, where impact is not seen as a one-time, unidirectional event, but rather as a relational and recursive process. By overcoming dualisms in traditional approaches to impact, pragmatist impacting can help advance progress on grand challenges and our current understanding of cocreation. In this paper, we illustrate pragmatist *impacting* and reflect on its opportunities and challenges through our experience at Innovation North, an innovation lab that brought together researchers and managers to cocreate a systems innovation process.

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Keywords: impact; grand challenges; pragmatism, cocreation

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3 Climate change, biodiversity loss, and public health issues have reached crisis proportions,
4 affecting organizations, society, and the planet. In response, researchers seek to impact
5 management practice to tackle these and other grand challenges (Wickert, Post, Doh, Prescott, and
6 Prencipe, 2021), which we define as urgent, complex, and significant issues that are wreaking
7 havoc on social, environmental, and economic systems (Banks et al., 2016).
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12 However, the impact of prior research on grand challenges may have been hampered, in
13 part, because of how impact has been conceptualized. Specifically, existing approaches to research
14 are deeply rooted in dualisms, which divide research and its impact on managers into opposing
15 elements (Farjoun, 2010), resulting in divisions such as researcher versus manager, means versus
16 ends, and thought versus action. Dualisms are especially pernicious in the context of grand
17 challenges because they motivate researchers to select only those activities that they believe to be
18 impactful, when the activities that are needed to tackle grand challenges are those in which impact
19 may be harder to foresee, measure, and attribute.
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33 In this paper, we ask: *How can researchers reconceptualize impact to overcome dualisms*
34 *and, thus, more effectively tackle grand challenges?* To answer this question, we draw on the
35 philosophy of pragmatism (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Follet, 1942; Mead, 1934; Peirce, 1877), which
36 challenges the dualisms inherent in more traditional approaches to impact. Pragmatism offers a
37 processual, relational, and recursive approach to scholarship. It asks researchers to shift their
38 perspective from the outcome of impact to the process of *impacting*. In doing so, the boundaries
39 between research and practice become less distinct, which is critical in tackling the urgent,
40 dynamic, and critical issues confronting humanity.
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51 We illustrate this pragmatist impacting through our work with the Lab at Innovation North,
52 which is situated at the Ivey Business School at Western University (London, Canada). The Lab
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3 comprises a team of management researchers and a set of ‘practice partners’ who seek to apply
4 systems thinking to corporate innovation challenges. In this Lab, we operationalize some of the
5 principles of pragmatism. Our aim is to recognize both the opportunities and challenges associated
6 with such an endeavor.
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12 We make a few noteworthy contributions in this paper. A pragmatist approach to impacting
13 extends traditional views that conceptualize impact as unidirectional by proposing a more bilateral
14 and inclusive form of impact. Furthermore, it broadens the concept of impact from grandiose
15 events to a process that evolves over time, transforming a singular impact event with pre-defined
16 measurable outcomes into an ongoing process of impacting. Lastly, pragmatist impacting advances
17 prior approaches by suggesting that impacting requires experimenting with ideas in practice to see
18 what does and does not work. We argue that this pragmatist approach to impacting puts researchers
19 and managers in a better position to tackle grand challenges more effectively.
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31 32 33 **TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO IMPACT FOSTER DUALISMS**

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35 The concept of impact is deeply rooted in fundamental dualisms, a particular belief system that
36 divides the world into two opposing or contrasting elements such as mind-body, micro-macro,
37 structure-agency, and change-stability. The dualistic view presupposes a clear-cut contrast,
38 precisely defined boundary, and mutual exclusivity between the two categories (Farjoun et al.,
39 2015; Simpson, 2017).
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47 While such distinctions provide conceptual clarity and simplicity, they reduce complex
48 issues into independent categories, missing a holistic perspective (Tsoukas and Dooley, 2011;
49 Whitford, 2002). Human action, however, often transcends boundaries imposed by the dualistic
50 thinking that splits thinking from acting (e.g., Joas, 1996; Paul, 2021). Consequently, scholars have
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3 come to view dualisms as a major shortcoming in contemporary social theory (Joas, 1996; Kilpinen,
4 1998; Knights and Mueller, 2004). We describe three important dualisms implicit in the current
5 conceptualizations of impact in the literature—researcher-manager, means-ends, and thought-
6 action—and explain how they inhibit impact.
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12 **Researcher-Manager Dualism**

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15 The first dualism separates researchers from managers. Many studies on research impact
16 strongly emphasize the ‘Great Divide’ (Rynes et al., 2001) between researchers and managers
17 (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Kondrat, 1992), which many argued could be bridged by translating
18 research insights for practice (Shapiro, Kirkman, and Courtney, 2007).
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24 Researchers play marginal roles in shaping management practices (Barley et al., 1988;
25 Fincham and Clark, 2009; Gibson and Tesone, 2001; Spell, 2001) because research and practice
26 represent two vastly different worlds with their own distinct institutional logics (Kieser and Leiner,
27 2009) and approaches to knowledge (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). For instance, researchers
28 aim for rigor while managers ask for relevance (Carlsen et al., 2014); researchers value
29 generalizable, descriptive knowledge while managers favor context-specific, prescriptive advice
30 (Kondrat, 1995; Sharma and Bansal, 2020); researchers are incentivized to produce knowledge
31 while for managers, knowledge is only valuable when it is applied in their world (Keleman and
32 Bansal, 2002). Moreover, researchers have relatively long timeframes in their pursuit of
33 knowledge, while managers have much shorter time horizons for decision-making (Bartunek et
34 al., 2003; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).
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49 Such a dualistic understanding of the researcher-manager relationship has contributed to
50 researchers adopting a self-centered point of view, conceptualizing impact as a unidirectional
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3 process where knowledge flows from researchers to managers. Managers are often seen as passive
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5 consumers of knowledge without the requirement to participate actively in producing knowledge.
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7 8 **Means-Ends Dualism**

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10 A second dualism is the divide between means and ends. The traditional approach in
11
12 researcher-manager collaborations typically begins with defining a problem (i.e., ends), and then
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14 proceeds to find a solution (i.e., means). By clearly separating means from ends, impact is seen as
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16 a predefined outcome achieved through appropriate means. It is assumed that impact lies in
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18 producing an ‘output,’ which involves repackaging research findings into a language and through
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20 a medium that is accessible to managers (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000; Spencer, 2001).
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24 However, the approach is critiqued for its ‘if you build it, they will come’ assumption
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26 (Bansal, Bertels, Ewart, MacConnachie, and O’Brien, 2012; Mohrman, Gibson, and Mohrman,
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28 2001). In addition, such an approach turns our gaze toward metrics, such as the number of
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30 downloads or mentions in the media (e.g., Aguinis, Shapiro, Antonacopoulou, and Cummings,
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32 2014), which are, at best, incomplete indicators of impact. Such an outcome-based
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34 conceptualization also fails to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between problems and solutions.
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36 The notion of co-evolution, as highlighted by Dorst and Cross (2001), suggests that problems and
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38 solutions are not static and distinct entities but are tightly intertwined and shaped by each other
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40 over time.
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44 45 **Thought-Action Dualism**

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47 The last dualism separates thought from action. By upholding this separation, previous
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49 studies implicitly suggest that researchers are primarily responsible for thinking, such as through
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51 theorizing, while managers are tasked with acting and implementing. Furthermore, there is a
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3 prevailing belief that changes in thinking should precede changes in action (Tsoukas and Chia,
4 2002). Therefore, thinking is not only distinct but often considered a prerequisite for action.
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8 Even progressive perspectives to impact divide thinking from acting. For example, Lewin
9 referred to a “spiral of steps”, in which each step has a distinct role: planning, action, and
10 evaluation (Lewin, 1946, p. 38). Similarly, Coghlan (2011) characterized research impact as
11 encompassing “repeated cycles of problem identification, planning, taking action, and evaluation”
12 (p. 57).
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19 However, this approach tends to limit knowledge to one side (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018),
20 with researchers often acting as on-lookers while managers as implementers. There is still
21 relatively little discussion about how researchers can act together with managers and how
22 managers can theorize with researchers.
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31 **WHY THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO IMPACT FAILS GRAND CHALLENGES**

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34 The persistence of such a dualistic approach to impact becomes especially problematic
35 when dealing with grand challenges. Grand challenges are “formulations of global problems that
36 can be plausibly addressed through coordinated and collaborative effort.” (George et al., 2016, p.
37 1880). They are 1) *interdependent and complex*, so they manifest especially in modern, globally
38 connected societies, making it difficult to pinpoint their root causes (Ferraro et al., 2015; Liu et
39 al., 2015), 2) *collective*, so their impacts extend beyond the boundaries of a single organization or
40 community and thus can only be effectively addressed through coordinated and collaborative
41 efforts (Colquitt and George, 2011; George et al., 2016), and 3) *significant and urgent* (George et
42 al., 2016; Seelos et al., 2023), so they greatly affect human welfare and demand immediate action.
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3 These grand challenges, by nature, defy the dualisms still implicit in the traditional
4 conceptualization of impact.
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8 First, the traditional conceptualization of impact has delineated distinct roles for
9 researchers and managers, implicitly assuming impact as a one-way process in which researchers
10 drive changes in practice. This approach confers authority upon researchers, presuming they
11 singularly have the expertise. However, such a clear separation between researchers and managers
12 becomes problematic when addressing complex grand challenges. These grand challenges involve
13 interactions across domains, locations, and time frames (Ferraro et al., 2015; Gehman et al., 2022),
14 necessitating diverse perspectives of multiple stakeholders (Ferraro et al., 2015).
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24 Accordingly, grand challenges call for the dissolution of traditional boundaries and a more
25 flexible understanding of roles (Grodal and O'Mahony, 2017; Gümüşay et al., 2022; Kroeger et
26 al., 2022; Stjerne et al., 2022). For example, Reinecke and Ansari (2016) studied the Democratic
27 Republic of Congo, showing how complex problems such as conflict minerals require the blurring
28 of public and private sector boundaries. Researchers addressing grand challenges, too, should
29 “rethink their role within society” (Gümüşay et al., 2022, p. 2). A role that dissolves the boundaries
30 between research and practice, even if momentarily, such that researchers can engage more deeply
31 with other actors.
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44 Second, the traditional conceptualization of impact pushes both researchers and managers
45 to pre-define a goal for their collaboration and then work together to identify the means to achieve
46 it. However, this clear separation between means and ends in conceptualizing impact becomes
47 problematic in grand challenges, which are inherently uncertain, lack clear cause-and-effect
48 relationships, and evolve unpredictably (Ferraro et al., 2015; Knight, 1921). One cannot pre-define
49 what impact looks like because predefined outcomes could lead to unintended consequences
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3 (Gehman et al., 2022; Sterman, 1989), just like when ethanol fuel, initially promoted as part of the
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(Gehman et al., 2022; Sterman, 1989), just like when ethanol fuel, initially promoted as part of the solution to alleviate climate change, diverted corn from feeding people (Ferraro et al., 2015). Well-intentioned innovations can unintentionally marginalize fringe stakeholders even further (Khan et al., 2007; Marti, 2018). Microfinance institutions aiming to alleviate poverty push people further into poverty, creating additional problems, such as deteriorating mental health among borrowers (Finch and Kocieniewski, 2022). As such, research impact in the context of addressing grand challenges demands that researchers break away from the means-ends divide and embrace a more dynamic approach to impact.

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Lastly, the traditional notion of impact separates thought from action, implying that researchers need to fully understand a situation before managers can act in researcher-manager collaborations. However, such a division between thought and action becomes particularly concerning when tackling grand challenges. These challenges demand prompt action, yet their complexity (Ferraro et al., 2015) makes relying solely on existing knowledge impossible (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

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Addressing grand challenges requires iterative actions that promote evolutionary learning through local (Mair et al., 2016) or distributed experimentation (Ferraro et al., 2015). For instance, ecologies of local efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the United States were more potent than the single, top-down approaches (Lutsey and Sperling, 2008). Experiments are crucial as COVID-19 showed us that past knowledge may not apply to unprecedented problems (Bansal, Grewatsch, and Sharma, 2022). There is no silver bullet that solves a grand challenge once and for all, and there is no way of knowing at the outset how best to proceed. Therefore, researchers studying grand challenges need to move away from the thought-action divide and open themselves

up to the emergence of insights that are “stumble(d) upon” (Wiedner and Ansari, 2017, p. 15) and gained while actively engaging in acting.

TOWARD A PRAGMATIST TURN TO IMPACT

For our theoretical grounding, we draw on classical pragmatism, associated with philosophers like Peirce, James, Dewey, Mead, Follett, and Addams to re-conceptualize impact for grand challenges. Pragmatism offers a rich philosophy (see e.g., Bernstein, 2010; Elkjaer and Simpson, 2011; Simpson and Den Hond, 2021) in which knowledge is grounded firmly in practice: the etymology of pragmatism is from the Greek word *pragma* for deed or act, and *prassein* for ‘to do,’ which is the same root as practices, praxis, and practical. Pragmatism is one of the important traditions from which scholars have drawn for exploring the relationship between practice and theory (see also Buch and Schatzki, 2018; Nicolini and Monteiro, 2018), and can be considered a theory of practice (Simpson, 2009).

There are a few key tenets of pragmatism that make it particularly relevant for this paper: (1) pragmatist philosophy of science; (2) pragmatism as systemic, and (3) pragmatism as anti-dualistic. First, the pragmatist philosophy of science (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Peirce 1877; 1878) puts problems derived from practice rather than problems derived from theory at the center. This focus on the practical has several consequences. First is the pragmatist belief in progress and emancipation (Dewey, 1939). Pragmatism is not satisfied with simply describing the status quo. Pragmatism is instead about actuating change and progressing toward a better future.

Such a stance toward actuating change yields what pragmatism highlights as the experimental nature of science (Peirce, 1877). Pragmatists described experiments as an approach to test concepts through their practical consequences (Peirce, 1878) and the importance of being

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3 open to new evidence (Shields, 2003). As such, pragmatism does not merely describe and represent
4 reality; it highlights that we learn through experiments that change reality (e.g., Simpson and
5 Lorino, 2016). Further, as a philosophy of science, pragmatism argues for a social nature of
6 epistemology. Individuals do not conduct research alone. Instead, researchers need to engage with
7 other stakeholders and a wider community to deal with problematic situations (Dewey, 1927;
8 Lorino, 2018).

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18 Second, pragmatism is systemic. Pragmatism influenced early systems theorists (see for
19 discussions, e.g., Barton, 1999; Britten and McCallion, 1994). Pragmatism considers the situation
20 a central concept (e.g., Follett, 1942), which allows researchers to see a system's
21 interconnectedness. Situations cover vast spaces and time, drawing on remembered past, imagined
22 future, and our explanations of the situation. Mary Parker Follett argued that we need to understand
23 how problems are part of a wider system (Follett, 1942). Such an understanding of systems can
24 cope with both systems' dynamics and complexity.

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34 Third is the anti-dualistic stance of pragmatism. Pragmatism critiques dualistic
35 explanations because they are static, as they pit two forces against each other (e.g., light and dark,
36 hot and cold, thought and action). Pragmatists were skeptical of absolutes, certainties, and claims
37 of final truth (Dewey, 1917; Elkjaer and Simpson, 2015; Lorino, 2018). Instead, pragmatism offers
38 an alternative in which dualisms are broken up by highlighting their interrelatedness rather than
39 separateness, which considers the situation and the process more (Dewey, 1917). An example is
40 Dewey's approach to art as an experience (Dewey, 1927). Instead of reducing art to be an object
41 with a distinct meaning, Dewey included the onlooker as an active participant in art. Art is not
42 only in the eye of the beholder, but the beholder becomes part of the art. Throughout pragmatism,
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3 the critique of dualisms and work towards dualities is a common thread (e.g., Elkjaer and Simpson,
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5 2015; Lorino, 2018).
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7 **From Impact to (Pragmatist) Impacting**

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10 Pragmatism offers unique insights that recast impact in a new light. We respond to the call
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12 by Gehman and colleagues (2022) to deepen our understanding of impact and grand challenges by
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14 drawing on the relational, processual, and recursive aspects of pragmatism. The relational aspects
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16 highlight ‘where’ impact occurs in changing relationships. The processual aspects highlight ‘what’
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18 impact is, focusing on the ever-becoming nature of impact. The recursive aspects delve into the
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20 mechanisms of ‘how’ impact happens. These three aspects collectively transform our
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22 conceptualization of ‘impact’ into ‘*impact-ing*’ – an ongoing, recursive process in the relationships
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24 between managers, researchers, and situations.
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28 **Relational Impacting through Trans-actions in a Community of Inquiry**

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31 Pragmatism offers a relational perspective that describes social entities and ideas through
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33 connections and relationships rather than their intrinsic attributes (e.g., Emirbayer, 1997; Simpson,
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35 2009). A relational perspective posits that “relations between terms or units [are] preeminently
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37 dynamic in nature, [are] unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert
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39 substances” (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 289). In other words, instead of seeing humans as individuals
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41 with independent attributes, pragmatism argues we are who we are through our relationships with
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43 those around us.
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48 In the context of research impact, the relational ontology of pragmatism does not posit a
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50 clear-cut division between researchers and managers. While it still recognizes differences in the
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52 roles of researchers and managers, it emphasizes their complementary nature and interdependence.
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54 We argue that pragmatism’s strong focus on relationships has significant implications for
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3 reconceptualizing ‘where’ impact occurs, prompting researchers to shift their perspective away
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5 from the separation between researchers and managers. It discourages the unidirectional targeting
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7 of others (e.g., managers) as the sole recipients of impact. Instead, relationality encourages
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9 researchers and managers to perceive relationships as collaborative spaces for impact.
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13 From a pragmatist perspective, the relational impacting is not solely the result of ‘inter-
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15 actions,’ where researchers and managers are essentially opposing entities, balanced against each
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17 other in a causal connection (Dewey and Bentley, 1949). True relational impacting necessitates
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19 ‘trans-action,’¹ indicating a deeper level of engagement that transforms both researchers and
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21 managers. To put it differently, while inter-action might imply a straightforward exchange of ideas
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23 or actions between parties, where “entities remain fixed and unchanging throughout such
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25 interaction” (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 235), trans-action signifies an engagement that can lead to
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27 substantial changes, learning, or transformation for all parties involved. The pragmatist notion of
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29 trans-action encourages us to delve deeper into the triadic relationship involving researchers,
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31 managers, and the situation.
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37 Reconceptualizing impact as trans-action becomes especially important when addressing
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39 grand challenges, which typically demand substantial and transformative solutions (Lorino, 2020).
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41 Trans-action implies ontological and thus more profound changes than inter-actions (Dewey and
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43 Bentley, 1949; Emirbayer, 1997), a crucial aspect when dealing with complex and deeply
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45 ingrained challenges. Furthermore, addressing grand challenges requires the integration of diverse
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47 perspectives, often involving a multitude of stakeholders (Ferraro et al., 2015). The concept of
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55 ¹ In our paper, we use “trans-action”, following Dewey and Bentley (1949) and Lorino (2021), to distinguish the
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57 pragmatist use of the term from its meaning in economics, psychology, or management as “transaction”.
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3 trans-action underscores that these interactions should be viewed as valuable opportunities for
4 collaborative learning and personal development, transforming all parties involved. Trans-action
5 becomes particularly important when confronting challenges that transcend the comprehension of
6 any single entity and demand interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration.
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13 The pragmatist notion of a ‘community of inquiry’ (Dewey, 1916) is particularly relevant
14 to embracing a more trans-actional research approach. Such a community highlights that
15 researchers and managers engage with each other on a more equal footing while maintaining
16 different roles (e.g., Lorino, et al., 2011; Wegener and Lorino, 2021). In this sense, researchers
17 become more active in practice, while managers become more integral to the theorizing process,
18 but maintain a degree of distinction in their roles.
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28 Three key aspects are central to a community of inquiry: dialogue, diversity, and
29 deliberations (Shields, 2003). First, dialogue plays a pivotal role in a community by facilitating
30 the exchange of ideas and experiences, leading to a more profound understanding of the situation,
31 the problem, and its potential solutions (Shotter, 2008; Tsoukas, 2009). From a pragmatic
32 standpoint, dialogue encompasses far more than just spoken words. It entails non-verbal
33 expressions, cues, and actions, a concept elucidated by Mead’s ‘conversation of gestures’ (Mead,
34 1934; Simpson, 2009; 2017). Secondly, while other approaches emphasize the necessity of shared
35 interests and goals, pragmatism offers a contrary perspective, asserting that value is in diversity
36 (Lorino, 2019). Diverse viewpoints within a community of inquiry yield valuable insights when
37 differences are acknowledged, explored, and turned into action (Follett, 1924; 1942). Therefore,
38 within research impact, the differences between researchers and managers are not viewed as a gap
39 to be bridged but rather as an opportunity to enrich the potential for impact. Finally, deliberation
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3 (Dewey, 1922) is the process of what to do next through a democratic process (Dewey, 1916;
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5 1927).

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8 In summary, relational impacting sees impact as not just unidirectional, but transforms all
9
10 parties involved. This transformation includes managers and the immediate situation and extends
11
12 to the researchers themselves. It recognizes that researchers are not passive observers but active
13
14 participants who can also experience growth, change, and transformation as they engage in impact
15
16 work. Such a two-way change is possible through a trans-actional approach that values dialogue,
17
18 diversity, and deliberation.

21 22 **Processual Impacting through Ends-in-view**

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24
25 Pragmatism is rooted in a process ontology underpinned by “an ontological commitment
26
27 that views the world as constantly *becoming*” (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016, p. 4). This perspective
28
29 shifts the focus from static entities that 'inter-act' with each other to dynamic flows, movements,
30
31 and emergence (Dewey and Bentley, 1949; Emirbayer, 1997; Garud et al., 2015).

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35 In the context of research impact, we argue that process ontology allows researchers to
36
37 redefine “what” impact is. A process ontology enables an understanding of impact as not a pre-
38
39 determined outcome but rather a process that evolves over time, emerging not just at the end of
40
41 researcher-manager collaboration but throughout the journey. We recognize that such a processual
42
43 conceptualization of impact is not entirely novel. A few scholars have previously advocated for a
44
45 more process-driven approach to researcher-manager collaboration (e.g., Coghlan, 2011; Sharma
46
47 and Bansal, 2021). However, we argue that a pragmatist perspective takes it further by
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49 transitioning from an epistemological to an ontological process (Langley and Tsoukas, 2016). This
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3 shift entails moving beyond merely understanding the process as it relates to our ways of doing
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5 research, embracing process philosophy, and taking process ontology seriously in research impact.
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9 Process as ontology is distinct from process as epistemology. A process ontology rejects
10
11 the tendency to compartmentalize means and ends. Pragmatism offers key insights on moving
12
13 away from such means-ends dualism. Dewey (1933, p. 140) highlighted that beginning with a
14
15 predefined problem is artificial, suggesting that reality does not neatly present itself as discrete
16
17 problems. Instead, problems arise from troubling and perplexing situations with inherent
18
19 problematic qualities that require investigation. Therefore, pragmatism suggests that fully
20
21 comprehending the problem involves engaging in problematization, a process through which
22
23 insights into both the problem and the solution are gained in a co-evolutionary manner. In essence,
24
25 the true nature of the problem only becomes apparent once a solution has been found (Dewey,
26
27 1933).
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32 Instead of positing final ends as telos, Dewey (1922; 1958) proposed that actors must
33
34 devise actions based on more situated 'ends-in-view'. These serve as loose guides for further action
35
36 based on the current understanding of the situation. Ends-in-view provide just enough direction
37
38 for actors to determine the appropriate next actions and observe the consequences; subsequently,
39
40 these ends-in-view become the means for the next ends-in-view. This process makes inquiry
41
42 proactive, creative, and intentional (Joas, 1996), as it selects actions based on combinations of
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44 means and ends-in-view, with practical consequences guiding the process (Joas, 1996; Joas and
45
46 Beckert, 2002).
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51 This processual understanding of impact significantly departs from traditional
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53 conceptualizations as it calls for focusing on impact in real time. Such a processual view would
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55 enable impact scholars to consider the emergent nature of the impact, which becomes especially
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3 critical in grand challenges, where problems are nonlinear and can reveal new concerns as they are
4 being tackled (Ferraro et al., 2015). Impact scholars need to pay closer attention to the overall
5 process, including how our understanding of what is impactful changes over time. Instead of
6 achieving a predetermined goal, the focus is recognizing how problems and solutions co-evolve
7 over time.
8
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14 **Recursive Impacting through Pragmatist Experiments**

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17 Recursiveness pertains to how processes operate in a looping manner, circling back to their
18 origins (Farjoun et al., 2015). It involves the idea of “multiple or chained influences returning over
19 time to their instigating source” (Farjoun et al., 2015, p. 1800; Ansell, 2011). Recursiveness
20 emphasizes that change and development are non-linear processes characterized by feedback loops
21 where the consequences of our actions inform and reshape our thoughts and practices. In turn,
22 these modified thoughts and practices facilitate further action.
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31 In the context of research impact, we argue that the pragmatist notion of recursiveness
32 informs “how” impact unfolds. The emphasis on recursiveness within pragmatism underscores the
33 intertwining of thought and action, challenging the stark separation between thought and action as
34 dualism (see e.g., Dewey, 1929). Rather than maintaining a clear boundary, recursiveness
35 highlights the capacity of individuals to adapt their actions and behaviors through reflective
36 thinking while actively engaged in action (Dewey, 1922; Farjoun et al., 2015; Schön, 1983).
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46 The division between thought and action becomes especially detrimental when tackling
47 grand challenges. These challenges demand swift action, yet their complexity (Ferraro et al., 2015)
48 makes it nearly impossible to rely solely on actions based on existing knowledge. One can never
49 understand a system by just observing it (Follet, 1924). Instead, action is essential for acquiring a
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3 deeper understanding of the complexity of these challenges, particularly because of the
4
5 interdependencies of the manifold relationships throughout the system.
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9 The concept of pragmatist experiments (Ansell, 2012) offers a solution to this divide
10
11 between thought and action. The pragmatist maxim is to focus on practical consequences (Peirce,
12
13 1878), in which experiments are crucial to understanding the value and validity of ideas.
14
15 Pragmatist experiments are about learning what works and what does not in practice (Ansell, 2012).
16
17 In positivistic experimentation often conducted in a Lab setting, the focus is on ‘if-then’ logic,
18
19 where researchers create hypotheses and design experiments to test specific linear cause-and-effect
20
21 relationships. This approach is characterized by a deductive framework, where researchers predict
22
23 outcomes based on established theories and then confirm or disconfirm those predictions through
24
25 experimentation (Ansell, 2012).
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31 On the contrary, pragmatist experimentations do not start with strict predictions; instead,
32
33 they begin with practical situations that are in some way problematic (Gross, 2009), following
34
35 Dewey’s idea that “the starting point is the actually problematic” (1925, p. 61). This problem forces
36
37 individuals to reevaluate their beliefs, theories, interpretations, and habitual actions (Dewey, 1922,
38
39 p. 364). Pragmatist experiments take on a ‘what if’ mindset. Researchers and managers engage in
40
41 pragmatist experiments by exploring a wide array of possibilities and scenarios (Bartel and Garud,
42
43 2003; Golden-Biddle, 2019; Mantere and Ketokivi, 2013). They formulate several competing
44
45 working hypotheses, including the problem, its potential solution, the actions one should take, and
46
47 the expected outcomes (Lorino, 2018). Pragmatist experiments acknowledge the complexities of
48
49 real-world issues while understanding that real-world experiments may not always yield definitive
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51 or clear-cut answers (Dewey, 1938). While abduction, a form of reasoning where explanations are
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53 inferred from specific observations (Peirce, 1998), plays a crucial role, it’s only part of the overall
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3 process. The working hypothesis generated through abduction requires validation or refutation
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5 through practical experiments or ‘what-if’ scenarios tried in real-world contexts (Lorino, 2018).
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11 **AN ILLUSTRATION OF PRAGMATIST IMPACTING: THE LAB AT INNOVATION**
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13 **NORTH**
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17 We, the authors, recognize the importance and limits of academic research in connecting
18
19 with practice. As a result, we have been developing an approach to research that would engage
20
21 practice deeply on issues related to grand challenges. This journey has offered a new understanding
22
23 of ‘impact,’ outlined in this paper.
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25

26 We illustrate aspects of relational, processual, and recursive impacting by drawing on our
27
28 experiences with Innovation North, which was housed at the Ivey Business School in Canada. It
29
30 was founded by Pratima (Tima) Bansal, one of the authors, and supported by the four other authors
31
32 as research team members. A primary activity of Innovation North was to form a Lab that was
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34 composed of approximately 30 organizations that included businesses, non-profits, and
35
36 government agencies. We called organizations “practice partners”. The first Lab session was in
37
38 October 2019 and the last in October 2024. We use the Lab to illustrate the efforts by the research
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40 team to take a more pragmatist approach to impacting and to reflect on the challenges involved in
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42 this undertaking.
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47 **Innovation North Overview**
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51 Innovation North’s objective was to apply systems thinking to corporate innovation in
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53 order to address grand challenges. Traditional approaches to corporate innovation either put
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55 internal stakeholders or the customer at the center to build the market and create economic value
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3 for the firm. They often reduce problems down into smaller, more manageable pieces and tend to
4
5 look for silver bullet solutions (Bansal, Lee, and Mascena, 2022).
6

7
8 A systems approach, on the other hand, considers the entire system in the innovation
9
10 process. We follow the perspective led by scholars such as Peter Senge (e.g., Senge, 1990) in
11
12 which systems thinking is an approach that recognizes the importance of analyzing the whole
13
14 system and not just its parts, and that systems are complex, dynamic, and the outcomes
15
16 unpredictable.
17

18
19 The Lab was created on the assumption that a systems approach to innovation fosters more
20
21 creativity and is more likely to generate products, services, and processes that contribute to positive
22
23 societal change and generate long-term revenues for the corporation than a more traditional
24
25 approach to innovation.
26

27
28 As a systems approach to corporate innovation is new, the researchers organizing the Lab
29
30 engaged managers in a range of activities, including: (1) quarterly meetings or Lab sessions, which
31
32 bring together researchers and managers, (2) the development of a new systems innovation tool,
33
34 which we called the Compass, (3) projects called ‘use cases’ within individual businesses and
35
36 organizations. We describe each activity in more detail below.
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38

39
40 Lab sessions were quarterly meetings in which researchers and managers explore specific
41
42 systems thinking and innovation topics. They generally ran over a half-day. They were
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44 conceptualized as in-person meetings, but after the second meeting, COVID-19 required they be
45
46 held online. The sessions included a keynote speaker, who was generally a researcher, or a scholar-
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48 manager with expertise in the topic of the Lab session. The research team worked with the keynote
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50 speaker to design the session in a way that combines presentations with active exercises. Each
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52 partner organization could send up to three people to participate in the session. After each Lab
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3 session, the research team debriefed and reviewed their own extensive notes. This debrief informed
4
5 the topics and ideas that would be included in the systems innovation tool the Lab was developing.
6

7
8 The Compass is a systems innovation tool that the researchers and Lab participants had
9
10 been building since 2021 based on the experience from the various Lab sessions. The tool included
11
12 a North Star and four spaces: problem framing, building systems awareness, ideating, and acting.
13
14 The Compass has undergone multiple iterations and, at the time of writing this paper, continues to
15
16 be modified. Users of the tool were encouraged to iterate among the four spaces, deepening their
17
18 understanding of the system through actions, and moving ever closer to the North Star. The
19
20 research team ultimately developed worksheets with managers and applied to their problems to
21
22 help apply the Compass with ease.
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26
27 In 2022, researchers and managers started engaging in ‘use cases,’ which are projects that
28
29 applied the Compass to address an innovation problem in practice partners’ organizations. As an
30
31 example, the Canadian Standards Association wanted to catalyze a circular built environment that
32
33 embraced the circular economy principles of regeneration, zero waste, and minimum emissions.
34
35 In another project, Co-operators Insurance worked with the research team to develop a more
36
37 resilient and sustainable approach to insurance claims. Each project involved meetings, interviews,
38
39 and workshops to navigate through the various parts of the Compass.
40
41

42 **Practical Consequences of the Lab**

43

44
45 To understand the practical consequences of engagement in the Lab, the research team
46
47 relied on conversations with managers and the journals, which the Lab participants filled out before
48
49 and after each Lab session. At the beginning of every Lab session, managers recorded, in their
50
51 individual journals, insights and data about changes they have implemented in the past three
52
53 months (i.e., since the last session). They recorded changes to both organizational practices and
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3 their own thinking based on their experiences with the Lab. Some of these practical consequences
4
5 are illustrated in the following excerpts from the journals:
6

- 7
- 8 • *“I ...have been using systems thinking to explore the idealized design of a future value*
9 *chain.”*
 - 10
11 • *“We have incorporated the process of ‘standing in other’s perspectives’ (exercise*
12 *conducted in a prior Lab session) to look at problem areas.”*
 - 13
14 • *“We’ve created an Innovation at [name of company] working group...we are trying to*
15 *create culture (of innovation, which is a systemic approach), not [house innovation*
16 *activities in] a department!”*
 - 17
18 • *“Systems thinking is now a big part of our innovation process.”*
 - 19
20 • *“[We are] developing a systems approach to building collaborative solutions around non-*
21 *reusable plastics.”*
 - 22
23
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31 Below, we provide additional examples from the Lab to illustrate relational, processual,
32
33 and recursive pragmatist impacting. Even though we describe the three aspects of impact as
34
35 separate, they are deeply integrated in reality.
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37

38 **Enacting Pragmatist Impacting**

39 ***Relational Impacting***

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43 In describing impact as relational, we advocate that the relationship between managers and
44
45 researchers be seen as reciprocal relationship. Further, pragmatist impacting that is relational
46
47 implies change, learning, and transformation for all actors involved, not just managers, as they
48
49 engage deeply through ‘trans-actions’ in a ‘community of inquiry’ (Dewey, 1916).
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51

52 One way in which Innovation North has been striving to approach relational impacting is
53
54 by revisiting role boundaries between researchers and managers. Over time, researchers and
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3 managers have gradually expanded engagement beyond their traditional roles. The first Lab
4 sessions resembled a traditional, even didactic, workshop, in which researchers were facilitators
5 and managers were there to learn through researcher presentations and group exercises. These roles
6
7 began to blur over time. Managers had become increasingly involved with the planning and
8 structuring of the Lab.
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15 For example, in July 2023, the research team met with a small group of managers from
16 each organization participating in the Lab. The 90-minute meetings were organized for the
17 research team to explain the Compass and its worksheets so that managers could understand, react,
18 and engage with the tool to tackle innovation challenges in their organizations. Each organization
19 sent beforehand one challenge in the form of a problem statement, and this anchored the
20 researchers' explanations of the worksheets. During these sessions, the research team also
21 discussed with managers the possibility of some managers leading the next Lab session based on
22 the innovation challenges they were working on. Three organizations volunteered to lead the
23 October 2023 session, in which they facilitated breakout groups of other managers.
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36 To prepare for the session with a software company in October, researchers and managers
37 interviewed members of that organization to gain insight into the innovation problem the
38 organization was facing. After conducting interviews separately, the research team and the
39 managers met to share what they had learned. Following this sharing of insights, the group had an
40 open discussion and realized the initial problem the organization was working on needed to be
41 reframed. The company had initially framed the problem as a lack of employee engagement. After
42 the discussion, the research team and managers concluded the problem had to do with how online
43 work exposed issues related to forming new relationships, fixing existing ones, and building local
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3 community ties. The reframed problem shed light on issues related to the future of work, inclusion,
4 and the company's role as an important community actor tackling social and environmental issues.
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7
8 The example above offers two illustrative insights: a shift from researchers leading the Lab
9 sessions to managers taking on this role; and researchers and managers playing similar roles in
10 interviewing, analyzing insights, and taking actions. By so doing, they moved closer to relational
11 impacting. Researchers and managers shared hats, including facilitators, experts, problem-solvers,
12 consultants, and ideators. This blurring of traditional role boundaries fostered co-inquiry among
13 researchers and managers and transformed both parties.
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21 ***Processual Impacting***

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23
24 Impact is processual when we consider the Lab's emergent organizing and objectives.
25 Below, we illustrate the notion of 'ends-in-view' that becomes the means in the further process.
26 Importantly, we show that ends were emergent and could not be planned fully such that the
27 subsequent means were emergent and yielded the next ends-in-view.
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34 When the Lab was created, we intentionally began with a broad idea of cocreating a
35 systems-based approach to innovation, not toward a pre-determined end goal, but with a general
36 notion that many of the grand challenges arose out of a singular focus on organizational profits in
37 the innovation process and that these grand challenges were highly systemic. We knew we needed
38 a more systemic approach to innovation.
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46 For the first few years, the Lab sessions and the review of the existing research helped the
47 research team develop a new systems innovation tool. A year into the Lab, the research team started
48 sharing versions of the Compass with the managers and asked for feedback on positive aspects and
49 areas for improvement.
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3 During a smaller meeting in early February 2022, however, one manager suggested that
4 the Compass needed to be tried in practice:
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8 *we've done a bunch of research and now we've got a model and a tool; [can we] now*
9 *use this innovation tool, test it, and iterate it by using it and doing it to make it even*
10 *better by trying to solve one or two real problems?*
11

12
13 This was a turning point since the manager was nudging the research team to not see the
14 Compass as an end in itself. Researchers and managers have applied the Compass to several
15 innovation projects such as building more resilience in the built environment and increasing the
16 circularity of building materials, a topic of concern to an insurance company participating in the
17 Lab.
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25 The journey of the Compass's development illustrates impact as a process in which means
26 and ends are not separate. The Compass, initially considered as the primary goal (i.e., end) of the
27 Lab during its early years, evolved into a tool (i.e., means) to solve complex challenges the partner
28 organizations are facing. At the same time, by applying the Compass to complex challenges, the
29 research team continues to revise the tool, such that the means contribute to the outcomes of tool
30 refinement, which becomes the next end-in-view. In other words, the Compass constantly evolved
31 such that each version represents an ends-in-view, which is further improved through the means
32 that follow.
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44 ***Recursive Impacting***

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46 In describing impact as recursive, we argued that thought and action are not linear; they
47 happen in a looping manner. We suggested that such recursiveness of thought and action can be
48 achieved through pragmatist experiments that researchers and managers engage in that are action-
49 oriented and bring thinking and acting closer together. Experiments, from a pragmatist lens, can
50 be of many forms such as thought experiments and trying ideas out in practice.
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3 We illustrate the recursive understanding of impact with an even closer look at how the
4
5 Compass has evolved. The idea of the Compass originated from our prior experience of working
6
7 at the intersection of research and practice. It was clear from that experience that conceptual
8
9 frameworks are limited in supporting action in organizations and systems; rather, we needed a shift
10
11 from frameworks to tools. Hence, the idea of developing a Compass started to take shape.
12
13

14
15 In 2022, the Compass emerged in its current form, a circular shape comprising four core
16
17 components, referred to as “spaces”: Problems, Awareness, Ideas, and Actions. “Spaces” was
18
19 chosen as an alternative word that deviates from a more linear process, such as “steps” or “stages,”
20
21 and thus builds recursiveness into the tool and innovation process.
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23

24
25 As the research team started to apply the Compass to individual projects, we realized each
26
27 researcher worked with the Compass components differently. For instance, the ‘Awareness space’
28
29 in one project tackling a nature-based financial instrument consisted of a map of relationships
30
31 between industries and the natural environment. However, in a project tackling sustainability
32
33 challenges in the insurance industry, the ‘Awareness space’ was a map of the flows of materials
34
35 involved in home insurance and repair, not relationships. This heterogeneity in use led the research
36
37 team to create worksheets to guide people through each Tool space. The initial version of the
38
39 worksheets was developed in the Spring of 2023, and each worksheet had several instructions, in
40
41 which the research team tried to capture all learnings from previous projects.
42
43

44
45 When the research team met with each participating organization in July 2023, we brought
46
47 thinking and acting on the Compass closer together. As researchers and managers discussed the
48
49 Compass, they realized that the complexity built into the worksheets had become overwhelming.
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51 Most managers were lost in engaging with the Compass, reflected in confused looks during
52
53 meetings and not being sure where to start. The research team started to adapt the worksheets in
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3 real time. One meeting after the other researchers would discuss potential changes in real-time
4
5 with managers—illustrating reflection-in-action. The researchers would take notes, make changes
6
7 to the worksheets, and start the next meeting with the new design.
8
9

10 We summarize the insights from these examples in Table 1.

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13 Insert Table 1 here
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15

16 17 18 **DISCUSSION**

19
20 In this paper, we challenged the way strategy and management scholarship has
21
22 conceptualized research impact. We argued that the traditional understanding of impact has rested
23
24 upon the dualisms between researchers and managers, means and ends, and thought and action.
25
26 Such dualisms have ironically hindered researchers from realizing their ambition to have a greater
27
28 impact. As a way forward, we draw on classical pragmatism to offer the notion of pragmatist
29
30 impacting. Pragmatist impacting holds important implications for scholars interested in research
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32 impact broadly.
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37 By moving from impact as a distinct, unidirectional event at a specific point in time, to
38
39 impacting as an emergent relational process, we advocate for a reconceptualization of impact as
40
41 an ongoing process of becoming. We propose that the very nature of the word ‘impact’ may
42
43 hamper our ability to create the very thing that researchers desire. We need to change, then, not
44
45 just what we do, but the process of how we do it and engage more deeply with the processual
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47 nature of impacting itself.
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49

50 **Contributions and Implications of Pragmatist Impacting**

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52 Our paper makes a few important contributions toward the understanding of research
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54 impact, particularly in the context of more recent literature on cocreation which represents a more
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3 active form of impact that involves managers directly in the research (Bartunek, 2007; Sharma and
4
5 Bansal, 2020a, 2020b; Van de Ven, Angle, and Poole, 2000).
6

7
8 In theorizing a view of impact that is relational, we propose moving beyond a
9
10 unidirectional view of impact, which recognizes that researchers are not only creators of impact
11
12 but also recipients of it. In so doing, we extend past the argument for collective inquiry and the
13
14 importance of dialogue in the existing work on impact and cocreation (Beech et al., 2010). We
15
16 argue that in relationality, researchers' 'trans-actions' with managers and other co-inquirers are
17
18 not only shaped by researchers but also shape researchers.
19
20

21
22 This insight has important implications for scholars interested in cocreating knowledge
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24 with managers. Prior research on cocreation starts from a place of separation such that researchers
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26 and managers are described as situated in different knowledge worlds, or what paradox theory
27
28 calls different poles of a contradiction (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011).
29
30 Scholars describe the (micro) practices (Sharma and Bansal, 2020; Parola et al., 2022) that help
31
32 navigate these tensions and move the research-practice collaboration toward impact. Implicit in
33
34 this focus is that researchers and their research, target managers and their practice, yielding
35
36 questions such as whether managers care as much about research impact as we do, or are
37
38 researchers, in the guise of impact simply telling managers what to do (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).
39
40 Practically, relational impacting eschews such a view. Theoretically, in claiming that researchers
41
42 and managers change their practice, we posit that both poles of the tension can change. This is in
43
44 contrast to a paradox perspective that takes a static view of the opposing poles. This insight opens
45
46 new possibilities for researchers to explore the deep relationality in the processes of cocreating.
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52 Second, theorizing pragmatist impacting as processual helps us realize that impact emerges
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54 over time and need not be driven by a grand and final goal. Traditionally, impact has been defined
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3 as quantifiable and measurable changes in predefined outcomes. Admittedly, more recent studies
4
5 on cocreation have taken a step in the right direction by advocating for a more process-driven
6
7 approach to impact. They describe impact as not only the material outcomes of the project but also
8
9 changes in how researchers and managers involved in such projects understand each other (Chen
10
11 et al., 2023; Sharma and Bansal, 2021), often leading to potential reframing of the problem
12
13 (Coghlan, 2011). However, even though this cocreation approach to impact is more process-
14
15 oriented than traditional approach, they still tend to compartmentalize means and ends. Even in
16
17 cocreation, the process typically begins with defining (framing and reframing) a problem (i.e.,
18
19 ends) and then proceeds to find a solution (i.e., means) that most effectively addresses the problem.
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24 In pragmatist impacting, impact is not merely a static endpoint but a dynamic process. By
25
26 advocating for ends-in-view (Dewey, 1930; 1958), we align with the insight that in cocreation,
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28 problem definitions evolve over time, subsequently shaping solutions (e.g., Chen et al., 2023;
29
30 Slawinski et al., 2023). Pragmatist impacting goes beyond cocreation literature as it argues against
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32 defining problems or solutions upfront or at specific points in time. Instead, it proposes a view in
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34 which both problems and solutions co-evolve and shape each other as we learn more about the
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36 situation.
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40 Thus, impact extends beyond grandiose outcomes to encompass the significance of small
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42 actions and decisions made along the way. While less noticeable initially, small wins accumulate
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44 over time and allow for a broader perspective and more complex actions that align with ongoing
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46 learning (Weick, 1984). Additionally, such a mundane view of impact invites cocreation
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48 researchers to consider tensions in research-practice collaborations. In so doing, we complement
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50 the calls to not only look at tensions that are debilitating (Lewis, 2000) but also look at tensions as
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52 the “unremarkable everyday of actors getting on with their work” (Lê and Bednarek, 2017, p. 8).
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3 Such a mundane view of impact encourages researchers to celebrate each small win in their quest
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5 toward impact, and hence continue doing the work of impact.
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7
8 Lastly, recursive impacting enables researchers to join managers in solving problems,
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10 thereby advancing progress in addressing grand challenges. Although grand challenges demand
11
12 swift and adaptive responses, researchers tend to isolate themselves from the practical world,
13
14 building metaphorical “Ivory Towers” (Gray, 2023). They do so because academia criticizes
15
16 change orientation as activism which is considered outside the purview of research: “don’t confuse
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18 your academic obligations with the obligation to save the world; that’s not your job as an academic
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20 ... [O]ur job is not to change the world, but to interpret it” (Fish, 2004).
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24
25 Cocreation scholars have railed against this approach to impact, since the knowledge
26
27 created may ultimately not be relevant to practical action. In action research (Coghlan, 2011), for
28
29 example, researchers collaborate with managers on projects that often involve cycles of action and
30
31 reflection to tackle real-world problems. This approach sees actions as “laboratory and field
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33 experiments in social change” (Lewin, 1946, p. 36) or “change experiments on real problems in
34
35 social systems” (Coghlan, 2011, pp. 56-57). Van de Ven (2007) describes the pivotal role of action
36
37 in engaged scholarship, and Sharma et al. (2022) advocate for managers and researchers to jointly
38
39 design “low-risk, low-effort experiments” (p. 355) to gain insights from the practical application
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41 of ideas.
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45 We build on this recent development in conceptualizing recursive impacting. We offer the
46
47 notion of pragmatist experimentation (see also Wicks and Freeman, 1998; Ansell, 2012) which
48
49 does not sacrifice rigorous theorizing for action. In fact, pragmatist experimentation makes clear
50
51 the inseparability of the thought and action. In pragmatist experimentation, the validity of ideas is
52
53 established through testing their practical consequences (see also Worren et al., 2002), as
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3 exemplified in the illustration of Innovation North. It represents the fusion of thought and action,
4
5 where thinking while acting adapts actions, and action while thinking informs thought.
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8 Recursive impacting offers valuable insights for reevaluating the separation of thought and
9
10 action in research impact. It responds to recent calls that question the split between theory and
11
12 impact (Reinecke et al., 2022). Recursive impacting implies that interventions (actions) can help
13
14 researchers theorize by interrogating past insights based on new experience instead of always
15
16 theory (thought) dictating interventions and action (e.g., Weick, 1999). There is a momentum
17
18 building around such theorizing (e.g., see ‘prescriptive theorizing’ by Harnisch, 2024), and the
19
20 concept of recursive impacting offers the handholds for *doing* such theorizing.
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23 24 **Challenges of Pragmatist Impacting**

25
26 Researchers pursuing a pragmatist approach to impacting will inevitably encounter a
27
28 number of challenges in their impact journeys. The most immediate and obvious challenge for
29
30 researchers is that the current academic system does not incentivize a pragmatist approach to
31
32 impacting. The prevailing systems, especially in academia, demand that impact be clearly
33
34 measurable and attributable. For instance, researchers are typically required to define the expected
35
36 outcomes and the research approach prior to being granted funding. This approach does not allow
37
38 impact to emerge in a relational, processual, and recursive manner. Researchers are often asked to
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40 predefine measures of impact through numbers, which inhibits the researchers’ ability to foster
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42 pragmatist impacting that allows for the emergence of what is impactful throughout the process.
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44 For managers, there is a similar pressure for results, and in many cases, with a short-term
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46 orientation. Of the partners who left the Lab, most departed because the executives were expecting
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48 concrete, demonstrable results in a short period of time.
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3 Another significant challenge inherent in pragmatist impacting is associated with its
4 relational nature. In an ideal world, with this new approach to impact, both researchers and
5 managers would meet as equals to collaborate in a dialogue of co-production and solve a shared
6 problem. However, researchers often still need to take the primary initiative. In our example of the
7 Lab, researchers still took the lead in establishing the Lab and inviting managers to participate. At
8 the time, many managers did not see the issue with their innovation process being exclusively
9 focused on firm-level outcomes, nor did they understand the work of researchers to see us as a
10 potential facilitator of building a new process. Over time, the dynamic has changed, and managers
11 also initiate ideas and projects to work on with the research team, but this shift needed significant
12 time and effort.
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26 Pragmatist impacting also requires openness and trust between researchers and managers.
27 In a pragmatist approach, such trust emerges through long-term engagement between researchers
28 and managers. Pragmatist impacting is not an act performed independently by researchers but
29 rather a dance where both parties engage in a constant exchange, responding to each other's
30 movements and cues over time. Therefore, pragmatist impacting requires a willingness to embrace
31 change among managers, which is hard and increasingly harder as time and attention become
32 increasingly short among managers.
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42 A further challenge of pragmatist impact is the vice and virtue of diversity. On the one
43 hand, a diverse group of participants, such as several executives from a variety of industries and
44 several researchers at different stages in their careers, enriches the impact journey. On the other
45 hand, diversity can be a challenge as different perspectives, interests, and language differences can
46 generate tension (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias, Cacciatori, Kavas, Krull, and Gallagher
47 Rodgers, 2023), and hinder integration and the development of win-win situations. The endeavor
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3 is thus to interweave the different perspectives and experiences into a meaningful integration of
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5 diversity (Follett, 1924).
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8 Finally, the experimental nature of pragmatist impacting involves a high degree of
9
10 uncertainty. It requires that all knowledge remains open to challenge and viewed as inherently
11
12 fallible. Pragmatism asserts that everything should remain susceptible to potential doubt. It
13
14 requires a willingness to subject our ideas to empirical scrutiny and testing. This can be quite
15
16 unsettling and disconcerting for both researchers and managers as it entails acting on ideas that
17
18 may not be entirely certain, and it also requires embracing the inherent risk of potential failure.
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23 24 **CONCLUSION**

25
26 The growing desire for impact has spawned special issues in journals (including this one
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28 for *Strategic Organization*), research programs, administrative positions (e.g., Associate Dean of
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30 Business+Impact at the Ross Business School, University of Michigan), and assessment exercises
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32 associated with faculty promotions and funding (e.g., the UK's 2014 Research Excellence
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34 Framework). There is an impact movement within business schools, and nowhere is it more
35
36 obvious than among researchers of grand challenges.
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40 Although we strongly support the impact movement, we question the word itself and have
41
42 advocated its reconceptualization. 'Impact' has raised the stakes for achieving measurable
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44 outcomes and sparked actions that may undermine the ambition of the members of the movement.
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46 This paper is a call to the management research community to engage managers in their research
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48 and not simply seek to 'impact' them. Drawing from the philosophy of pragmatism and our own
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50 experiences within Innovation North, we offered a new approach to impact—one that is more is
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52 inclusive, continuous and ongoing: pragmatist impacting.
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3 What we have shared in this paper with the Lab offers only a humble step forward. We
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5 invite researchers to join us on this journey of embracing pragmatist impacting. And, in no place
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7 does it feel more important and urgent than in the pursuit of tackling grand challenges.
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Table 1. How Pragmatism Helps Overcome Dualisms, Pragmatist Impacting and Illustration.

Dualisms in Research Impact	How Pragmatism Helps Overcome Dualisms	Pragmatist Impacting	Example from Innovation North
Research-Practice Dualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the situation as a resource • Consider impact in changing relationships including between researchers-managers, and the situation they are in • Use diversity of perspectives, e.g., differences in language • Be aware of your research itself being a practice • Share each other’s roles: researchers involve managers in theorizing; and managers include researchers in acting 	<p>Relational Impacting: embracing a more trans-actional approach to research, in which both researchers and managers are transformed. Relational impacting can leverage the pragmatist notion of a ‘community of inquiry’ and its three key aspects: dialogue, diversity, and deliberations.</p>	<p>Revisiting role boundaries between researchers and managers: researchers as co-managers such as when they address problems in the organization, managers as co-inquirers such as when they conduct interviews and analyses to generate insights.</p>
Means-Ends Dualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach the process as non-teleological • Keep the ends-in-view • Take existing means to revise ends 	<p>Processual Impacting: understanding that impact is not a pre-determined outcome but rather a process that evolves over time, emerging not just at the end of researcher-manager collaboration but throughout the journey.</p>	<p>The Compass starting as an ends-in-view for the Lab’s first years, shifted to becoming a means to solve complex innovation challenges. These means helped revise the tool, and so on.</p>
Thought-Action Dualism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take thoughtful action, and “actful thought” • Stay situated, i.e., remain close to action, explore the situation at hand • Engage in research as thought experiments, where practical consequences are imagined • Practical experiments, where the experiments are actually enacted to test for practical consequences 	<p>Recursive Impacting: bringing thoughts and actions closer together, often occurring simultaneously through reflection <i>during</i> action.</p>	<p>Compass changing in real-time in conversations between researchers and managers. Researchers introduced the worksheets, managers engaged in thought experiments, researchers took notes, and made changes to the worksheets in real time (reflection-in-action). Researchers started the next conversation with the new worksheets (and continued the process.</p>