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Less epistemology; More government and social status

Jone L. Pearce

Manifestos are rather strident. In manifestos, the writer presumes to speak for others, and that an audience will find the writer's public accounts of his/her reasons credible. Certainly I speak for no body, sovereign or otherwise. Nor do I feel comfortable telling other scholars what to study and how to do it. They will do as they please without my permission, in any case. Nevertheless, I agreed to do it. So, I begin by indulging myself in a complaint. It is always easier to complain about conversations and debates that you would like to see disappear than to propose ones that do not yet exist. The ones you don't like provide recurrent annoyance whereas stating what you would like to see makes you vulnerable to various kinds of assaults. So I will begin with what is easy. Then, because I am in no position to tell others what to do, I have chosen to focus on two topics I am currently debating.

Fewer content-free epistemological and statistical debates

I would love to see our successors freed from my debates over epistemological perspectives, procedures and statistics. In my ideal future, all attacks and defenses of a particular approach to developing and testing ideas would be based in logic and evidence demonstrating a utility in shedding light on important social and organizational problems and processes. Without reference to real intellectual or practical problems, epistemological, procedural and statistical critiques make no contribution. I have been reading such debates and criticisms for over 20 years and as far as I can tell no new substantive understanding of organizations or organizational behavior has been gained from them.

There may actually be one or two of our colleagues who really do believe that a statistical or methodological procedure producing the same substantive result as another but based on more elegant mathematics or slightly less heroic assumptions is worth everyone's additional time and energy. But surely there are not enough of them to have persuaded so many editors to have devoted so much ink to these kind of critiques. Such debates seem to be rather transparently about something else. Resentments, revulsion at that which is different, attempts to stake out strong positions of power within our disciplines clearly are factors. Further, it is much easier to build a publication record that is oft cited by using statistics or procedures new to the field, which you as a reviewer insist everyone else use, than it is to develop and test genuinely novel and useful ideas.

There are outsiders to battle as well. Unfortunately, some of the insights we offer tend to be commonsensical and uninteresting to anyone but the author. Dressing them up in opaque methods or obscurant jargon makes them look more scientific or scholarly. It is less likely that our colleagues elsewhere in universities or in the real world can understand such decorated work well enough to attack it; it satisfactorily intimidates. I am sympathetic to pressures created by the career demands we all face, but enough is enough. The social sciences have firmly established themselves in positions of power throughout the world; we no longer need to befuddle sceptical outsiders.

As for the insiders, to purge this irritant I propose that any reviewer or editor suggesting alternative perspectives, procedures or statistics be required to ground that suggestion with a rationale explaining why the author's approach led to a misleading or incomplete understanding. There would have to be a reason, grounded in a contribution to our substantive understanding of the question being studied, for any such suggestion. Similarly, 'new approaches' special issues and articles should be held to the same standard of substantive contribution as would work using old approaches. These practices would stop the careerist basis for these works. As for the debates driven by resentment and power seeking, I would suggest the best cure is ridicule – all doctoral students could be given these few paragraphs with the suggestion that they look for the self-serving bias in the next contribution-free epistemological, procedural and statistical critiques they read. That should do it.

Since I have argued so forcefully for the importance of substance over form, what do I have to say about substance? I can hardly make this manifesto a contribution-free critique after that diatribe! Which ideas would I like to see debated and discussed in the foreseeable future? There are two that appeal to me at this time: governments and status.

More theory and research on the effects of governments

Governments are important to organization. Governments establish and enforce the rules under which organizations operate. They can make a course of organizational action profitable or illegal. Governments facilitate the establishment and enforcement of the fundamental understandings necessary to action – who is entitled to what uses (use rights), who may legitimately sell products, land and equipment (ownership rights), and what actions are acceptable (contract law). They are extraordinarily various, ranging from centuries-old tradition-encrusted institutions to the bandit in control of a small region, with every imaginable variation in between. Yet, however various they are in form and practice, governments are always important to organizations and their participants. They establish the rules by which organizations must play and have the means to use physical force to coerce compliance.

Because those who operate and work within organizations must always contend with the governments ruling over them, it is remarkable that government is not more prominent in theories of organization and organizational behavior. Certainly it has become a truism that economic activity is enmeshed in institutions (Polányi, 1957). That is, individuals take action in the context of their expectations about the meaning and effects of their actions. Yet governments have not figured prominently in the institutions examined by theorists of organizations and organizational behavior. Social institutions (Granovetter, 1985), cultural ones (Hofstede, 1980) and historical experiences (Guillén, 1994) have received scholarly attention while the effects of different forms of sovereign government on organizations and the organizational behavior of participants are only rarely noted.

To illustrate, corruption among government officials has been widely discussed in the popular management press¹ and by economists (e.g. Rose-Ackerman, 1999), but rarely addressed or explained in the scholarly organizational literature. Yet surely the ability (or requirement) to avoid the enforcement of inconvenient laws results in different organizational strategies, organizational practices, and attitudes and behavior of participants than what would obtain in a society where enforcement of the rule of law is strict and assured. Economists have sought to analyze corruption as a cost of business but rarely have organizational scholars analyzed how corruption affects how the participants organize their work and their relationships with one another. And corruption is just one example; the same inexplicable silence confronts such government practices as erratic and opaque laws and regulations, requirements that organizations take state-owned partners in their ventures, or the practice of favoring cronies and family members in

government contracting, among others. Anecdotes and description do exist in various works from international business, but even they have not given governments the theoretical or research prominence its importance would seem to merit.

More theory and research on the role of status in organizational behavior

In contrast to the study of the effects of governments, the motive to attain a respected status or social position (here called 'status' for simplicity's sake) within organizations is widely noted, but somehow has never become the focus of sustained theoretical and empirical attention. The drive for status attainment has not been completely neglected – examples include Maslow's (1954) study of esteem needs and work on face (Doucet & Jehn, 1997; Ho, 1976; Hu, 1944) and facework (Goffman, 1959) – but the pursuit of status certainly does not have the prominence of financial incentives or affiliation in our field. In this respect, it is similar to the position of the concept of trust about a decade ago, and has the potential for the same explosive growth.

Certainly, I can think of many observations of organizations in which status was an important driver of behavior. How many people continue to work punishing work schedules because they are afraid of being seen as less tough, less one of the 'high-performance elite' (i.e. seen as having less status)? Organizational representatives have long given pins, certificates, honorary luncheons and other marks of appreciation intended to bestow status on those they deem worthy. How many organizations will terminate new supervisors who are failing at their managerial tasks rather than demote them back to their old jobs because they assume they could not be effective after such a punishing loss of status?

Status in differing guises has been studied in detail in allied disciplines. For example, status, as social differentiation, has always had a prominent place in sociology (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/1984; Parsons, 1966; Weber, 1922/1978). This work serves as a valuable base, but it needs to be applied to organizational settings. For example, how important are organizational occupations and ranks for participants' sense of status? How much control do executives and other organizational agents have over workplace social status? What will people do to increase their status in their own and others' eyes? Further, status promises to provide powerful insights regarding many other organizational questions. For example, it can help in understanding cross-cultural interactions: parties may be bringing different mental models of status-worthy behavior to their interactions.

In short, my position is that the field would benefit from less journal and conference space devoted to contribution-free debates on epistemology, procedures and statistics, and more discussion and analysis of those factors that promise increased substantive understanding of organizations and organizational behavior. I suggested two such promising factors – governments and social status – but there are many, many more worthy of our time and attention.

Note

- 1 Recent examples include: 'The termite hunter', *The Economist*, 16 October 1999 and 'Hospitals blighted by a Venezuelan disease, graft', *The New York Times*, 19 November 1999.

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