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Communities of Practice and Situated Learning: A Theoretical Examination of a Shift in Individual Power

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Abstract: *This manuscript describes a new theory of empowerment in the workplace. Unlike typical management literature dealing with empowerment, this theory uses a critical perspective to explain how communities of practice generate authentic empowerment at work. Authentic empowerment leads to higher performance, innovation, creativity, and success.*

This conceptual manuscript presents an emerging theory of empowerment in the workplace. Drawing from community of practice and situated learning literature, the theory suggests that workers who are legitimately embedded in communities of practice (COPs) become more autonomous at work. In other words, there is a positive relationship between the existence of COPs in an organization and the amount of authentic individual autonomy in that organization. The theory posits that organizations with developed COPs have the least 'control' over employees. Conversely, organizations with little to no COPs have the most 'control' over employee behavior.

It is important for organizations to understand and accept this loss of 'control' because organizations rely on *human* processes of thinking, learning, and acting instead of *technical* processes (as in the Industrial Age). Like a car needs gas to run, organizations need employees capable of thinking, performing, and adapting. Organizations depend on this talent in order to succeed in today's economy (Nakamura, 2003; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkataraman, 2001; Nooteboom, 2002). The knowledge and talents of individuals are thus central to performance in today's economic environment (Swanson & Holton III, 1997; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nooteboom, 2002; Nahapiet & Goshal, 1998). In fact, individuals are seen as *the primary* driver of value creation in today's knowledge economy (Blair & Kochan, 2000; Nooteboom, 2002; Shapiro & Varian, 2003).

Typical management literature on empowerment is focused on helping the organization develop empowerment practices and culture. Beyond that, the literature helps organizational leaders and HR people to understand how to convince employees that they are, in fact, empowered. This manuscript takes a more critical stance: from the individual employee perspective, empowerment is authentically and actually generated from within the individual, and is not 'granted' or created by the organization. The theory proposed here suggests that empowerment is a result of a combination of three things: 1) the individual develops his or her own *human capital* (e.g., knowledge, skills, and abilities); 2) the individual develops his or her own *social capital* (e.g., resources embedded in networked relationships—see Lin, 2000); and 3) the individual develops a *holistic, systemic, or gestalt view* of his or her role in the world and at work. Both human capital and social capital cannot be owned by the organization—it can only be borrowed. (Storberg-Walker, 2004). Consequently, owning their own human capital, combined with accessing the social capital they create, provides leverage to individuals in the workplace.

This theory suggests that these three components of empowerment are necessary for communities of practice to emerge. Without the combination of these components, organizations *can* get work out of employees, and actually succeed and create market value in the short term, but they cannot *sustain* that performance and be host to authentically empowered employees

acting within a COP. Communities of practice are central to understanding the self-generating nature of empowerment in the workplace because they are based upon the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). COPs are built from and by individuals possessing human and social capital, and autonomy is *taken* by individuals as they go about the work of the community, and as the community admits them further and further into the 'core' of the community. The inclusion in to the community is a function of learning and doing: to become embedded people need to rely on their human capital (learning) and social capital (doing in collaboration with community members). Please note that this theory seeks to ensure that COPs are not being co-opted by the organization (see Contu and Wilmott, 2003 for a discussion of Lave and Wenger's misunderstanding of the role of power in COPs).

The manuscript begins with a real-world example of a power shift currently occurring in a contemporary workplace: in the U.S. Army. Next, theory building research methods are briefly introduced in order to explain the theory building research process being undertaken for the larger project, of which this manuscript is a part. From the Army example, and based on accepted theory building research methods, key concepts of the shift in power are identified. The concepts are then pieced together into a new model of empowerment in the workplace. Finally, the implications and future research opportunities are presented to conclude the manuscript.

Real World Example: The Emergence of a Contemporary Community of Practice

A recent New Yorker article entitled "Battle Lessons: What the Generals Don't Know" described how a couple of West Point grad friends co-created a website for sharing knowledge learned in combat (www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/050117fa.fact, accessed 2/10/05). This website (created in 2000) was entitled "Companycommand.com," and it has catalyzed a new understanding of training, learning, and autonomy in the military. From its inception, the website has boldly embodied individual empowerment (manifested by self-initiated knowledge sharing) in a military system that had previously encouraged deference and rule-following behavior. The web site is the repository of lessons learned on the ground in Iraq, and offers company commanders just-in-time access to the camaraderie, experience, and talent of peers.

The 'official' military did not sanction this venue for knowledge sharing at first. The organizers of the web site were advised to get a lawyer by a lieutenant colonel shortly after Companycommand.com started operating, and an R.O.T.C. trainer insisted that "institutional education has three components…a common curriculum, a dedicated cadre of trained instructors, and common experience…(Companycommand.com) does nothing to raise the educational level of the officer corps…" (www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/050117fa.fact, accessed 2/10/05, p. 7). Despite these organizational barriers, the organizers continued the websites and officers began to incorporate it into their daily activities in Iraq.

Today, Companycommand.com and its spin off Platoonleader.org have become institutionalized in the daily lives of scores of military personnel around the world. For example, a topic site within Companycommand.com is specifically geared to provide help to leaders of "the next patrol, six to nine hours out…" (www.newyorker.com/printable/?fact/050117fa.fact, accessed 2/10/05, p. 7). This topic site is known as Cavnet, contains more security protocols for access (in order to prevent the enemy from finding out the next Army moves), and is designed to 'build leadership skills and share general tips and tricks about fighting in Iraq…" (p. 7). Both websites embody a hierarchically-free, self-organized, voluntary, and problem-solving 'space' of learning, sharing, and supporting (see Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995 for a discussion of the concept of 'ba;' and Lave & Wenger, 1991, for a discussion of situated learning and knowledge sharing

in a COP). Soldiers learn to creatively problem solve and to develop sophisticated and nuanced decision making skills, such as whether to shoot or show respect when confronted with an angry mob. The context of the Iraq war was nothing like the situations the officers had been trained to deal with, so the officers themselves came up with the solution and a community of practice emerged through the vehicle of the web sites (see Orr, 1996, for a discussion of how IBM repair men developed a COP in spite of 'official' IBM work and training manuals).

The Army needed this community of practice to emerge, because in 2000 the Army Chief of Staff (General Eric Shinseki) found that "about half of a soldier's training was meaningless," and that "the problem was not 'bogus' training exercises but worthwhile training being handled in such a way as to stifle fresh thinking…" (p. 1). In essence, the Army itself had found that officers lacked the ability to innovate and think creatively. The New Yorker article quotes Auguste Ledru-Rollin, who said in revolutionary France: "there go the people. I must follow them, for I am their leader…" (p. 7). Like Ledru-Rollin, it appears that the Army has followed the websites, after an initial period of resistance, and demonstrated its commitment to this 'new wave' of autonomy in the ranks by promoting the website founders, paying for their Ph.D. education, assigning them to teach at West Point, and assuming the costs of operating both websites.

To conclude this introductory section, it is evident that the website founders, as well as the emerging COP of army officers using the website for their daily work, have altered the balance of power between themselves and the 'hierarchy' of the organization. The Army did not give this independence to these 'employees,' rather, the employees developed a sense of autonomy from deep within themselves. The organization (Army) found itself lead by the employees (Company Commanders and Platoon Leaders) who had generated authentic empowerment through building a COP.

Theory Building Research Method

This section briefly describes the theory building research method used for this manuscript, and due to space constraints, is limited describing the first phase of theory building research in applied disciplines. For the manuscript that will be submitted for journal publication, this section will be expanded to include more real world examples and subsequent theory building phases.

Theory building in applied disciplines has been dominated by a functional/empirical perspective, but as qualitative research and constructivist paradigms develop, that dominance has been eroded (Gioia & Pitre, 1989). Today, scholars are offered a vast array of theory building research methods (see Storberg-Walker, 2003 for a review) that can accommodate multiple paradigms and perspectives. That said, the theory building research method selected for this project is Lynham's (2002) General Method of Theory Building Research in Applied Disciplines (the General Method). The General Method was compared to alterative methods (Storberg-Walker, 2004) and identified as most appropriate for multi-paradigm theory building focused on complex, multi-level organizational phenomena. The General Method 'can be framed by way of five interdependent, interacting phases of theory building, namely: conceptual development, operationalization, confirmation/disconfirmation, application, and continuous refinement and development of the theory," (Lynham, 2002, p. 22). For the theory of empowerment in the workplace, future work to operationalize and test the theory will be conducted, and subsequently real-world application and refinement will occur ad infinitum. A true theory is never finished. (Lynham, 2002).

To identify the concepts of a theory of empowerment in the workplace, the theorist must deeply examine the connections between the real world and the scholarly world of abstract words, concepts, and ideas associated with the phenomenon of interest. From the Army example described above, we are not stretched to see evidence that confirms and demonstrates many elements of knowledge creation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), situated learning (Lave, 1988), and communities of practice (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition, the example documents the role of human capital (knowledge, skills, and abilities) and social capital (in this case, knowledge resources embedded in the online COP) as key catalysts to the development of the COP and authentic empowerment. The following table provides a list of these theoretical concepts with examples of their physical manifestation in the real world of Companycommand.com and Platoonleader.org.

Table 1: Key Concepts in The Theory of Empowerment in the Workplace (Army Example)

Abstract Concept	Manifestation in the Real World
Human Capital (knowledge, skills, and abilities)	*Knowledge* of the disconnect between traditional Army training and what is needed to succeed in Iraq, combined with the knowledge of the internet medium as a vehicle for sharing information. Concrete, task related *skills* learned by actually performing a job (Company Commander or Platoon Leader) in Iraq. *Ability* to think systemically about the problem and possible solutions to the problem.
Social Capital (the resources embedded in networked relationships)	The development of a *network* of people serving in Iraq who are able to share knowledge *resources* through the internet
Knowledge Creation (see Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995)	The combination of individual tacit experiences, shared and amplified through the network of Company Commanders and Platoon Leaders
Situated Learning (see Lave, 1988)	The process of learning how to succeed in Iraq, not based on Army training, but based on immersion in problem-solving on the ground in Iraq
Communities of Practice (see Orr, 1996)	The persistence of the online network over time, in spite of initial barriers; the demonstrated willingness to share stories and insights; the creation of a space for sharing and coping
Empowerment	Self-initiated actions to create the websites; self-initiated actions to access and post to the websites; self-initiated actions to continue using the website in spite of official barriers; Army actions to ultimately 'follow' the people they employ

Model of Empowerment in the Workplace

This section presents the model of empowerment in the workplace that is emerging from the conceptual work described above. To create the model, Whetten's (2002) 'modeling as theorizing' process was used. The concepts (above) were arranged and re-arranged in a linear fashion (you can use post-it notes for this exercise) in order to come up with a working, visual explanation of the process of empowerment in the workplace. Please reference Figure 1, below. As you can see from the model, an attempt is made to explain the sequence of developing autonomy that begins with a person's 'stock' of human and social capital. In addition, the feedback loops are critical to understanding how situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (e.g., the degree of inclusion in the COP) act to create a separate arena of individual power vis a vis the organization. The feedback loops act to create and recreate a virtuous cycle of empowerment. Please note the sequence contained within the dashed line box—this area illustrates how the theory explains the power shift from the organization and to the individual. It would be possible for a person's human and social capital to directly benefit an organization

through a performance outcome; however, the feedback loops in that type of system would not generate autonomy. Only through situated learning will the development of autonomy begin, and only through knowledge sharing and creation will a person become embedded in a COP, and only through that degree of inclusion will a person capture power in relation to the organization.
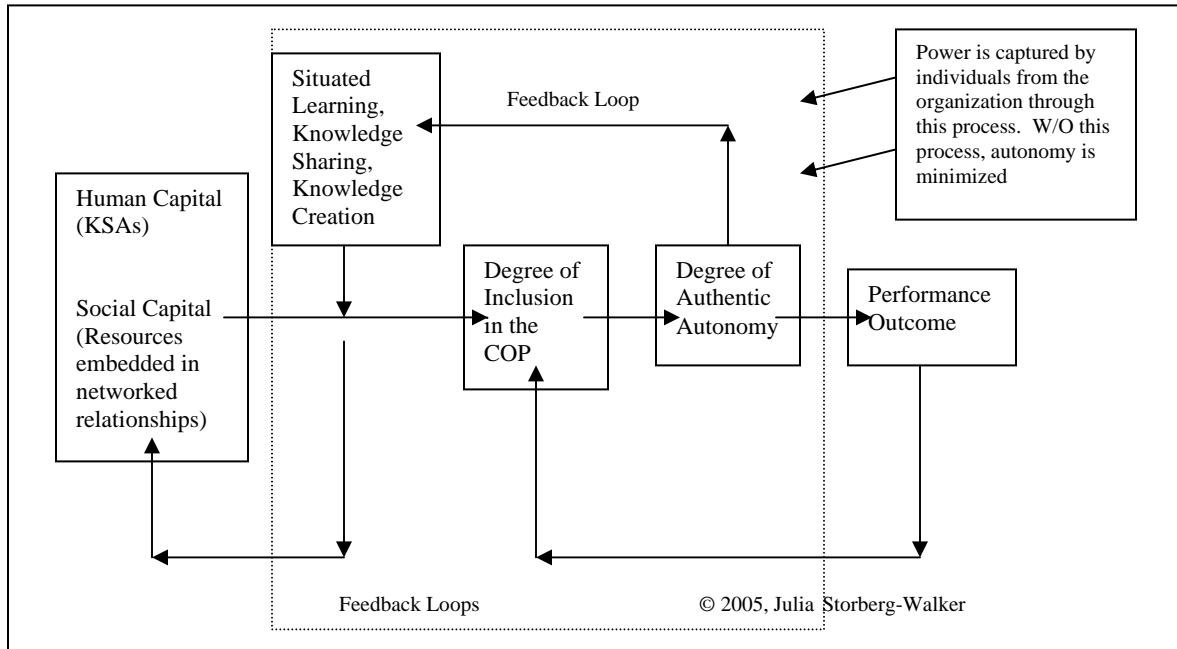

Figure 1: Model of Empowerment in the Workplace

Implications and Conclusions

The theory of empowerment in the workplace is being developed from a critical perspective (see Contu and Wilmott, 2003) in order to explain the role of COPs and situated learning at work. The intent of the author is to pose an alternative explanation, from the performance paradigm, of the function and value of COPs and situated learning. Performance and autonomy do not have to be seen as polar opposites, and this research challenges others to think about the connections between high performance and individual autonomy. The opportunities for this perspective are great: individuals may begin to develop a more critical view of their role in organizations, and begin to exert influence for a more sustainable, humane workplace.

The autonomy that emerges can be thought of as a product of developing a new shared language of work, much like Friere's conception of the role of education in emancipation. The new shared language is generated by working together, sharing with each other, and learning with and from each other. This language is not under the perview of the organization, and it cannot be 'managed' in the traditional sense. The best an organization can do is to understand the value of COPs to both the organization and to its people, and stand out of the way.   The challenge is for individuals to take power that COPs offer, and not wait for it to be given to them.

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