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## EXTENDING THE SOCIAL TRADITION ON ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING – ETHICS, GENDER AND CITIZENSHIP

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### **Abstract:**

**Purpose** – to highlight the controversial and potentially rich dilemmas of contemporaneity in organizational settings, including the context of the knowledge economy, the need to promote knowledge management, the structuring role of organizational learning, and the enabling and powerful framing, which emerges from the ethical, gender and citizenship dimensions.

**Design** – an exploratory theoretical inquiry, which acknowledges the importance of capturing the philosophical argumentation behind different epistemic options and schools of thought, including the possibility to understand the empowering potential of concepts such as social innovation.

**Findings** – the acknowledgement of the role of signification is highlighted in a crucial way: according to the social tradition perspective, there are two central items that illustrate the process through which meaning-making emerges spontaneously in human spheres of action, the first one is language use and the second one is the participation in social practices.

**Practical Implications** – ethics, gender and citizenship are direct entry spaces for the understanding of the complexity of how humans organise themselves and create and share knowledge in order to optimise their action.

**Originality** – the full power of human thought and action is achieved when there is enough individual and social motivational alignment in order to promote the best options available; such options do emerge and succeed as a matter-of-fact evidence of the creative and interpretative capacity, which finds in organisations one of the best instances for such human development.

**Keywords:** organizational learning, ethics, gender, citizenship, social innovation – JEL O35.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The rationale behind the emergence of Organisational Learning, in the last quarter of the twentieth century, was that a new transitional phase was under way, corresponding to a change from an industrial society, based on rigid settings dating from the nineteenth century, namely the command and control paradigm, to a post-industrial society, focused on collaboration and cooperation, which gains new relevance in the turbulent first decades of the twentieth first century. A transition implies that there have to be new solutions to new problems and also that the very idea of problem and solution is changed.

The post-industrial era has acquired many different designations, from knowledge economy, to digital economy or information economy. Broader still, the societal context, also acquires a new terminology, namely the network society (Castells, 2011), the programmed society (Touraine, 1971) or the digital

age. If knowledge is important, then learning becomes crucial and organisations become a fundamental setting within which learning and knowledge creation and sharing may occur.

The links between a new technological enabled environment, related to the digital and information technology revolution, and the need to promote learning in organisational settings, is straightforward. However, the transition phase holds a myriad of different layers, like the skin of an onion. Therefore, there are philosophically based concerns that may take the form of epistemological, anthropologic and ethnographic inquiries. Not only one ascertains that learning at organisational level is crucial within the changing societal environment, but also that the methods, approaches and models being used in order to capture this changing reality have to evolve too.

The social tradition on Organisational Learning, in contrast to the dominant cognitivist perspective, brings in a widely diversified and heterodox set of contributions, ranging from history, the arts, psychoanalysis, to semiotics. The message that it holds is that complexity must be dealt with from novel perspectives, including transdisciplinary inputs. More importantly, new starting points of analysis should be put forward, namely those that may enable new and powerful perspectives and worldviews to emerge. Consequently, addressing issues such as ethics, genre and citizenship, perform this role of working as a new reality test in relation to current organisational and societal challenges.

In short, ethics refers to how each society defines and distinguishes good from bad, desirable from undesirable behaviour. Gender issues relate to the importance of recognising the inheritance from a male dominance society and the role of feminism in promoting a more balanced society. It is crucial to highlight that inclusion and equality issues, within the human's rights settings, are primarily related to the rights of the minorities. However, gender equality is a cause that represents half of humanity, meaning that it is hard to hide. Finally, citizenship refers to the possibility, capacity and ability of individuals to promote common good and contribute to the societies to which they belong. These three dimensions enable a critical and constructive angle of analysis of current reality.

Identifying core items in the present change and transitional phase and enabling the creation of an effective organisational agenda, which may address such items in a gratifying and effective way, that is an open goal to be attained. Such organisational agenda for change may represent strong opportunities for groups of individuals to work together towards a common objective. No matter the geographical setting or the historical age, these elements are constitutive of that which signifies being human, that is, to imagine, design and work towards a common goal, this has always been present in the history of humanity.

Although the social tradition perspective has always been present in organisational and management studies, its heterodox and marginal role, when confronted with the dominant position of the cognitivist perspective, makes it hard to be fair and objective regarding its ability to capture, to decode and to deconstruct the fine lines of meaning that are present in human settings.

Organisations are human laboratories for social innovation and organisational communities may host radical and revolutionary lessons for society as a whole, as microcosms of how a differentiated unity enables humans to work together for common good, creating something that is larger than the sum of its parts. Social innovation is part of the process of change and transition, and it is understood to be an integral and dynamic process, which overlaps individual and organizational scales in order to focus on the cultural, political and historical process of change, evolution and human development.

The present work uses the importance of interdisciplinary studies as a gateway for organisational complexity. The argument is that organisational learning and social innovation are framed by contemporary challenges that may be better grasped through three main theoretical constructs: ethics, gender and citizenship. Consequently, the structure of the current paper is to highlight the contributions of several authors to these different fields of study, so that each will form one of the sections below.

## **2 THE RELEVANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES**

Complexity and the autopoietic capacity of complex systems are considered to be core requisites for the relevance and emergence of interdisciplinary studies. Certain authors, namely Newell *et al* (2001) argue that "an examination of complex systems yields new insights into the practice of interdisciplinary study and confirms widely accepted principles for the conduct of interdisciplinary inquiry". As they explain: "Interdisciplinarity is necessitated by complexity, specifically by the

structure and behavior of complex systems. The nature of complex systems provides a rationale for interdisciplinary study.” (Newell *et al*, 2001). Even more strongly: “Most importantly, the distinguishing but elusive characteristic of interdisciplinary studies—synthesis or integration—is at last explained in terms of the unique self-organizing pattern of a complex system.” (Newell *et al*, 2001).

The need to use an interdisciplinary perspective in research is often related to the need to come closer to real life problems and to practical and hands-on solutions to such problems. Robson and McCartan (2016) stress the importance of such approaches in “projects for which social research methods can be used”. Moreover, they consider the challenge that is posed to researchers, departments and university institutions and research centres: to make proof of the “ability to obtain funding for research and complete projects with measurable impact” (Robson and McCartan, 2016). These authors identify three characteristics in current research: “An increased emphasis on ethical considerations when carrying on research involving people; the mighty bandwagon of evidence-based everything; the all-pervading Internet, particularly the rise of social media” (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Again, these characteristics point towards the need and justification for the use of interdisciplinary perspectives.

In an educational setting, Jones (2010) discusses the benefits of interdisciplinary studies and how and why new curricula are needed. He contrasts the following concepts: “The interdisciplinary approach is uniquely different from a multidisciplinary approach, which is the teaching of topics from more than one discipline in parallel to the other, nor is it a cross-disciplinary approach, where one discipline is crossed with the subject matter of another. Interdisciplinary techniques go beyond these two techniques by allowing students to see different perspectives, work in groups, and make the synthesizing of disciplines the ultimate goal (Jones, 2010).

This author argues that interdisciplinary curricula, though being time consuming, has the advantage of promoting collaborative team work: “the interdisciplinary approach continues to synthesize the characteristics and methods of multiple disciplines while developing lifelong learning skills” (Jones, 2010). Further, this author highlights: “Students and their teachers will advance in critical thinking, communication, creativity, pedagogy, and essential academia with the use interdisciplinary techniques (Jones, 2010).

Klein (2005) highlights the links between interdisciplinary studies and integrative learning. Under his perspective ““Interdisciplinary” studies is a subset of integrative learning that fosters connections among disciplines and interdisciplinary fields”. This author argues that this is intrinsically a constructivist approach and he explains why. “Students are engaged in “making meaning.” Application of knowledge takes precedence over acquisition and mastery of facts alone, activating a dynamic process of question posing, problem posing and solving, decision making, higher-order critical thinking, and reflexivity.” (Klein, 2005). Furthermore, he stresses four main characteristics, as “a set of core capacities that emerge from the intersection of the two concepts”, interdisciplinary studies and integrative learning. These are: “the ability to ask meaningful questions about complex issues and problems; the ability to locate multiple sources of knowledge, information, and perspectives; the ability to compare and contrast them to reveal patterns and connections; the ability to create an integrative framework and a more holistic understanding” (Klein, 2005). Equally important, this author is able to connect complexity and paradox, arguing that there is a certain compromise in the acceptance of the frontiers of knowledge. “Contextuality, conflict, and change are the defining parameters of this kind of learning. Contextuality is a different metaphor of knowledge and education than unity, which assumed consistent, logical relations within a linear framework with the expectation of achieving certainty and universality. Contextuality accepts the contingent character of knowledge and action. Students need to tolerate ambiguity and paradox if they are to take grounded stands in the face of multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives.” (Klein, 2005)

### **3 ETHICS**

Ethics has traditionally been related to moral and to prescriptive modes of distinguishing right from wrong. The idea that some kind of behavior would not fit a certain social context could be assumed to be against the moral and ethics of such context.

Ethics is an important branch of philosophy. Practical and applied philosophy has increased its importance as the complexity of social settings rises. Such is the case of organizational contexts, where management problems often have ethical related implications.

The rationale that sustains the importance of ethics when discussing organizational phenomena is that it may capture the subtleties of human interaction. Ethics of care, ethics of alterity and ethics of the other, all refer to the same empathic involvement between people. Under this perspective, the other, the different, is an unavoidable and irrefutable experience, which all human beings may share.

Moreover, it is through this confrontation with a different other, the child and the mother, or the employer and the employee, that each individual may acknowledge hers or his own interior reality. Without a personal contact with a different other there could not be a healthy development of individual human beings.

Nilo R. Júnior (2009) develops a rich interpretation of the relationship between ethics and alterity, the different other. According to this author: the millenary long history of human development and of the face to face encounters, as the face of the different other “inaugurates a wisdom that is older and more original than the wisdom obtained by means of reason, i.e., by knowing or thinking” (Júnior, 2009). From this encounter, this author develops the links to the role of education and of peace building: “peace asserts itself as care and responsibility towards the other, and also as justice and equity towards the third one” (Júnior, 2009). And also: “peace is built up as solidarity against the exacerbation of individualism”.

Nel Noddings (2002) addresses the concept of ethics of care within a broad philosophical framework: “The ethics of care can be seen as fundamentally relational, not individual-agent-based in the way of virtue ethics, and the ethics of care is more indirect than character education.” (Noddings, 2002). This author argues: “An alternative to character education is care ethics”. In other words, the fundamental issue is not the definition of a specific set of virtues, which ought to be promoted as a process of educating one’s character, but rather the experiential involvement in a one-to-one relationship where caring for someone and being cared by someone are structuring and signifying experiences.

Virginia Held (2006) addresses the perspective of the ethics of care as a novel approach to ethics. Traditionally, for the last two-hundred years, ethics has been majorly restrained to moral theory. The development in the last few decades of ethics of care offers promising potential for applied research, namely in the civil rights and social movements areas. This author addresses the relations of ethics and power, and the reach of law, stressing the understanding of “care as a practice and as a value”. The argument is that the abundance of normative perspectives forces the need for alternative options. The advantaged of the ethics of care perspective is that it does not need to “rely on dubious claims of universal norms of reason”, which form moral normative standards. According to this author, the development of this perspective is itself an open on-going and cooperative process.

Maurice Hamington (2004) addresses the ethics of care, or care ethics, as he refers, from the perspective of the body, of corporality, highlighting the practical and concrete nature of care. This embodied care is also linked to the area of feminist ethics and to the work on the body developed by the philosopher Merleau-Ponty.

The author Michael Slote (2007) stresses the role of empathy in defining the ethics of care. This author argues that care ethics “present an important challenge to other ethical traditions”. Namely the conventional understanding of ethics as a rigid set of norms and not as a dynamic and open process of reflective critique.

Within an organisational setting, Alexander Styhre (2001) argues: “Thinking of work as ethically embedded rather than determined by the degree of distribution of the empowering resources in organizations paves the way for opportunities to conduct more sensitive analyses of how managerial techniques operate in practice.” (Styhre, 2001). This author highlights the importance of empowerment, offering a critique of its often too idealised view: “Empowerment is depicted by its proponents as the common denominator for recent managerial techniques and activities that acknowledge the individual employee as an intelligent, accountable, creative being, and therefore a productive resource for the company.” In an innovative way, this author argues: the importance of the “notion of ethics, and more specifically what Foucault calls *technologies of the self*, provides possibilities for analysing how employees constitute themselves as ethical, productive, and legitimate members of society through the use of management techniques” (Styhre, 2001).

Different authors discuss the paradoxes around ethics in organizational contexts. Sheldene Simola (2003) argues: "Despite the importance of ethics in corporate crisis management, they have received limited attention in the academic literature." This author addresses ethics of justice and ethics of care as complementary perspectives.

Regina Scheyvens and Helen Leslie (2000) address the ethical concerns involved in conducting applied research and fieldwork. In particular, these authors stress the "ethical issues regarding the validity and effectiveness of cross-cultural and cross-gendered fieldwork", in particular in developing countries. They offer a "critical discussion concerning whether there is potential for the fieldwork process to be empowering for research participants" (Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000).

#### **4 GENDER**

In their work on transdisciplinarity in women's and gender studies, Irene Dölling and Sabine Hark (2000) argue that this area is undertaking a movement towards a needed "higher level of self-reflexivity". As they explain, "the increasing institutionalization carries with it the threat of a loss of critical potential, especially the capacity to reflect upon its own modes of knowledge production". This normalization occurs in all disciplines and transdisciplinarity is the answer. "Transdisciplinarity, understood as a critical evaluation of terms, concepts, and methods that transgresses disciplinary boundaries, can be a means to this higher level of reflexivity". They situate this account in the following manner: "caught between a visible trend toward normalization and a renewed struggle over the legitimacy of women's and gender studies, feminism is undergoing a critical reexamination as women's studies own disciplinary location brings renewed attention to the necessary role of transdisciplinarity in women's and gender studies."

Working in the field of gender studies, Mary Bucholtz (2003) calls attention to the critical role of the relationship between language and gender, in particular to the centrality of discourse, that is, "the interdisciplinary investigations of discourse-level phenomena". As she explains: "The study of language and gender has increasingly become the study of discourse and gender". This author stresses that: "Discourse is language in context". And, as happens in discourse-oriented research, the language use in social practices is the centre of attention. "Language as it is put to use in social situations and not the more idealised and abstract linguistic forms that are the central concern of linguistic theory." (Bucholtz, 2003). This social tradition interpretation of language is critical to the understanding of complex phenomena such as gender unbalances and sexual discrimination.

Interestingly, Bucholtz stresses the rich and positively slippery nature of both discourse and gender studies, as they necessarily respond to the complexity and to the diversity of social contexts: "Hence there is no well-defined approach to discourse that can be labelled "feminist discourse analysis". Indeed, not all approaches to gender and discourse are feminist in their orientation, nor is there a single form of feminism to which all feminist scholars subscribe." (Bucholtz, 2003).

In organizational contexts, gender biases are critical and they help to explain the inequality of gender balance in top management positions. Gary Powell, Anthony Butterfield and Jane Parent (2002) stress that, besides some positive evolution, nevertheless "a good manager is still perceived as predominantly masculine". Though "there has been a considerable increase in the proportion of women managers in recent years, and a call for "feminine leadership" to capitalize on this increase". Their study focuses on the following question: "whether there has been a corresponding change in men's and women's stereotypes of managers such that less emphasis is placed on managers' possessing masculine characteristics". As has been said, they conclude that this is not the case, as management performativity is still strongly connected to male stereotyped characteristics.

Deborah Prentice and Erica Carranza (2002) address the issue of "reactions to gender stereotype deviants and sex discrimination" in organizational contexts. They create a framework to "characterize the contents of prescriptive gender stereotypes". They call attention to the double effect of past and future determinations; whereas prescriptive biases are fixed in the past, proscriptive ones project such biases into the future, in a self-strengthening manner. "The framework distinguishes between prescriptions and proscriptions that are intensified by virtue of one's gender, and those that are relaxed by virtue of one's gender" (Prentice and Carranza, 2002). They addressed both American society in general and highly masculine contexts in particular, with interesting results. "The results demonstrated the persistence of traditional gender prescriptions in both contexts, but also revealed distinct areas of

societal vigilance and leeway for each gender. In addition, they showed that women are seen more positively, relative to societal standards, than are men.” (Prentice and Carranza, 2002).

In organizational contexts, the work of Madeline Heilman (2001) addresses the gender inequality in top management jobs. This author argues that gender unbalance is key: “Because of gender bias and the way in which it influences evaluations in work settings, it is argued that being competent does not ensure that a woman will advance to the same organizational level as an equivalently performing man.” (Heilman, 2001). As this author explains, “the scarcity of women at the upper levels of organizations is a consequence of gender bias in evaluations”. In this work the author addresses the “processes giving rise to these outcomes” and identifies the “procedures that are likely to encourage them”.

Using blunt terms and plain language, this author highlights the profound injustice that occurs in organizational settings related to gender unbalances, including being penalized for being effective: “It is proposed that gender stereotypes and the expectations they produce about both what women are like (descriptive) and how they should behave (prescriptive) can result in devaluation of their performance, denial of credit to them for their successes, or their penalization for being competent” (Heilman, 2001).

Agency is critical in women’s studies as it relates to the capacity of individual female members of a society or organisation to go beyond and to transgress previously defined prescriptive gender biases. Agency is empowerment and the denial and refusal to remain enslaved in previous societal prejudices. Laurie Rudman and Peter Glick (2001) develop an interesting study where women’s perceived niceness is key. They carried on from previous research, taken in late 1990s, in order to design the following setting: “In an experiment, job description and applicants' attributes were examined as moderators of the backlash effect, the negative evaluation of agentic women for violating prescriptions of feminine niceness. (...) students made hiring decisions for a masculine or “feminized” managerial job. Applicants were presented as either agentic or androgynous.” (Rudman and Glick, 2001). The results are close to an anecdote: “a feminized job description promoted hiring discrimination against an agentic female because she was perceived as insufficiently nice. Unique to the present research, this perception was related to participants' possession of an implicit (but not explicit) agency-communality stereotype. By contrast, androgynous female applicants were not discriminated against.” (Rudman and Glick, 2001). As they conclude: “The findings suggest that the prescription for female niceness is an implicit belief that penalizes women unless they temper their agency with niceness.” (Rudman and Glick, 2001).

## 5 CITIZENSHIP

The identification of the frontiers of research of citizenship studies is a complex task as it is a dynamic construct, following the changes that occur within society itself. Jopke (2007) analysis such changes under three dimensions: status, rights, and identity. “With respect to status, it is argued that access to citizenship has been liberalized. On the rights dimension, there has been a weakening of social rights and rise of minority rights. Citizenship identities today are universalistic, which limits states' attempts to counter the centrifugal dynamics of ethnically diversifying societies with unity and integration campaigns.” (Jopke, 2007).

Isin and Turner (2007) argue in favor of an agenda for citizenship studies in the following terms: “not so much a dogmatic sequence of principles as an ethos toward conceiving democratic citizenship as a cosmopolitan virtue”, understood as a concrete and practical expression of what it means to belong to a certain society.

Indeed, the idea of global citizenship is universalistic and it connects to the notion of cosmopolitanism, which other authors highlight as a key component of current notions of citizenship.

The context of the new economy brings forward novel perspectives on citizenship. Bennett *et al* (2009) address the need to consider the “changing political identifications and practices of new generations of citizens”. Their focus is “in different post-industrial democracies with the aim of deriving a set of core learning categories that offer a starting point for thinking about how to address changing citizen identity styles and learning opportunities in various online and offline environments.” These authors challenge traditional paradigms of what they call “dutiful citizenship”. They expand such notion by “identifying additional civic learning opportunities that reflect more self-actualizing

styles of civic participation common among recent generations of youth who have been termed digital natives.” According to these authors, self-actualization is key and it works through specific learning styles, which favor “interactive, networked activities often communicated through participatory media such as videos shared across online networks” (Bennett *et al*, 2009). Under this perspective the emerging online environments represent new communities of learning, which create new digital ecosystems, again that fuel novel forms of citizen engagement.

Citizenry is a powerful concept because it may be reframed within a smaller scale, such as the dimension of an organization instead of a society. Indeed, organizational citizenship illustrates the importance of promoting forms of behavior that favor the benefit of all the stakeholders involved in a specific organizational setting, in other words, to work towards the benefit of the organization as a whole. Different dimensions of such organizational citizenship behavior have been analyzed through factor analysis and under meta-analysis (e.g., Walumbwa *et al*, 2010). These authors highlight the following predictors of organizational citizenship behavior: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, fairness, trait conscientiousness, and leader support.

Previous research started in the 1980s and it influenced this field of study. Namely, Organ and Ryan (1995) were pioneers and they address attitudinal and dispositional dimensions of organizational citizenship behavior. Attitudinal measures include job satisfaction, perceived fairness, organizational commitment and leader supportiveness. The degree of conscientiousness is relevant as a dispositional dimension.

Other authors address the role of leadership in promoting citizenship in an organizational setting, in particular transformational and transactional leadership. Nguni *et al* (2006) focus on “the effects of transformational and transactional leadership on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior” and they comment on the potential for accumulated effects, the so-called add-on effects, emerging from the interaction between the different dimensions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment, appropriation and capacitation stand for enabling mechanisms through which it is possible to foster, nurture and promote the best potential for human thought and action. No matter the scale, from groups to organisations and to social movements, there is a common factor that is a precondition for success, which is the capacity to work together towards a common goal. In other words, the capacity to engage, attract and mobilise individual efforts is a multidimensional phenomenon, which directly depends from the narrative, discursive and argumentative logical reasoning that may justify such engagement, attraction and mobilisation. The power of narratives to unleash the imagination and the desire to achieve previously unthoughtful alternatives and future ideals has been present throughout the history of humankind. The pipeline for human ingenuity and creativity has been the capacity to aim at achieving that which may have seemed impossible in the past. No matter the context or the historical era, the structuring conditions of human development remain focused in a few essential elements, namely the possibility to remain open to the unknown, the capacity to trust in oneself and in others, and the opportunity to experiment deep forms of transformative learning. In other words, the possibility to profit from trusting and empowering environments and to experiment open and diversified cultures, enables the widening of horizons and the unleashing of creativity through an authentic, rich and dense living experience. It is not possible to underestimate the potential of humans to overcome adversity, vulnerability and frailty. Why? How? Precisely by uniting efforts in strong community building and sense-making efforts of collective engagement towards the achievement of common goals, because that is what makes humans human. Unless these anthropological and ethnographic assumptions are stated upfront and assumed as a precondition for success, it is not possible to understand the potential for action of organised groups of individuals, such as institutions or social movements. Ethics, gender and citizenship dimensions are present implicitly in every organisation. The quality, fairness and democratic intensity of the relationships regarding the organisation stakeholders, will be reflected upon the organisational effectiveness and potential for excellency. Motivation, work satisfaction, performativity and an inclusive and challenging organisational culture, are indeed consequences of the invisible, informal and implicit power of the organisational community and of its meaning-making potential.

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