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The Culture of Social Science Research

Abstract

[Excerpt] This paper is valuable to any social scientist, whether he or she studies culture or not, because it empirically investigates the extremely important question of the linkage of theory and practice. Barley, Meyer, and Gash are deserving of considerable praise for their effort to take the question beyond the realm of ideological positions, into the domain of testing patterns of change and influence. They employed an innovative methodology to compare the pragmatics (connotative meanings) of language usage in academics' and practitioners' articles. However valuable this methodology might be for subsequent research, I will concentrate on the results themselves, and use them as an opportunity to reflect on how organizational researchers do social science.

Keywords

academic subculture, methodology, academic writing, research agenda

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The Culture of Social Science Research

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No social science can ever be "neutral" or simply "factual," indeed not "objective" in the traditional meaning of these terms. (Myrdal, 1969)

Stephen Barley, Gordon Meyer, and Debra Gash's "Cultures of Culture: Academics, Practitioners and the Pragmatics of Normative Control" is a rich and suggestive paper in which they attempt, among other things, to explore the influences of academics and practitioners on each other's portrayals of a new issue, namely, organizational culture. They do so by employing textual analysis of a carefully selected set of theory and practice articles on organizational culture to determine whether or not one perspective has acculturated or changed the other. The results indicate that over time the discourse of academics has become more like that of practitioners. Academics have been acculturated, increasingly defining their discussions of culture according to the interests and issues of practitioners. In contrast, practitioners were not influenced by the conceptual and symbolic language of early academics. An equally intriguing finding is that the early academic writers who continued to write on the subject altered their later writing to reflect the practitioner orientation and the traditional functionalist framework of "mainstream" academic writers.

"Perhaps because they have always worked at the margin between basic and applied social science, organizational theorists have long contemplated how the academic community and the managerial community influence each other (Thompson, 1956). Over the years, two competing views of the relationship have evolved. The dominant perspective frames the relation in terms of the diffusion and utilization of knowledge (Cherns, 1972; Duncan, 1974; Beyer, 1982). The terms are borrowed from the physical and life sciences where they denote the process by which basic research inspires practical advances in technical fields such as computers and medicine. From this vantage point, academics are seen as impartial sources of empirical principles that are taught to practitioners who, in turn, put the knowledge to worldly use (Beyer and Trice, 1982). Since diffusion theorists presume that knowledge flows from the academy to the field, their primary concern has been to disseminate information and stimulate applications of new knowledge (Corwin and Louis, 1982; Dunbar, 1983).

The second view, which we dub the political perspective, stands in sharp contrast to the notion of knowledge diffusion. Whereas diffusion theorists assume that academics frame problems for practitioners, political theorists contend that scholarly endeavors are ultimately defined by the interests of those who dominate society and by whose largess academics retain the privilege of pursuing research (Wassenberg, 1977; Salaman, 1979; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980; Watson, 1980). The interests of the powerful are said to shape research more significantly than the curiosity of the researcher, primarily because the former control the latter's access to critical resources.

The problem with both perspectives is that each offers an oversimplified and essentially ideological account of what is likely to be a complex process (Pettigrew, 1985). Both explanations presume that relations between academics and practitioners are hierarchically structured: that one world awaits direction from the other. The two simply reverse the role of leader and follower. Moreover, both assume from the outset that the two worlds have similar interests: in the first case, more accurate and useful knowledge; in the second, maintenance of a system of dominance. Consequently, neither allows for the possibility that managerial and academic worlds might conflict or that reciprocal influence might occur. Most critical, however, is the fact that neither perspective has subjected its claims to empirical tests, largely because each takes the direction of influence for granted."

(Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988, pp. 24-25)

This paper is valuable to any social scientist, whether he or she studies culture or not, because it empirically investigates the extremely important question of the linkage of theory and practice. Barley, Meyer, and Gash are deserving of considerable praise for their effort to take the question beyond the realm of ideological positions, into the domain of testing patterns of change and influence. They employed an innovative methodology to compare the pragmatics (connotative meanings) of language usage in academics' and practitioners' articles. However valuable this methodology might be for subsequent research, I will concentrate on the results themselves, and use them as an opportunity to reflect on how organizational researchers do social science.

For me the major contribution of "Cultures of Culture" is not its use of an intriguing methodology or its presentation of data in a studied, objective, and rule-guided form. I like a paper that grounds its questions in previous work and can place some tension between two perspectives, but this alone is not what I found fascinating. I applaud the authors for their deliberate and precise refutation of possible criticisms of method and analysis. It is always delightful to raise a question while reading, only to have the authors raise and answer it in the next sentence; this is good practice of the craft, but not what I find exemplary about this paper. What captures my interest and draws me back again to this paper is what it does not explain, what it cannot say, and what it might suggest for all of us making a living as social scientists. I like this paper because it forces me to examine the way I do research, the sources of my thinking, and the ways in which language shapes our research agenda.

The Data Are Silent

Barley and his colleagues accurately note that the data are silent on why academic outlets adopted or accommodated practitioners' issues. The data are mute on why academic discourse shifted toward the language evident in early practitioner texts, while practitioner texts remained the same over time. We do not know why the same academics who wrote before 1982 changed their perspectives after that time. These are the puzzles of Barley, Meyer, and Gash's study.

Sorting through the distinctions among early academic, later academic, and practitioner texts is part of the challenge in understanding the culture literature. Close examination of the academic speech community's model shows that early academic texts introduced culture as an alternative paradigm to the functionalist models for studying organizations. These texts were varied in their own frames, making them more difficult to categorize, but shared an emphasis on departing from traditional organization theory. In contrast, the practitioner writings had a consistent discursive model that stressed causality and embodied functionalist references to bureaucracy, structural differentiation, and rational control. Emphasis was placed on how management could control people and things in the face of environmental volatility.

Barley, Meyer, and Gash demonstrate that the shift from early to later academic writing is not just a move from interpretive to functionalist research traditions, but their analysis does reveal the close linkages between the practitioner and traditional functionalist academic texts. In fact, both are incorporated into the practitioner model of discourse. The use of pragmatics in this study highlights the "radical" nature of early academic writing and offers some intriguing possibilities for speculation about acculturation in the organizational sciences.

"It is possible to argue that the change in academic discourse offers testimony to nothing more than functionalism's resilience. As previously stated, many early academic authors viewed organizational culture as an opportunity to build a phenomenologically attuned, if not a fully interpretive, theory of organizational life (Van Maanen, 1979a; Louis, 1983). As Smircich (1983:347) put it, interpretive theorists viewed culture as something that organizations "are," not as something they "have." In making such a distinction, the interpretive theorists rebelled against the dominant tenets of a functionalist paradigm (Parsons, 1951; Kroeber and Parsons, 1958; Jaeger and Selznick, 1964). If the interpretive rebellion was quickly cooled by a resurgence of functionalism, then one would expect academics' and practitioners' rhetorical styles to have converged, not because academics adopted a managerial perspective but because practitioners never abandoned a functionalist ontology. The results might therefore reflect little more than the fact that academics gradually reappropriated functionalist language. To counter such an argument would necessitate showing that recent academic rhetoric is as indicative of managerialism as it is of functionalism.

As an intellectual doctrine, functionalism is a variant of systems theory: it concerns dynamics that exist beyond (and in spite of) actors' volitions (Boudon, 1979). A functionalist theory of culture should therefore posit impersonal forces of control for whose operation the intentions of the powerful are irrelevant. To the degree that academic discourse began to sanction an intent to control, one could argue that its authors moved beyond the rhetorical requirements of functionalism to adopt a more managerial stance. Individual regressions of the four indicators that measure a purely systemic view of control on year of publication showed that only CthrO+ and CthrO- became more common in academic texts. The two other indicators (CthrC+, CthrC-) remained constant over time. There is, then, some support for the claim that academic rhetoric became more functionalist. However, there is also evidence that the rhetoric became more managerial. Eight indicators implied an actor's ability or desire to control and, hence, were indicative of more than the mere restraints of an impersonal system (Covo+, Covo-, CthrOA+, CthrOA-, Covc+, Cove-, CthrCA+, CthrCA-). Separate regressions of these indicators on year of publication revealed that six of the eight became more common in academic discourse by the end of 1984. Thus, it

seems fair to argue that the convergence between academic- and practitioner- oriented discourse cannot be explained by a resurgence of functionalism alone.'

(Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988, p. 53)

Why did the pragmatics of early academic texts change? Would the change have occurred if the early texts had not challenged the traditional academic community? Is it possible that the findings of this study on organizational culture are unique because the early writers departed from the ontological and epistemological assumptions of doing research within the organization studies discipline? Could the shift from academic to practitioner concerns reflect pressures to sustain legitimacy in the academic community at large, to address practitioner relevance, and to survive in the academic enterprise? The lack of answers to these questions makes Barley, Meyer, and Gash's study all the more intriguing as a context for commentary and reflection on doing social science research.

Since the early academic work relied on an interpretive orientation to culture that challenges the fundamental assumptions and methods of functionalist research, it is not surprising that this research was not sustained. Herein lies an intriguing opportunity for speculation that emerges from the Barley et al. study. The findings raise disturbing questions about the culture of academia in the organizational sciences. Can alternate paradigms be sustained after being introduced when they challenge the traditional, taught, and presumably fundamental assumptions and ways of setting up the problem? The evidence of this study suggests not. To understand how a scientific community functions as a producer and validator of sound knowledge, we must ultimately understand the unique set of shared standards and values for doing research that serve to control the production of scholarship. We must further consider our roles as teachers of the practitioners of tomorrow, for they will likely solve the problems of tomorrow with the solutions and theories we provide today. The practitioners' interest in normative cultural control may be an extension of what they were taught about formal control in organizations. The able practitioner, like the bright student, may model a new problem on another previously encountered and solved. In addition, the shifting of academic discourse may suggest a rubber band approach to theorizing in which new ideas may stretch or challenge conventional thinking, but ultimately bounce back to traditional or popular thinking.

Framing a Research Agenda

I believe that Barley, Meyer, and Gash's study suggests that we are what we read, learn, and take for granted. Biases permeate theoretical and practical approaches to social problems, and we must be aware and apprehensive as we proceed in the offering of solutions. I cannot help but wonder how many of the newcomers to the culture literature were doctoral students moved simultaneously by the practitioner books and the early cultural writings within an interpretive framework. Figuring larger than life between the notable contrasts of these different writings were dissertation advisers who wanted to see "sound positivist empiricism" and the subsequent "marketability" of the work to recruiters and journals in the field. As the student of organizational culture struggled for clarity, a host of academic subcultures diverged and possibly muddied their thinking.

"Similarly, one cannot decide from the data whether the convergence is to be welcomed or lamented. Such an evaluation rests ultimately on one's sense of the rightful relationship between organizational theory and practice. It may be appropriate for organizational theory, as an applied discipline, to concern itself with issues that trouble organizations during specific eras. To the degree that the data suggest this has occurred, they may indicate the field's responsiveness rather than the ease by which it is co-opted. Alternately, if applied social sciences require basic social research as a fount of knowledge (as is generally assumed to be true of the hard sciences), then the results should give us pause, for the data suggest that there may exist a set of social dynamics strong enough to compromise, in less than a decade, a stream of research that is apparently without immediate practical relevance. Since it is clear that no one gains when knowledge is pushed to relevance before its time, it would behoove organizational theorists to identify the social pressures that might contribute to such a rapid convergence of aim and to determine whether these dynamics are harmful."

(Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988, p. 55)

"Cultures of Culture" has reinforced my belief that social science research is not and cannot be objective, and that systematic biases are present because of the assumptions and value premises we employ, many of which are grounded in our education as academics (or MBAs) and reinforced by what is written in journals, newspapers, and magazines. The findings that (a) academics are influenced by how practitioners frame the problem of organizational culture and (b) early academic texts changed to fit practitioner and mainstream academic texts are intriguing but troubling. The message I have chosen to draw from this study is that it is the responsibility of every researcher and

practitioner to identify the sources of their assumptions and to articulate their value premises carefully. Theory and practice are both grounded in beliefs and opinions that require specification if we are to understand the lens through which the social world is viewed.

Myrdal (1969, p. 40) contends that "facts kick," by which he means that social research will eventually correct itself so long as the re-searcher avoids seeking what is not there. I, like Myrdal, believe in the power of self-healing that can be obtained through diligent empiricism. Exemplary research in my opinion begins with an intriguing idea, such as the one in the Barley et al. study, but is not a single study. In fact, research is exemplary when many researchers amass observations and analysis to find what they had not expected. It is my hope that the "facts" of this empirical paper "kick" other researchers into attempting further empirical examination of discipline-based influences and assumptions in the field of organization studies. We have yet to understand fully either our roles as theorists and applied scientists or the subcultures that shape our thinking.

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