

PHRONETIC ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

properties and classification of these sources. While subject awareness is rooted with intentional acts of interest, these acts involve active orientations around already established modes of understanding. So the associated 'need' for power to provide warmth might, if experienced by a consumer in a western market economy, might be configured using the object of a commodity (rather than, say, an emblem of divine power). This market economy background then elicits specific actions in relation to the object 'warmth', such as purchasing, expending, storing and so on [*hermeneutics*]. As subjects, we are both temporally and spatially configured; experience from which we cannot wrest ourselves as separate, phenomenologically distinct beings (Derrida, 1973). Yet despite market economy upbringings, the need for heat need not be commodified *in toto*; the subject flows back on to the world; and so, for example, silent vents are passed over for fireside aesthetics which in turn may restore a more direct, less commodified relationship with the object warmth.

Robin Holt

PHRONETIC ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Definition

Phronetic organizational research is an approach to the study of management and organizations focusing on ethics and power. It is based on a contemporary interpretation of the Aristotelian concept *phronesis*, usually translated as 'practical wisdom', sometimes as 'prudence'. *Phronesis* is the ability to think and act in relation to values, to deliberate about 'things that are good or bad for humans' in the words of Aristotle (1976: 1140a24–b12). Phronetic organizational research effectively provides answers to the following four value-rational questions, for specific problematics in management and organization studies:

1. Where are we going with this specific management problematic?
2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is this development desirable?
4. What, if anything, should we do about it?

Phronetic organizational research concerns deliberation, judgement, and praxis in relation to the four questions. Praxis is the process by which *phronesis* as a concept becomes lived reality [*practice theory*]. Answers to the questions are used as input to ongoing dialogues (q.v.) about the possibilities and risks that management and organizations face and how things may be done differently. The 'we' in the questions consists of those researchers asking the questions and those who share the concerns of the researchers, including people in the organization under study. Phronetic researchers see no general and unified 'we' in relation to which the questions can be given a final, objective answer. What is a 'gain' and a 'loss' often depends on the perspective taken, and one person's gain may be another's loss. Phronetic researchers are highly aware of the importance of perspective, and see no neutral ground, no 'view from nowhere', for their work.

The focus of phronetic organizational research is on practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations in organizations [*action research; mode 2; pragmatism*]. It may mean, but is not limited to, a focus on known sociological, ethnographic (q.v.), and historical phenomena such as 'everyday life' and 'everyday people', with their focus on the so-called 'common'. What it *always* means, however, is a focus on the actual daily practices [*practice-centred research*] – common or highly specialized or rarefied – which constitute a given organizational field of interest, regardless of whether these practices constitute a stock exchange, a grassroots organization, a neighbourhood, a multinational corporation, a government office, an emergency ward, or a local school board.

The result of phronetic organizational research are concrete examples and detailed

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narratives (q.v.) of the ways in which power and values work in organizations and with what consequences, and to suggest how power and values could be changed to work with other consequences. Phronetic research holds that in so far as organizational situations become clear, they are clarified by detailed study of who is doing what to whom. Such clarification is therefore a principal concern for phronetic organizational research and provides the main link to praxis.

The methodological implications of following a phronetic approach may be briefly described by the following methodological guidelines, which should be seen not as imperatives but as indicators of direction:

1. Focus on values (what's 'good or bad for humans in organizations').
2. Place power at the core of analysis [*actor-network theory; critical theory*] (because, as Bertrand Russell observed, the fundamental concept in social science is power, in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept in physics; power is productive).
3. Get close to reality (to improve understanding and ensure practical relevance).
4. Emphasize 'little things' (God is in the detail - and so is the Devil) [*ethnomethodology*].
5. Look at practices before discourse (what is done is more important than what is said, and understanding the difference between the two is an effective means for learning about management and organization).
6. Study cases (q.v.) and context (because the practical judgement central to *phronesis*, and to good management, is case-based and context-dependent).
7. Ask 'How?', do narrative (to understand the process and what to do).
8. Move beyond agency and structure (to internalize externality in organizations and externalize internality).
9. Do dialogue with a polyphony of voices (phronetic organizational research is dialogical (q.v.) with no one voice, including that of the researcher, claiming final authority).

Discussion

Because *phronesis* concerns values it goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) [*realism*] and technical knowledge or know how (*techne*) and it involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social actor. Aristotle was explicit in his regard of *phronesis* as the most important of the three intellectual virtues: *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is most important because it is that activity by which scientific and instrumental rationality is balanced by value-rationality; and because, according to Aristotle, such balancing is crucial to the viability of any organization - from the family to a business to the state. To ignore value-rationality in human organizations is to ask for trouble, according to Aristotle. The many recent scandals of corporate governance may be seen as cases in point. They result from executives not understanding the importance of and not being proficient in *phronesis*.

In terms of the history and theory of science, Aristotle and Machiavelli are the classic thinkers of *phronesis*. More contemporary scholars within this tradition are Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz Alasdair MacIntyre, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty, who emphasize phronetic before epistemic knowledge in the study of social organization, despite important differences in other domains.

A curious fact can be observed, however. Whereas *episteme* is found in the modern words 'epistemology' and 'epistemic', and *techne* in 'technology' and 'technical', it is indicative of the degree to which scientific and instrumental rationality dominate modern thinking and language that we no longer have a word for the one intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, which Aristotle and other founders of the western tradition saw as the most important condition of successful social organization [*positivism and post-positivism*].

Epistemic science, modelled after the natural sciences, has gained dominance to a degree, where even intellectual activities like organizational research and social science, which are not and probably never can be

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scientific in the epistemic, natural science sense, have found themselves compelled to strive for and legitimate themselves in terms of the epistemic model. According to Czarniawska and Sevón (2003: 9-13), epistemic organizational research is the mainstream of organizational research and it claims universality based on a search for generic truths about management and organizations.

Prospects

It is a problem that management scholars generally do not recognize the distinctions between *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis*, because they are very different intellectual activities with very different implications for practical research. It is often the case that these activities are rationalized as *episteme*, even though they are actually *techne* or *phronesis*. However, it is not in their role as *episteme* that one can argue for the value of organizational research and other social sciences. In the domain in which the natural sciences have been strongest – the production of theories that can explain and accurately predict – the social sciences, including organizational research, have been weakest. Nevertheless, by emphasizing the three roles, and especially by reintroducing *phronesis*, we see there are other and more satisfying possibilities for organizational research than vainly emulating natural science.

The theoretical and methodological implications of *phronesis* for organizational and management research were first explained in Flyvbjerg (2001, 2003). The following may serve as examples in an emerging body of organizational research that contains elements of *phronesis*. In the study of power and organizations, the work of Clegg (1997) and Clegg and Kornberger (2003) stands out. In the organization of the firm and of accounting, the work of Miller (2003) must be mentioned. In the organization of science and technology there is the work of Latour (1999b) and Rabinow (1999). And in the organization of government there is Schram and Caterino (2006), Flyvbjerg (1998), and Dean (1999). Examples exist as well from more specialized fields of research, such as the

organization of consumption (Miller and Rose, 1997), policing (Harcourt, 2001), and space (q.v.) and architecture (Crush, 1994) [*modernism and scientific management*]. More examples of phronetic organizational research may be found in Flyvbjerg (2001: 162-165) and Dean (1999: 3-5).

Bent Flyvbjerg

POSITIVISM AND POST-POSITIVISM

Definition

Within the social sciences, advocates of positivism argue that the only legitimate source of knowledge are sense data, through which reality is experienced. In order to guard against the personal and subjective basis of this sensory experience, findings are claimed to be reliable when they can be repeatedly verified. Positivism's roots lie within empiricist philosophy in which wider metaphysical and ethical questions of meaning and value were 'cut away' from the rational pursuit of factual truth based upon an unalloyed experience of nature using the method, or logic, of verification. By letting metaphysics go as a kind of archaic outlier, positivism brings the material world into confined, codified and tidy structures. Its acknowledged founder in social science – Auguste Comte – used the approach as a counter-blast to clerical dominance; it had a democratising tone. The rise of post-positivism is, similarly, a counter-blast, but this time against the dominance that the empirical, scientific worldview that Comte championed itself came to occupy. Verification became its own metaphysics, open to challenge from those who felt there was more than one – empirical – way of understanding the world.

Discussion

As early modern management sought to transfer the traditions of applied engineering in the natural sciences to the social sciences