Chapter 7
Expanding the Discourse on Organizational Inquiry, Power and the Metaphor Commodity

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ABSTRACT

Models of organization are unsatisfactory as they assume a certain level of predictability, but research shows that each organization is unique and cannot be encapsulated by a single ontological model. Organizations exist in a turbulent environment and must change to survive, but change creates tensions that threaten its stability. Those who make up the organization cooperate only when it is in their interest to do so; in other words, it is far from being predictable. Individuals and groups use their power in an attempt to shape outcomes into one that they can accept. The way that power is used can have a significant effect upon the decisions made about the way the organization maintains its relationship with its environment. To enhance our understanding of the way organizational power is used, the notion of “commodity” as a metaphor for power is introduced as a means of surfacing the way in which individual power is used.

BACKGROUND

This chapter is an updated version of the paper published in IJSS Vol 1. No1 in 2014 and provides an opportunity to place the notion of organizational power, the subject of the paper, into context. First, we describe the Systems perspective upon which this argument is based; second we describe what we mean by organization

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5996-2.ch007

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and then commodity as a metaphor for power. Finally a short section outlining the
current research activities associated with the ideas expressed in this chapter

Organizational intervention is problematic as each inquirer has a different notion
of what an organization is and in order to make sense of it the inquirer adopts a
model or concept of ‘organization’. In this paper the author revisits the way in which
we set about organizational inquiry and how we can gain a greater appreciation
of power and how it might be used. It is argued that a once and for all model of
organization is deficient as organizations exist in a turbulent environment and must
constantly change to survive. Change may bring about resistance from those most
affected. The notion of Commodity as a metaphor for ‘soft power’ is introduced as
a way of surfacing how it is used. By thinking in terms of commodity the inquirer
gains insight into the effects of power within the group and opens the way for a
wider range of discussions to take place that may bring out hidden and imagined
manifestations of power. Understanding the way that power manifests might play a
significant part in developing management strategy.

SYSTEMS AS A META DISCIPLINE

What Is an Organisation?

Organizational enquiry means intervening into it in some way, but the term
‘organization’ is vague with no universal definition. Organisation often relates to an
entity of some kind that is given an identity by the observer. In order to address this
potential difficulty we will adopt, in this paper, the Systems approach. The Systems
epistemology is a meta-discipline; a way of thinking about the world unfettered by
the need to adopt a particular ‘discipline’ driven model.

A ‘systems approach’ is an attempt to think in a more holistic way than does Natural
Science. Its justification lies in the real existence of emergent properties. The two
ways of using systems ideas (properly defined, not as in everyday language) namely
hard (seeing the world as systemic) and soft (seeing the process of inquiry into the
world as systemic) broadly imply two philosophical traditions: positivist allied
to a sociology of functionalism, and phenomenological allied to a sociology of
interpretivism, (Stowell-Checkland; U Tube 2012).

Defining a particular ‘System’ is problematic because everyone has a general,
uninspected, idea of what organisation means; consequently it is exceptionally difficult
to pin down a sharp definition. It is because each individual has a ‘choice’ that we need
to remind ourselves of the importance of his or her world-view, or Weltanschauungen.
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