Chapter XVI

Organizational Observers as Agents of Change

They are playing a game.
They are playing at not playing a game.
If I show them I see they are, I shall break the rules and they will punish me.
I must play their game of not seeing I see the game

(R.D.Laing, 1991)

Abstract

In this book we propose using verbal data such as discourses and speech as input for organizational analysis. One of the main differences between verbal data and traditional quantitative data is that the latter are objective whereas the former may give rise to multiple interpretations. In this chapter we deal with the issue of the reliability of discursive data and try to provide an answer to the following questions: How one can be sure the information contained in discourse has been correctly interpreted? Is there more than one admissible interpretation? When is an interpretation admissible? We show that in order to answer such questions the organizational analysts have to assume a mindset and research attitude that are rather different than the traditional objectivist point of view.

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Three Problems

The methodological approach described in the preceding chapters assumes that discourses are used as input for the analysis of organizational memory and shared cognition. This kind of input is “problematic” and has quite different characteristics from the quantitative data traditionally used in empirical research.

The fundamental difference between numerical data and qualitative verbal data lies in the fact that while the first can be associated with objective meanings, the second can be attributed meaning only after a process of subjective interpretation of the data. For example, to affirm that “Today the outside temperature is 100°F” is not the same thing as saying, “Today it is hot.”

In particular, the question of the reliability of data brings up questions such as: How can we be reasonably sure that the information contained in the discourses is correctly interpreted by the analysts? When is an interpretation admissible? Is more than one interpretation admissible? Is it possible to find and evaluate interpretative errors?

In order to give satisfying answers to these kinds of questions we must consider a large set of epistemological and methodological aspects. However, we will limit our discussion to three fundamental questions:

a. The problem of distancing between the researcher and the context of the study.
b. The problem of involvement of the organizational actors.
c. The problem of reliability of interpretation.

The Problem of Distancing:
The Organizational Analyst as an Agent of Change

In the study of organizational phenomena and in the social sciences in general, there are two opposing methodological positions that begin with very different epistemological assumptions: The interpretative/subjective approach and the positivist/objective approach (Sandberg, 2000).

The interpretative approaches assume a constructionist perspective that does not assume a sharp separation between what is being observed and the observer (see Chapter VI). Instead, the positivist approach is based on the dualism of the exact sciences in which the world of phenomena is an objective reality that is distinct from the subjectivity of the observer.
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