Organisational Power and the Metaphor Commodity

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ABSTRACT

Organisational intervention is problematic as each inquirer has a different notion of what an organisation is and in order to make sense of it the inquirer adopts a model or concept of organisation. But models of organisation are unsatisfactory as they assume a certain level of predictability, but research shows that its members cooperate only when it is in their interest to do so; in other words it is far from being predictable. Organisational research suggests abandon ontology for epistemology in recognition of the dynamic of organisational behaviour. At a time of change tensions are created that threaten its stability and individual members and groups use their power in an attempt to shape outcomes. In order to enhance understanding of the way organisational power is used the notion of “commodity” is introduced as a means of surfacing the way in which individual power 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.

Keywords: Commodity, Metaphor, Organisational Behaviour, Organisational Power, System

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AN ORGANISATION?

A simple, but vacuous, definition of organisation is it is an organisation because we say it is. This has some validity because from an observer’s point of view a social grouping of any kind will be recognised by something that gives it a meaning for them and could be described as an organisation; for the observer it is a recognisable entity. This observation highlights the fact that everyone has a general, uninspected, idea of what organisation means; consequently it is exceptionally difficult to pin down a sharp definition. But to intervene into an organisation the inquirer needs a model of some kind that allows them to understand what it is they are trying to make sense of. Checkland and Holwell (1998) suggest “ in order to bring more clarity …it does seem important to declare a defensible concept or model of organisation…” (ibid p79 -84,1998). But there is difficulty in doing this, as the notion of organisation has many dimensions. For example, there is its formal manifestation identified by the name by which it is known. Take “Camford” University, for this university there is both a formal definition and an individual’s personal experience of it. A generic definition of a university might be, “an institution of higher education, offering courses
and research facilities in mainly non-vocational subjects and having acknowledged powers and privileges, especially that of conferring degrees” (Shorter Oxford Dictionary 2007) but it is also a place where people from different backgrounds and experiences meet and integrate (to varying degrees) into a social community. It is being a part of a social community that is often the thing that will define their university in a more personal way.

If we think of a community or an organisation in a formal way we can describe it as a community bound together in a contractual sense where the social relationships are individualistic and impersonal. Tönnies referred to this kind of relationship as Gesellschaft. This kind of instrumental relationship is in contrast to the informal relationship we feel as part of our family or the close-knit community to which we belong. These relationships he described as Gemeinschaft. Here we have relationships built on a sense of belonging, being a part of a tribe or community. Truzzi (1971) describes the equilibrium in Gemeinschaft as being “… achieved through morals, conformism, and exclusion - social control - while Gesellschaft keeps its equilibrium through police, laws, tribunals and prisons. … Rules in Gemeinschaft are implicit, while Gesellschaft has explicit rules (written laws)”. But experience shows us that human beings do not always act in a rational way. Tonnes argued that “…Nothing happens in Gesellschaft that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself. On the contrary, everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension against everyone else” (Harris, 2009, p52). Checkland and Holwell, added to this view by arguing that an organisation is not “…simply a rational machine whose members willingly combine together to pursue organisational goals” (ibid p80). So if we accept this view we should assume that whilst its members appear to willingly conform this may be only when it serves their particular ends.

Against this background of uncertainty about the nature of an organisation emerged a generalised concept of organisation from Lancaster University’s 30 year programme of Action Research (see Checkland, 1999). The research was undertaken in real organisations resulting in more than 300 projects that contributed to the notion of organisation and how it might be researched. The kernel of this overall concept found, beneath the multiple concepts that can be used to describe organisation, that there are three elements:

1. A social collectivity; showing;
2. Multiple world views- and worldviews changing over time;
3. Would-be purposeful activity.

This observation provides a source of immense and changing complexity in any real world example of an organisation. The full complexity of the way in which it exists could never be described in detail, which means that only epistemological statements about organisations are justified.

FROM ONTOLOGY TO EPISTEMOLOGY

The lessons learnt from the Action Research programme at Lancaster marked a move from ontology to epistemology and the so-called hard/soft paradigm shift in systems thinking (Checkland and Poulter, 2006). Researchers and practitioners involved in the programme recognised that the complexity of views and aspirations of those that make up an organisation, meant that intervention to achieve intended change can only be undertaken via a process approach; i.e. by defining an epistemology that can be used to investigate, explore and inquire into real world organisations.

Experience of organisational intervention reveals that change can take place at three levels. The first is Structural, that is to say changes to reporting and functional structures; the second is Process, which relates to the dynamic elements of reporting and informing, and the third, possibly the most difficult, is Attitude (Checkland, 1999, pp180-181).
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