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SO!APBOX
EDITORIAL ESSAYS

Reconsidering the role of the practical theorist: on (re)connecting theory to practice in organization theory

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> In my late twenties I was a general contractor of custom homes. One day, while walking with the architect on an inspection of the jobsite, we stopped at something that clearly displeased him – the foundation being built out of field stones from the property. In giving voice to his dissatisfaction with the mason, he explained about the importance of the 'physical mass of the stones', 'the receding elements of their multiple forms' and 'the transition from the rich and irregular organic materials of the New England farm field to the turn of the century geometry of the Shingle Style structure'. He summed up, 'It must look as though it were supporting everything, literally growing out of the ground'. When he was done with his eloquent explanation, the mason turned to me and asked, 'What the *#&% did he just say?'

Communication breakdowns are a frequent problem in construction; one that is the general contractor's role to resolve. Here were two professionals who were unable to speak to each other, even though it was critically important for the success of the job that they do so. Coming from two different cultures, they needed an intermediary to fill the communication gap. And much like the architect in this story, organizational scholars suffer from an equal inability – or at times even an unwillingness – to span boundaries and translate their work for those who can most benefit; those who will take it and make it real: practitioners.[1] But more to the point, I believe that the field of organizational theory possesses distinct structural and institutional barriers that stifle those who try to play this role. As a result, organizational theory research suffers in comparison with other fields – in particular strategy research – because it has failed to connect to the world of managers. Where strategy researchers have gone to great lengths to make their ideas accessible and therefore have enjoyed greater success in influencing the world of action (Tushman, 2003), organizational research has remained inaccessible and has suffered as a consequence. If left unchecked, organizational theory faces a growing irrelevance beyond its own narrow academic community.

The purpose of this essay is to address how and why organizational theory might become more relevant by speaking to practitioners (as well as other academics) and by addressing pressing contemporary issues. It is a call for organizational scholars to reconsider the way we think about, structure and deliver our research so as to apply it to the practical world. It is a call for the role of the practical theorist;[2] someone who can bridge that gap; whether it is the researcher by herself or himself or through the aid of enabling structures that play intermediary. It is not a call for more consultants, hired guns who provide a service. It is a call for organizational scholars to play an important role in society, offering analytical models and perspectives to help individuals (whether they be business managers, government officials, civil service administrators or others) to solve their own problems (Stern and Barley, 1996; Jonsson, 2003).

Grounding in the social sciences and humanities

The strength of organizational theory lies in its grounding within the rich theoretical traditions of sociology, psychology, political science and others. In fact, many of the scholars now residing in business school-based organizational behavior departments migrated to their new homes from schools in the humanities and social sciences. The influx of rich minds and the theoretical grounding they bring allows the field to build on years of refined research, carefully constructed and applied models and a broad set of concepts and frameworks in explaining the phenomena we study.

But a corresponding weakness in these roots lies in the resultant insularity, both in the questions asked and the language and style used to answer them. Given the field's basis in the social sciences and humanities, its research is primarily designed to study questions of theoretical relevance. Topics of practical application are given less primacy. While important as a means for understanding for understanding's sake and explaining organizational phenomena to others in the field, these questions tend to leave many in the applied world baffled. For how many of us do the world of teaching and the world of research have minimal overlap? How many of us write about one set of theoretical concerns and teach about a different set of practical concerns?

It is not my intention to blame any one person by highlighting their work as an example of that which I speak, so I will turn the lens on my own work. The questions in my research seek to explain, as in one paper (Hoffman, 1999), how agency fits within institutional fields. Regardless of the theoretical relevance of such a question, I answer it in practical terms every time I enter the classroom and teach managerial practice to MBA students; in essence teaching them how to act as agents in institutional fields. The ironic disconnect never seems to faze me. In another paper (Hoffman and Ocasio, 2001), I ask why certain events are attended to within organizational fields while others are not. And once attended to, why do some events become issues of critical importance to field-level participants while others do not? And again, no such distinctions are covered in the classroom. We discuss only those events that have become critical issues, not asking how or why.

It is not that such theoretical explorations are, in and of themselves, inconsequential in a practical sense. The more important issue for my purposes in this essay is to ask how these questions and the resultant answers are of relevance to the practice of managers. And here, I believe that there is always a corollary answer; a practical benefit to our work. Organizational scholarship has built a great base of knowledge over the past decades (Tushman, 2003) and that knowledge can help to explain the political dimensions of power, the social processes of sense-making, the criticality of networks in successful action, the importance of timing and framing in altering social and market environments and many other important topics to graduates from any business school. Yet, much of this research remains within the pages of academic journals that, with the exception of select consultants (who profit from their ability to translate this work), few practitioners will ever read. Valuable knowledge is left on the table. Instead, why can't we publish this work twice? The first outlet is the academic, a place to build rigorous and defendable arguments. The second outlet is the practitioner, a place to offer our tested ideas for application and social change.

One impediment to this duality lies in a second weakness growing from the field's foundations in the social sciences and humanities: the language, concepts and delivery style used to answer our research questions. Again, in scanning my own work, I see reference to 'organizational fields', 'isomorphism', 'collective rationality', 'legitimacy', 'contestation', and the like. While decidedly useful for communicating complex thoughts quickly and efficiently, such language also serves to distance organizational scholars from others not in the field, creating a clique by sharply delineating those who are 'in' and those who are 'out'. The words used in our academic articles have little explanatory meaning to those who work in the applied worlds I am explaining. Even the core term of my work, 'institution', means something very different in the academic and professional worlds. I could well imagine using the terminology and models of organizational theory to explain an idea to a practicing manager, and have him turn to a colleague to ask, 'What the *#&% did he just say?' More than practitioners, such terminology also serves to distance our research from other departments within our very own business-school environments. We need to learn to be multilingual, able to speak the language of academic research as well as the language of those we study in that research.

Bridging theory and practice

The shift of organizational theory from schools in the social sciences and humanities to schools of business over the past decades has also served to influence the kind of research that is conducted, despite the theoretical underpinnings of those who carry that research out (Perrow, 2000). For one thing, the locale of organizational behavior departments biases the field's research towards empirical issues of relevance primarily to business (Stern and Barley, 1996). Business schools are professional schools, locales for research that bridges theory and practice. Just as chemistry professors study the behavior of chemicals, and civil engineering professors study the behavior of physical structures, business-school professors study the behavior of organizations in market settings. For many, however, this emphasis in teaching has gone too far towards the instrumental, relegating the academic to the role of a market where students are customers (March, 2003). Such a trend forces scholars to pander to students for ratings, and dissuades us from introducing transformative ideas into the classroom, challenging students with provocative ideas that may be rejected by 'market forces'.

My challenge to make organizational research more accessible to the world of practice does not mean getting into bed with the corporate agenda. We need to retain a critical distance not only to assist but also to challenge corporate behavior. But cultural biases in business schools encourage organizational research away from issues that are critical of business interests or run contrary to the accepted orthodoxy that profit maximization is the only true end goal of organizations. This is one criticism that the disciplines of strategy and organizational theory share equally. Looking beyond business success or wealth creation as the primary purpose of our studies, we tend to overlook controversial topics that question the role of the business organization in society and the potentially negative consequences of corporate activity. While such research streams may remain relevant within the social sciences and humanities, there are skeptical views when business school scholars write about social responsibility, environmental degradation, poverty, economic inequity, class stratification, homelessness, diversity and ethics (Walsh et al., 2003).

Again, referring to my own experience, I recall being turned down for an academic position with the summary comment, 'We really love your stuff on organizational theory but think you're too focused on the [protection of the natural] environment.' Would the same issue have been raised had I been studying technology strategy in the drug industry? Just as the pharmaceutical industry is an ideal empirical domain for studying the disciplinary aspects of technology strategy, the evolving phenomena of corporate environmentalism is an ideal empirical site for studying the disciplinary aspects of institutional dynamics. What is different is that the latter is topical, value-laden, emotional, contested, controversial and potentially critical of business interests. And given all this, it bears the potential for (or at least the appearance of) advocacy. My objectivity was questioned because of the fear that too much of my personal identity was wrapped up in the phenomenon I was studying, leading me perhaps to an emotional connection to my work (translation: subjective bias). But without involving my whole self in my research, my personal drive and inquisitive spirit will be left behind. Unengaged, my research would be dead (Dutton, 2003).

Down a path towards irrelevance

Our work is further biased by specific structural and institutional controls that channel it in specific directions. These controls begin with our training in doctoral programs and continue through our professional development as organizational scholars. In both cases, the constant immersion in academic seminars and journals to the exclusion of practitioner seminars, meetings and journals serves to weaken our literacy in the languages of the larger mass of people. And why do we limit our involvement in such 'outside' activities? It is because the underlying norms of what is considered legitimate and valuable as well as the overt set of incentives and reward structures lead us away from such endeavors. Our tenure and promotion is based primarily on the publication of top-tier academic journal articles. This is the signal of merit and success. Any expense of effort on any other endeavor is decidedly discouraged. Attempts at external boundary spanning (or internal community building for that matter) will not be rewarded. Publishing in practitioner journals, writing practitioner books (or any books for that matter), speaking at practitioner conferences are discouraged as 'anti-intellectual' at worst and an 'impractical' waste of time at best (with 'practical' coded as whatever will help you first graduate and second get tenure). These activities will not register in a dissertation defense or a tenure review. What matters most are top-tier journal publications to the virtual exclusion of all else. So why would any person seeking job security do them?

It is my belief that the system of near-term incentives for young academics is perverse, both for the ultimate interests of the individual scholar and the potency and relevance of the field. In the long term, when we look back on our careers, our reputation and the importance of our work will be tightly linked to criteria far beyond our top-tier journal articles. We will be noted for our impact on how people think and act, both in the world of thought and in the world of practice. (Ironically, I have been told by many senior scholars that it is their books – and often their trade books – more than their academic articles that have proved the most important for creating this kind of impact.) And to build this body of ideas, we need to build intellectual and practitioner communities around ourselves in order to develop better research. In the final analysis, every personal endeavor is, in large part, the product of a collective. Our intellectual communities help us to refine and test our ideas, strengthen our scholarship and present our arguments. Our practitioner communities help us to ground our ideas in the real world, a place where our 'data' originated and where our future phenomenological questions will emerge. Together, all our communities provide inspiration, emotional support and intellectual challenge. Without them, our work would be unsustainable (Dutton, 2003).

The institutional bias of what connotes legitimate organizational scholarship, coupled with the overriding focus on tenure and the need to publish in top-tier academic journals biases young scholars away from issues that might be controversial, contested or uncertain, and which might therefore be risky endeavors towards acceptance in the academic market. We are channeled instead towards issues that will yield a higher potential for successful graduation and tenure, as a separate concern from personal passion. As such, we are steered away from activities that can build the foundation for a long-term satisfying career.

Many of us tell ourselves that we will get tenure first and then turn our attention to the issues that matter most in our hearts. The irony in such a game plan is that we, as organizational scholars more than anyone else, should understand the co-optive powers of conforming to a dominant culture. Even if we were able to return to the topics that excited our passion earlier, how many of us will be able to bring our full and open zeal to the endeavor? Not many, I fear. By the time we have devoted five or six years to obtaining our degrees and another six years to getting tenure, we will have become so indoctrinated in 'the game', we would be severely challenged to deviate from that which has brought us 'success' and attempt to regain our earlier ambitions. That creative fire within us will have been diminished, if not fully extinguished. We may approach new and controversial topics, but possibly not with an open mind towards creative and innovative methods and models that may be necessary to understand them. We will fall back on old and safe methods and models that have taken us 'successfully' through the thirteen years – give or take – of our doctorate and tenure. We will have learned how to publish successfully, but will we have learned how to have published well, with impact for the worlds both within and beyond the academic walls?[3] There are, of course, exceptions; people who have been able to re-engage their excitement and passion, but they are, I believe, in the minority.

And in the end, this move away from controversial and topical societal issues leads to a detachment from personal opinions and connections with our work. We adopt the scientific method for credibility (Stern and Barley, 1996); much like an engineer or scientist, but unlike the engineer or scientist we discount our humanity in that process. An engineer will study the dynamic properties of a new material or the structural design of a bridge, but she or he will have clear opinions about the outcome she or he hopes to see. A scientist will study the chemical and biological pathways by which chemicals alter living tissue and will have a clear hope that he or she will find a breakthrough towards an end that will cure cancer or precipitate the regulation of a toxic material.

But we all too often cover ourselves with the facade of indifference to the issues and subjects we study. We remove ourselves from the world around us in a sort of elitism, pretending we are somehow above it all, detached, uninvolved, that we would never stoop so low as to 'bias' our results with an opinion or worse yet, heaven forbid, advocate a particular outcome. Do we fear presenting ideas in the world of practice for fear of being exposed for not knowing all the answers (Jonsson, 2003)? Are we simply hiding behind the shield of 'scientific objectivity?'

Or is there a cultural bias among our scholars to have little interest in the affairs and interests of practitioners? Given that many organizational scholars are drawn from the humanities/social sciences to business schools by the lure of greater resources and salaries (Perrow, 2000) how many would return to their home departments if, by some miraculous event, there were income parity between the schools? Not an outcome I desire, but an important empirical question that raises concerns about how many of our colleagues genuinely wish to be housed in the business schools in which they are located.

What can be done about it?

At a recent conference on institutional theory and change, a noted scholar summed up the study of organizational theory as the answer to the question 'Why do people accept forms and structures of domination?'. I found this question ironic as I see the very environment in which organizational scholars work as a structure of domination, one that leads us further from relevance because it is designed to squeeze interest in research application out of us, weed out those of us who do not comply and bar others from entry. But in the spirit of institutional change, and as a challenge for me to apply what I study, I cannot write this essay without offering some suggestion for ways in which to change this state of affairs. The answers lie in both institutional and structural change.

Let us begin in the institutional by acknowledging that a dynamic tension exists in our work; the strain to balance theory and practice. I have argued that organizational scholars, as a field, pretend this tension does not exist and have swung too far towards the theory end of the spectrum in our research. I believe we strive too much to distance ourselves from our subjects and are removing our work from the realm of the relevant. There are dangers, of course, in swaying too far to the practical (as some are now questioning in the field of entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2003)), relegating our work to the level of mere editorial. But we should not ignore the tension; we must struggle to find a balance because it is constructive in producing better research.

I am revealing, perhaps, the imprinting of my own training when I make this plea. As a joint doctoral candidate between the schools of management and engineering, I was constantly pressed by my organizational theory advisers to explain the theoretical relevance of my work, while my engineering advisers kept asking, 'What's the point?'. By appreciating this duality in our research, we begin to understand our individual role in bridging these two domains or the role of specialists who bring work from the level of theory to the level of practice and back again.

In this regard, we may learn something from scholars in the European community who seem to feel much less discomfort with expressing an interest and advocating a position in their research. Our North American fear of appearing to be an advocate and therefore somehow tainted and biased removes our work from that which motivates and animates it: our role as participants as well as researchers of the business environment.

Structurally, we must ask whether we can change the rules of doctoral training and tenure so that writing for practitioner journals, speaking at practitioner conferences, writing trade books or some other metric of external impact registers as valuable. This is one area in which strategy scholars have outdistanced organizational theory scholars, producing more work in practitioner journals and considering such work to be of value (Tushman, 2003).[4] Can we convince tenure review committees to consider outside letters from practitioners who feel that our work has changed the realm of practice? And can we convince them to pay attention to the community-building efforts that are important to the productivity of individual careers and the culture of the society of scholars as a whole? We need to foster collaboration over competition (Walsh et al., 2003), an idea that our worth is based not only on our singular efforts at publishing in top-tier journals but also in our ability to build bridges between practitioners and academics as well as among academics of different kinds. These are the challenges for faculty and school administrators who wish their business schools to be more centrally located in debates of importance to the world of practice we study and teach.

Beyond fundamental change in the institutions of academia, we can also act as individuals. For just as the institutional structures of academia constrain us, they also empower us. We are conveniently situated in locales where we can bridge the worlds of theory and practice. We conduct research, teach (undergrads, MBAs, PhDs and executives) and reach out to academics and professionals through writing, speaking and giving opinions to the media. We possess the power to change our individual circumstances and have impact within and beyond our academic communities. Oftentimes the conforming pressures that we think are coming from around us actually come from within us. We can defy them if we only have the courage to appear unorthodox. In the end, impact on practice has impact on research. It is in our self-interest to eschew the safe route and plot our paths through fields of importance for scholarly and professional audiences. The two can go together. Theory can offer tremendous insights into phenomena and inform practice. And the empirical domain can offer rich settings for applying and expanding theoretical development. The relationship is recursive and synergistic.

With time, the unorthodox can become the institutionalized. There are practical-theorists out there. They do exist.[5] Their role is to recognize the biases in the system that lead junior scholars away from offering relevant research to practitioners and call attention to it; offer a road map for others to follow, while also constructing the institutions that enable this to happen. Together, we must acknowledge that communicating with practitioners is a skill no less difficult than communicating with academics. There are some who are suited to one domain, some who are suited to the other and some who are bilingual enough to be suited to both. To help those in all three categories, department heads or business school administrators might hire editors, coaches and public relations professionals to help translate internal research for external audiences.

In the end, I would hope that the structures and institutions of academics would change such that scholars young and old would be encouraged by the system in which they are developed to focus not only on the stability of tenure but also on the impact of their work. I would hope that they would begin to ask, not only what the theoretical relevance of their work is, but also what the point is. I would challenge them to study what they care about and to use that research to challenge the world around them. I would like us to think of academia as a special and honored place in society (March, 2003), not above it or separate from it, but part of it. We need to re-establish that idea in the institutions of academia, so that we can produce work that speaks with an impact for broader worlds, not just become publishing for publishing's sake.

In the final analysis, the task of organizational and strategy scholarship is to analyze and communicate about where social and organizational systems are now, where they may be going and how we might visualize and realize alternative and better futures. Just as an architect must be able to speak to the masons and carpenters that build a house, we cannot build our theoretical houses on a solid foundation unless we can better communicate across the divides to jointly build knowledge about the best houses to build. But to do this we have got to be practical theorists, to venture out beyond our small academic communities to engage people in the professional world. Without such a shift in emphasis, we will continue to drift further from real-world relevance.

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Notes

1 I use the broad term 'practitioner' here because I am sympathetic to the complaint that organizational scholarship has become too focused on business organizations. It is my desire that my argument be relevant to those who study other forms of organization such as governments and non-governmental organizations, among others.

2 I deliberately borrowed this term from Marrow (1977) who used it describe Kurt Lewin. As Marrow describes him, Lewin worked hard to bring the worlds of theory and practice together, connecting his theoretical ideas with work on practical problems such as social conflict, child development and health, prejudice, leadership, factory production, mass communication and group dynamics (Sandelands, 1990).

3 Ironically, I wonder whether those most successful at the process of publishing would find it most difficult to undo the imprinting of the 13 years of success.

4 One important factor that helps strategy scholars to publish more easily in practitioner journals is that their unit of analysis is often the organization or the individual manager, whereas

organizational theory often lifts the level of analysis to the industry or the field (Jonsson, 2003).

5 I have my own personal favorites, but do not want to be so prescriptive as to name them as 'the' model. I think it is important for each of us to identify those whom we would like to emulate.

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