

PART ONE

Framing the Field: Introducing Some Big Questions





What Do OB Tools and Practices Do?

André Spicer

INTRODUCTION

Many people ask what theories of organizational behaviour actually do. Students are notorious for prodding their teachers about the use of sometimes seemingly baroque theories. Practitioners enjoy the sport of mocking researchers for their quaint irrelevance. Producers of theories of organizational behaviour are also prone to engaging in a little self-flagellation when they ask questions such as: 'Aren't these theories just a fancy version of common sense' (Gordon *et al.*, 1978), 'can't any relatively intelligent person pick these ideas up on the job' (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, 2004), 'What is the point of an education in all these silly models which bear little relationship to what managers do' (Mintzberg, 2004), 'don't theories of OB stunt peoples moral and ethical development' (Leavitt, 1989), 'Why do theories ignore real world problems' (Hambrick, 1993), 'Why do we ignore the external validity of our theories' (Kilmann, 1979), 'How relevant are the theories which we develop to the real world?'

(Starkey and Madan, 2001; Starkey, Hauchlet and Tempest, 2004), and 'Are we using the right style to communicate our ideas' (Grey and Sinclair, 2006).

Some scholars have directly reacted to these concerns by arguing that the purpose of organizational behaviour should be the development of knowledge, not a desperate quest for relevance. For instance, during a speech at a large scholarly conference, Jim March (2000) commented that the purpose of management research 'is not in trying to identify factors affecting corporate performance, or in trying to develop managerial technology. It is in raising fundamental issues and advancing knowledge about fundamental processes affecting management'. For March and many others like him, the purpose of theory is to expand our understanding of the organizational world. It is not to provide relevant tools for managers to fiddle about with.

In this chapter, I will look at the conundrum that people who engage with management theory face. The question at the centre of this

chapter is what do organizational behaviour theories do? In order to answer this question, I will begin by giving a brief sketch of what it is that we mean by the idea of theory. In the second part, I will consider why theories matter by looking at empirical research that has investigated the impact that management ideas have on organizations. I will use this research to make the case that theories of management have a profound and far-reaching affect on organizational life. In the third part of the chapter, I consider the way that management knowledge is used. I argue that theories of organizational behaviour can be used for four purposes: *predicting* how an organization may work, *understanding* why organizations operate as they do, *critiquing* the way that organizations currently work, and *creating* new ways of organizing. I conclude the chapter by arguing that a competent user of theories of OB should try to develop skills in each of these areas.

WHAT IS THEORY?

Think of the typical tools and practices that managers use. These tools are not things like a hammer or an egg beater. Rather, they are neatly packaged theories. Some examples include batteries of personality tests that are used during recruitment, ideas about team formation that are pushed into practice during a project, or theories about organizational structure that are put into play during corporate change processes. So in order to know what an OB tool or practice can do, it is vital that we consider what theories do.

The first question we must clearly answer is this: What exactly do we mean by theory? The word 'theory' is derived from the Greek word, *theoria*. This means contemplation, speculation or taking a view of things. The modern usage of the word owes a great deal to the sciences. A scientific approach tends to define theories as 'a statement of relations among concepts within a set of boundary assumptions and constraints' (Bacharach, 1989: 496. For a similar example see Dubin, 1969 and Whetten, 1989). A few things jump

out if we unpick this terse definition. First theory is about concepts. That is, a theory is made up of abstract representations of reality that are embodied in some kind of language or symbolism. For instance, the theories of power are typically made up of abstract concepts such as 'networks' and 'power' (for examples of network and power research see: Burt, 1992). These concepts are abstract because they include a whole range of empirical instances. For instance, the abstract concept of networks can be used to describe a relationship between friends, lovers, or colleagues.

The second characteristic of theory is that it is about the relationship between concepts. That is, a theory seeks to establish how two abstract representations fit together. For instance, a theory of power might suggest that powerful organizational members (the first abstract representation) have a diverse social network (the second abstract representation). Notice that these two abstract representations are linked by a causal relationship. This theory states that diverse social networks cause an individual to be powerful. According to some, rooting out these causal relationships is the bread and butter of theory. The job of the theorist is to suggest possible relationships between concepts which the more empirically inclined can go away and test.

The third characteristic of theory is that it seeks to explain why concepts fit together as they do. This involves developing an explanation of exactly why concept one might have an affect on concept two. For instance, theories of network power provide an explanation of why more network = more power. They do this by suggesting that social networks provide individuals with access to valuable information, resources, and opportunities to influence decision makers which in turn provide an individual with power. Such explanations require the theorist to argue out the links between the two concepts. This can be done by carefully logical deduction where the theorist argues if A is the case, then B must be true. It can also be done by deducing links between concepts from previously undertaken empirical work.

For instance, studies of network power have pieced together empirical evidence from existing empirical studies of power and resources, information and opportunities. No matter which way theorists go about this task, they must substantiate a link between concepts.

The final aspect of theory is the identification of the broad context or constraints under which it works. To put this in a different way, a theory involves identifying the conditions under which two concepts relate. For instance, a theory about power and networks might identify that the idea that bigger network = greater power works in some cultural contexts rather than others. Often an enthusiastic theory builder will try to bracket off these potentially pesky problems by labelling them as 'contextual variables'. For instance, the theory about networks and power might identify cultural context as a contextual variable. By identifying when and where a concept might work and when and where it might not work, a theorist is able to make her model more bounded and potentially more convincing.

The sciences certainly provide us with a very clear and well defined answer to what a theory might be. However, this approach does not provide the only indication of what theory can be. A second, quite different approach to theory can be found in the humanities. This sense of what theory is was produced by the theoretical turn that occurred during the second part of the twentieth century. At a minimum, theory in this tradition involves an 'abstention from empiricist or positivist knowledges through insight into their sleeping structures' (Hunter, 2006: 87). That is, the theorist is not so concerned with simply describing the world of happenings and events as it appears to them. In fact, the theorist is profoundly suspicious of any sense data that comes their way. For them, our experiences and understandings of the social world are mediated by some kind of theory. In revealing how a theory mediates data, they dig out the 'sleeping structures' that arrange and order our experiences of the social world. This involves a kind of revelation whereby the

theorist seeks to identify and discover the ancient ideas that infuse how we see the world. This act of rooting out the theories we use to see the world also involves changing ourselves. For Terry Eagleton, 'theory of this kind comes about when we are forced into a new self-consciousness about what we are doing' (2003: 27). Indeed, theory ultimately aims to help us cultivate a certain sense of 'openness to being' (Hunter, 2006) that might involve not only the ability to recognize ourselves as if for the first time, but also see the world anew. According to proponents in the humanities, theory is not a model which relates a set of concepts. Rather, theory is a way of approaching the world based on constant questioning and looking beyond the immediate data and common sense which come so easily to hand.

DOES THEORY MATTER?

Now that I have established what theory is, let me ask a slightly more troubling question: does theory actually matter? People dealing with theories of organizational behaviour are often very sceptical. They regard theory as nothing more than something to keep credulous managers amused, consultants paid, and academics busy. However, this assumption does not seem to stack up against the evidence. Studies of the impact of management theories have noted the widespread and profound affect that management ideas have on organizations and our lives more generally. They include a profound affect on routines, cognitions, fashion, ideology, language, distribution of capital, and technology. Let us consider each of these points in turn.

One of the first areas of research that noticed the profound affect that management ideas had on organizational life was the field of routines. Researchers working in this field argue that organizations are not only groups of people who do things. They are also collectives who act together. Studies of organizational routines show how collective processes of trial and error gradually become the everyday practices of an organization

(Levitt and March, 1988; Feldman, 2003). These routines, which we take for granted, are often the result of hard-won collective lessons. For instance, the process of hiring a new candidate usually involves a well trodden routine. However, these routines are often the result of incremental and collective processes of learning in organizations. Collective trial-and-error processes are brought together as a theory proper through some kind of scientific endeavour. For instance, the practices of corporate culture during the 1980s were later rationalised and mapped out in formal theories of the organization (Barley, Meyer and Gash, 1989). What had been a rather fluid and fuzzy collection of practices developed into a theory. The greatest advantage is that these ideas could be transported and translated across different workplaces (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). Theories about how we do relatively mundane things such as hire people, fix a minor problem, or communicate with our boss are gradually embedded in our practices, but our routines are rarely the result of our own learning. If this was the case, our routines would be quite stunted. Rather, routines are often the result of the learning of others which have been packaged into theories. Consider the example of hiring again. When a newly minted HR manager is faced with the prospect of hiring new staff, they do not just rely on their own experience. Instead, they reach for some of the standard templates of how you hire. The result is that one template of hiring quickly becomes the common sense that managers cling to. This reminds us that theories of organizational behaviour matter because they can rapidly become embedded into our un-thought everyday actions.

Once researchers had begun to recognise how theories could have a profound affect on routines, they began to ask how this occurred. One result was that new theories changed how people in organizations thought about and understood the social world. This stream of research has repeatedly uncovered how shared theories focus the minds of people working in certain industries (Lant, 2002), which happens when a certain 'cognitive

scheme' spreads throughout an industry. Such schemes typically shape how people think about and interpret that industry. For instance, the rise of new understanding of what the Catholic church should do during the 1960s led to fundamental changes in the structure of the organization, how priests relate to the laity, and how religious services should be conducted (Bartunek, 1984). Similarly, who companies understand to be their competitors are shaped by collective theories which circulate within an industry (Porac and Thomas, 1990). For instance, members of the Scottish textile industry thought about it using common cognitive schemes which were divided along the lines of Hosiery, Knitware and Lace (Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller, 1989). These divisions were based on shared cognitive schemes. The result was that companies operating in each sector of the market understood their competitors in a rather limited and circumscribed fashion. Shared cognitive schemes can shape what skilled groups understand as appropriate and reasonable at certain moments. For instance, in his re-reading of the Mann Gulch disaster, Karl Weick (1993) argues that a group of firefighters refused to drop their heavy tools and run from a dangerous wildfire because they understood their tools as being part of their professional identity as firefighters. The theories of fire-safety which were drummed into these unfortunate young men during their training and socialisation cost them their lives. The lesson that we can draw from these studies is that theories can become inscribed into shared cognitive schemes within organizations, sometimes with life and death consequences.

Theories don't just shape our routines and our thinking. They can also create whole industries. Studies of management fashions have pointed out that there is a whole sector of the economy in many advanced capitalist countries that is devoted to the development and circulation of management ideas (Abrahamson, 1991; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999). Participants in this economy include the producers of fashionable new ideas such as academics, intellectuals, and

management gurus. There is also a large group of people whose time is devoted to circulating management fashions such as management consultants, advisors, and the business press. Finally, there are many willing and eager consumers of management knowledge such as governments, employees and, of course, management themselves. Indeed the management knowledge sector plays an increasingly important role as part of the post industrial economy. In fact, some of the more desirable jobs that the young and ambitious aspire to occupy are as circulators of management fashion. These positions are so coveted because not only do they pay well, but they also confer on the position holder a degree of status; their holders are the witch doctors of the post-modern metropolis, able to prescribe all sorts of common sense and hokum tricked out with fancy trappings.

Theories are not just people's bread and butter. They also provide an orientation and collective sets of ideas. Indeed, these ideas provide strict and appealing normative schemes for managers. They give a set answer to disturbing questions such as what is right and wrong, what we should strive for, and what we should do. In short theories of organizational behaviour can act as ideologies. Many commentators on contemporary societies have noted that some of the most widespread and surprising ideologies of our day are ones associated with management (Chiapellio and Boltanski, 2005). Just think of the fanatical commitment that we all seem to have towards leadership (Calás and Smircich, 1991). Whole nations have been driven into neurotic fits of self-scrutiny when they feel they 'lack leadership'. Many millions are spent on nurturing leadership. Today, even schools have downplayed teaching 'content' (such as history or chemistry) in favour of instruction in the illustrious process of leadership. As a theory gradually becomes an ideology, it typically provides a justification for particular relations of power within a society. The ideology of leadership, for instance, provides an alluring justification for why it is that we should sit back and follow the

demands of a leader, no matter how harmful. This is because the ideology of leadership leads us to assume that leadership is good and thoroughly necessary.

Theories tell us what to value. They also provide us with a language we can use to talk about the world. Indeed management has become a widely accepted *lingua franca* of social life (Grey, 1999; Grant *et al.*, 2004). Theories of management have gradually become the way many people talk about the world. Talk about team work has become a way we discuss group relations. Entrepreneurship has become a widespread parlance for understanding nearly any setting from education to the organization of medical services (Jones and Spicer, forthcoming). We use ideas of management to talk about even the most mundane aspects of everyday life from sleep to home decor (Hancock and Tyler, forthcoming). The spread of management as a discourse is particularly important for a number of reasons. First, management talk provides us with a limited set of ways of describing the social world. This means that we begin to have a very complex and well crafted repertoire for acts that involve telling others what to do. More than this, discourses of management also begin to shape how we understand and interpret social life. For instance, the language of entrepreneurialism means that we understand the social world as one huge set of opportunities which only need to be seized by a wily operator. Indeed, studies of entrepreneurial discourse go as far as claiming that the language of entrepreneurship 'makes up' our sense of who we are as people (Du Gay, 1996). For instance, the rise of entrepreneurship discourse means that professionals drop their sense of identity in favour of a new more entrepreneurial outlook.

Theories of management are rarely picked up because they directly lead to greater productivity or more effective organizations. Rather, theories of management are often adopted by managers in their quest to gain legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). That is, theories of management which are widespread and relatively well accepted become a way

people seek to be seen as being a good player in an industry. The result is that companies often pick up and use management theories even when they have little or no direct practical benefit. However, what these management theories actually do is to confer a sense of status and legitimacy on the firm, which can have quite widespread and practical implications. For instance, putting into practice a theory such as total quality management, which is seen to have widespread importance in an industry, may mean that potential investors will look on the company more favourably. In turn, this might result in a better valuation by financial analysts, a better share price or a better chance for the company to survive in a competitive market. So the central lesson here is that theories of management can make a significant difference to the status and legitimacy of managers and organizations.

The final way that theory makes a difference in organizations is by becoming part of the technologies that are vital to the daily functioning of the organization. If we look carefully at many of the technologies that are frequently used in organizations, we find that they embody particular theories. Accounting systems embody theories of double-entry bookkeeping. Group-ware systems embody ideas of collaborative working. The new open-planned office environment embodies ideas of knowledge sharing. Recruitment systems embody ideas of human resource management. In each of these cases what were once complex and quite fluid ideas have been tied up and packaged into rather neat technologies (Latour, 2005). The result is that the user does not necessarily have to think in any depth about the ideas. Rather, the theory has become almost automated – it does it on its own. In many ways, theories of organizational behaviour have become part of the ubiquitous ‘software’ of organizational life.

HOW CAN YOU USE THEORY?

OB theories are powerful tools and practices that profoundly influence organizational life. However, like any tools, it is not good enough

to know what they are and what they can do. We must also know exactly how these tools and practices can be used. One thing of which we can be certain is that theories about organizations are a special kind of tool. They are not blunt instruments which one can use as a paperweight. Rather, they are performative things. By this, I mean theories are a set of words which can be used to do things (Austin, 1969). Indeed, people do things with theories all the time. They use them to restructure, chastise, reflect, comment and convince (Cooren, 2000). Indeed, using a theory is a kind of practical act that has various affects in the world (Spicer *et al.*, 2007). If using a theory has affects, then we must ask what kinds of things we use theory to do. Jürgen Habermas (1987) provides a neat answer to this troubling question. He argues that we use theories to pursue particular interests. There are three distinct interests he identifies: explaining causal relations, understanding and interpreting, and critiquing the world. In what follows I shall expand on these three uses of theory. I will also suggest that theories of organization can have a fourth use: creating new modes of organizing.

Perhaps the most widespread way that theories can be used is to predict and control aspects of the social world. In order to do this, a theorist would set out to identify two or more concepts and posit a causal relationship between them. For instance, a theorist of power may suggest that the more scarce resources that an individual has at their disposal, the more powerful they will be (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Having identified this relationship, the theorist would then seek to predict it. They might try to predict how much power an individual will have in an organization on the basis of the resources that they have at their disposal. Finally, a theorist might go a step further. On the basis of their theoretical knowledge, they may seek to control this relationship. For instance, a theorist might be concerned about the lack of power that immigrants have in the labour market. In order to rectify this, they might seek to provide immigrants with

some scarce resource (such as specialist skills) which would make them more powerful. Underlying this approach to theory is a deeper assumption about the nature of the social world. This assumption is that social life is made up of a complex web of causal relations. Moreover, these causal relations can be objectively known and understood through careful testing. Finally, by using a theory to predict social relations we usually end up conserving or, at the best, incrementally changing existing social relation because we are using evidence of how organizations are in order to build a theory. The result is that what we end up producing as truth what already exists, not what could possibly exist. Using theory to predict certainly has some strong advantages. Perhaps the major advantage is that it allows the theorist to identify clear causal patterns in organizations. As a rhetorical move, giving the audience a clear and uncomplicated message about causal relations can be very convincing indeed. It makes nice news stories and can appeal to the busy practitioner who does not have the time or effort for 'partially this, partially that' stories. However, such certainties come at a high cost. By making rigid rule like statements, much of the ambiguity and uncertainty that characterize social life is completely written out of the picture. The result is that we develop a one-dimensional and rather un-supple understanding of the social world. At times we can end up in a situation where our law-like generalisations act as mechanisms that reproduce existing patterns of domination and subjection. This means our theories can act as a brake on social change and enforce a single dominant version of how things should be.

A second way that we can use theory is to interpret the social world. This involves using theory as a perspective or point of understanding to sort out the buzzing confusions and complexities of the social world. Following this approach, the moment of doing theory is a moment of trying to generate meaningful understanding of the social world. Often this involves trying to recover the folk theories that people press into service in their everyday

attempts to negotiate and make sense of the social world (Glaser and Strauss, 1968). For instance, some studies of power have sought to undercover the interpretive schemes that people working in organizations use to negotiate certain situations. One example is the practical negotiations which go on around how a contract should be interpreted on a building site (Clegg, 1975). This process of interpretation largely involved attempts to recover the ways people interpret the social world in order to create a degree of mutual understanding between actors. The idea is that we should try to communicate how other people interpret and understand the social world. Underpinning this approach to doing theory is the assumption that the social world is saturated in meaning. It also assumes the way that we can understand this social world is through an effort to recover the patterns of meaning and interpretation of actors. Thus, it is first and foremost an attempt to root out the practical knowledge of actors as they go through the social world. In doing so, we continue to have a rather conservative approach to the social world. This is because we seek to root out the interpretive schemes that are already existing within a society. We do not make the more difficult move of innovating, of actually trying to posit radically new ways of interpreting and understanding the social world. This approach to theorising certainly has some distinctive and notable strengths. First, it allows us to develop situated, rich, and meaningful descriptions of social life (Latour, 2005). These descriptions of social life can often prove to be engaging and intuitively convincing. They are stories that speak to our experience of the social world as a space of ambiguities, meaningfulness and complexities. However, in providing a deep and detailed description of what happens in a particular setting, we end up with an endless list of specific knowledge. It is difficult to develop any generalized theory which can be usefully used to mediate between different contexts and even more difficult to turn theory building into a progressive enterprise where new theories build on existing ideas. The result is that theorists can

continually engage in a process of reinventing the wheel. Using theory to interpret social reality can mean that it is very difficult to question existing patterns of social life. When interpreting, all a theorist can do is to affirm the existing stock of practical knowledge. Calling this knowledge into question is seen to be somewhat arrogant and belittling to the stock of practical knowledge of our research subjects.

The third way that theory can be used is as a tool for critique. This involves using our ideas to call into question existing social relations and ways of organizing. Theory becomes a kind of negative capability. This is the capability of 'being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, 1970: 43; see also: Bion, 1984). This ability to live with the unknown involves a willingness to unfold and unpick our deeply held assumptions and perspectives on organizations. Moreover, it involves a willingness to deliberately destabilize our existing understandings and dearly held theories about social life. Using theory to call into question established perspective works through a process of questioning. It sets out to reveal the assumptions and political commitments that underlie existing approaches to the social world. Once these underlying assumptions are identified, the theorist proceeds to dismantle each and every one of these assumptions. Studies of power in organizations often take this route. Instead of seeking to recover the interpretive schemes and practical knowledge of actors, they seek to call this practical reason into question. For instance, Burawoy's (1979) study of power in a factory showed how the practical knowledge of the employees that they used to help the time pass during the boring work day actually made them complicit in their own subordination. Seeing things this way this allowed Burawoy to call into question the structures of power and domination that underpin the organizational life world of these workers. Using this approach to critique he sought to reveal the structures of domination and power that infest social life. Doing so involves an attempt to grasp

the possibility and potentialities of creating radical social change. Underlying such efforts is the assumption that social reality is something that is structured around struggles and patterns of domination. The theorist seeks to know the world by throwing that world into question. Knowledge, according to critical theory, is first and foremost a process of asking questions in order to create some kind of radical or emancipatory social change. Such procedures of critique certainly allow the theorist to do some interesting things. It allows them to reveal relations of power and domination that often underlie existing theories. It also means that the theorists do not unconditionally accept existing bodies of ideas. Rather, they seek relentlessly to call these bodies of ideas into question. Doing so means that we are not fated to merely accept existing folk theories as the way things are and indeed should be. Rather, it allows them to call into question these folk theories in ways that may lead to human emancipation. Indeed, it was this very negative capability of questioning and critique that underpinned some of the great movements such as the Enlightenment, the Reformation, and the French Revolution (Withnow, 1989). While such negative capabilities certainly can produce large scale social change, they can also lead to more sinister outcomes. Perhaps one of the most questionable consequences of using theory as a tool for critique is that it leads theorists in a relentless cycle of destructive tearing down of any ideological edifice they are faced with. The result is two-fold – first it makes it very difficult, if not impossible to identify what the theorist actually supports (Böhm, 2006). Second, it leads to a kind of resentful dependence on the very thing which we set out to critique (Brown, 1995). Thus critique has a kind of parasitic dependency on the existing bad guys at whom it takes pot-shots. Finally, critique can seduce the theorists into making rather grand claims in a way that disregards folk theories. The rich world of everyday ideas is replaced with a monolithic single commitment to critique which effectively wipes out the diversity of local knowledge that

critique is supposed to celebrate. It also can sap energy from the many practical efforts to change organizational life to which critique is apparently so committed.

After Habermas, some other theorists have developed a further way that theory might be used in the world, not for prediction, understanding, or critique but innovation. The final way that theory can be used is in the creation of new ways of being and organizing, an approach to doing theory that involves creating new concepts that allow us to think about organizations in a different way. This process of concept creation proceeds through the encounter with thought and the world, an encounter which will certainly reveal things which are mysterious and cannot be adequately explained (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). In order to provide explanations, we are then pushed to create concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1996). This involves crafting new representations and ways of being which reveal unthought aspects of social life. It gives us a language through which we can begin to think what was previously unthinkable. For instance, some theorists of power have taken the risk of creating new ways of understanding and enacting relations of power within organizations. This process of concept creation can produce new ways of doing power within organizations. Thinking about organizational power relations as a kind of social movement allows us to imagine new ways of relating to one-another in organizations (e.g., Davis *et al.*, 2005). By inventing new ways of thinking through power relations, we are able to open up the world by drawing out the potentialities that dwell all around us. The act of doing theory should be understood first and foremost as an act of theorising. Approaching theory as a creative act assumes that the organizational world is one which is at least partially confronted through and in the theories which we have of it. These theories can certainly be investigated and understood, but they can also be reworked to draw out potentialities in the social world. Doing so helps to make incremental and sometimes potentially radical changes to the social world.

Instead of these changes being made through a negative destabilising of existing social relations, they can be made through a generous contribution of new ways of existing and living. The process of doing theory involves contributing new ways of theorising. Going through this process helps us to bring into being new ways of understanding and being within organizations. It expands our theoretical imaginations. It provides us with new ways of thinking and talking about the social world. It also gives a sense of what might be possible within organizations, but perhaps most importantly, if we approach the process of theorising as one of concept creation, we are able to hold the process of theorising consistently open to potentialities which we cannot yet imagine. While all this sounds promising, the act of theorizing as a process of creation comes with less lustrous baggage. Because of the commitment to consistent openness, it can lead to the undisciplined creation and multiplication of concepts. While this can create an attractive and exciting fair of ideas, it can also create a lack of any progressive research programme. In addition, it may nurture a commitment to the outlandish, novel and freakish rather than what is actually 'true'. It might even produce a disorientating and rather confusing landscape of ideas for the neophyte to negotiate. Along with the excitement might come a sense of confusion and disorientation.

CONCLUSION

Theory matters. At least this is the argument I have tried to make here. I have argued that when we use OB tools and practices we are largely using theories. They may be naïve theories or complex theories, but they are theories all the same. These theories have a range of affects in organizations such as changing people's routines, influencing the technologies they use to get the job done, and changing the very job which is to be done. Furthermore, I have argued that theory can be used for a number of purposes including prediction, understanding, critique

and creation. What remains is the question of exactly how a theorist of organizations can fit these different ways of doing theory together.

One way people think about how different theories are used is to think in terms of conflicting paradigms (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Such an orientation involves recognising that the different approaches to doing theory rely on mutually exclusive assumption which cannot and should not be mixed. All one can do is be certain about exactly what kind of theorist one is and remain true to the cause. As an approach, it certainly has its charms. It clarifies the underlying theoretical positions we come from when we think about organizations. It also identifies why it is sometimes so difficult for different theorists to work together. However, it can lead to a rather unproductive situation where there is no possible or practical interaction between different theoretical approaches. The result is the carnage of paradigm warfare with little border traffic between different approaches.

A second way of thinking about how these different ways of doing theory fit is in terms of the political standards which are used to think through the doing of theory (e.g. Contu and Willmott, 2005; Böhm, 2006). Following this approach, each of the different ways of doing theory are said to be based on different political agendas. Any attempts to mix different theoretical positions would ultimately involve wavering between what should be considered to be incoherent political positions, meaning that one would dilute their political commitments and projects. The upshot is that one should remain committed to their position and attempt to build a movement around it. Doing so would see the position gain strength and steeling itself from attack from other conceptual movements. While this approach is certainly good advice for the theoretical field marshal, it can fall victim to an absolute elision of theory and politics. For sure, our theorising always has political commitments, but it is never *only* politics. Theory can be and indeed should be far more than this. It can overflow the possibility of

petty wars of dominance in favour of an encounter with the rich strangeness of the world.

So if not paradigms or politics, what then? I would like to suggest that doing theory can involve a kind of practical stance. This is a stance where we realise that when we do theory, we are performing certain things. The question then is not first and foremost about our commitment to a certain theoretical positions or political causes. Rather, the key question is about what the task at hand might be and how theoretical practice, of whatever kind, can be used to do it (Spicer *et al.*, 2007). Taking this approach involves asking exactly what I am hoping to do with this theory, who will benefit, and what might be the best way of going about doing it. This would probably necessarily involve a movement between different positions when investigating different questions. By asking somewhat more loose and experimental question, the practice of theory may become one which is not dominated by hard and fast commitments. Rather it becomes a practice that is more supple and able to answer the pressing concerns at hand. This would make the task of doing theory something which does not involve dogmatic commitments. Rather it would become an act of testing and experimentation (Ronnell, 2006). Doing theory would be about remaining open to the world and the constant possibility that this world will overflow the ideas we already have at hand. Most importantly, it would cultivate the ability to listen for and experience the mystery that is how people behave in organizations.

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