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## **Adjusting the granularity of management perception and action**

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### **Abstract** (Article Summary)

Beech et al argue that attacks to postmodern thinking that conceive it as leading to purposelessness are misconstrued and that it is possible to adjust the focus of purpose in a way that reframes action. They argue that the appropriate approach is postmodern, not post-purpose, and that postmodernism does not reject the idea of purpose per se, rather it draws attention to the chaotic context in which purposes are played out.

### **Full Text** (5006 words)

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#### **[Headnote]**

ABSTRACT

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A danger that postmodernism faces is that it is branded as irrelevant to practicing managers -- those who daily influence the lives of others. Part of the accusation of irrelevance derives from attacks on postmodern thinking that see it as propounding a sense of purposelessness and antipathy to action. It is possible to see such accusations as being based on a reading of Lyotard's (1984) demolition of meta-narratives. Without meta-narratives such as religion, capitalism, scientism or communism, individual actions lose their place in modernist teleological purpose. When there is no ultimate purpose, then day-to-day actions do not have significance. If, for example, there is no perceived purpose to making a profit - whether or not 'profit' is viewed as beneficial then the manager's task in eliciting effort from workers is reduced to a mere whim. Such a line of reasoning can lead to a rejection of postmodern thinking.

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In this study, we argue that attacks on postmodern thinking that conceive it as leading to purposelessness are misconstrued, and that it is possible to adjust the focus of purpose in a way that reframes action. Ironically, we see the work of Weber (1968), who has often been associated with meta-narratives of bureaucracy and

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religion, as offering a route to maintaining the utility of the anti-meta-narrative approach. We argue that the appropriate approach is postmodern, not post-purpose, and that postmodernism does not reject the idea of purpose per se, rather it draws attention to the chaotic context in which purposes are played out.

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In seeking to support understanding of the chaotic context of organizations, we argue for approaches to management that are based on 'coping' with diversity, and on 'improvisation' around complexity and ambiguity, rather than on reduction and convergence in search of unattainable unity of meaning and purpose.

## PROBLEM WITH THE READING OF POSTMODERN THOUGHT

Lyotard (1984) developed a convincing argument for the rejection of meta-narratives as forms of explanation and modes of imbuing purpose. He argued that meaning and truth are not 'out there' in the world and are not descriptively captured through grand theory. Rather, grand theories such as religion, capitalism, scientism and communism go in search of data to support their structures (knowledge), and for Foucault (1980) this process is one of the furtherance of knowledge and power - forever intertwined.

Marsden and Townley (1999) have argued that within the dominant narrative in managerial thinking and practice, 'normal science' maintains dualities - such as the 'right' and 'wrong' ways of doing things and privileges managers as the leaders of those who need to be led and as the solvers of problems by and large caused by others. This narrative can be seen as embedded in the traditional Excellence theories (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Waterman, 1994) where prescriptions about how people should be treated at work were derived from best practice cases. The well-intentioned argument was that if other organizations replicated such practice, then they too would be successful. More recently, the work of Becker and Huselid (1999) amongst others has adopted a less anecdotal, more scientific approach. Now there is proof that treating people better will inspire them to higher levels of performance, and that the organization will benefit as a result. Again, case studies are produced so that others can copy the successful, but it is yet to be seen whether formulaic replication leads to success or if, as with the Excellence theories, even the exemplary firms can be subject to failure. What is notable about this later work, however, is that it seeks to solve the problems of Excellence theories by doing what they sought to do, only better through statistically rigorous data collection and analysis. There is, however, still an attempt to adopt an approach that forms generalizations that can be replicated.

However, from a postmodern perspective, the problem is not that earlier approaches were not scientific enough, but rather that they entailed an inappropriate way of conceiving organizations. Privileging the meta-narrative of scientism in managerial research maintains dualities - that there is a right and wrong way of doing things and, following Derrida (1973), many postmodernists would reject a solid distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, and so on. For Marsden and Townley (1999), postmodern attacks on scientism in organization studies run the risk of ending in 'hopeless relativism' because of their inability to say that one form of action is better than, or preferable, to another. We will argue that such a relativistic position, which may be anathema to an action orientation, is not the necessary postmodern position, and that a postmodernism that is not post-purpose is fully possible.

## BEYOND AND BETWEEN UNITY, FRAGMENTATION AND NIHILISM

Rationalist and reductionist thinking is evidenced in much of the managerial literature that informs the fields of practice and research, with a focus on unity, a drive for agreed meaning and interpretation (Hedberg, 1981; Weick, 1991; Kim, 1993) across all organizational actors, and with associated rejection of the logically inconsistent. The concept of unity can be read into managerial concepts such as seeking cohesion (Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991), shared vision (Collins and Porras, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Wack 1985), setting clear goals and objectives (Rumelt, 1987) drawing a team together so that it is more than a mere group (Katzenbach and Smith

1993), and exercising leadership so as to transform followers into a more unified and motivated body (Bass, 1985).

Within the critical tradition in organizational literature (e.g. Salaman, 1979; Fox, 1985) there is a move away from the excessively rational and structural view of organizations prevalent up to the 1970s (Zey-Ferrel, 1981), a replacement of the meta-narrative, and a recognition of diverse perspectives. However, as Knights (1997) has argued, critical literature is also subject to dichotomizing tendencies. For example, pluralist perspectives are aware of dichotomies such as structure/action, but they often deal with them in a reductionist mode (Knights, 1997). This is done either by adopting a hierarchical arrangement (Chia, 1996) in which one side is privileged over the other as in structural-functionalism or action theory or through seeking reconciliation as in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) where structure is both the medium and the outcome of action. Postmodernism highlights concepts of complexity and ambiguity, and is distinct from other approaches in maintaining the nonresolution of contradictions, tensions and dichotomies in organizations (Burrell, 1988; Cooper and Burrell, 1988; Cooper, 1989).

In our search for meaning for and with organizational actors, we reject both the concept of unity and the approach of those who place differing unity sets in dichotomous opposition to each other. However, we reject also the views of those that see only disunity - those of the 'nihilist' "who judges of the world as it is that it ought not to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist" (Nietzsche, 1968: 318) - since these too are based upon reductionist and dichotomous arguments. Some have argued that postmodernism maintains modernist concepts such as the dialectic struggle, for example when arguing against meta-narrative (Letiche, 1992) and, in so doing, maintains essentialist concepts of opposing forces. An alternative reading is that postmodernism, with its destruction of those purposes derived from grand meta-narratives, can lead to a nihilism, perceived as having no reason to do anything - or one thing rather than another. We take issue with both these positions. First, whilst postmodernism reacts to and resists modernity, it does not derive a 'single state' outcome, but a lack of single state does not necessarily imply a nihilistic, non-political stance.

In rejecting both the ideas of unity and of fragmented nihilism, we do not see the foundations of a positive postmodernity in consolation and deliverance through some form of 'social hoped' (Rorty, 1999), believing that the drive for consensus and for establishment of freedom from domination are inherent forces in society (Habermas, 1987). As Flyvbjerg (1998) posits, confrontational and destructive conflict is the exception in human relations, but not in a state of consensus, rather in a state of 'divergent equilibrium'. We see the divergent equilibrium of organizations as being a state that is not free from the forces of domination--from the application of 'will to power' (Nietzsche, 1968) by those who seek to be both the decision makers, and also to determine the criteria by which these decisions are judged 'good' or 'bad'.

## ON COMPLEXITY AND AMBIGUITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

In seeking to understand the foundations of meaningful action in organizations, we must turn away from all of the approaches discussed so far, yet we must embrace them - moving between and beyond the dichotomous oppositions of the (post)modern. Here, we argue that neither the modernist, unitary approach, nor the postmodern approaches of fragmented individualism (Derrida, 1973; Lyotard, 1984) and nihilism (Hassard, 1992) are conducive to achievement of meaningful action the *causa efficiens* (Nietzsche, 1968), the efficient cause that is sought by managers in their own context of thinking/acting. One of the key challenges of complexity is not to take sides for order or disorder, for rationalism or pluralism, not to polarize and dichotomize (Morin and Kem, 1999). Rather, there is a need for non-rational assertion that enables organizational actors to dodge the trap of nihilism and to engage with their uncertainties an approach that requires that both we, and they "deal with the world in which (we) actually live" (McKenna and Zannoni 2000: 331) We seek to understand the status of (dis)order and

(ir)rationalism that informs managerial acting/thinking in the context of its origination and application that of the actors themselves. We seek the basis for a postdichotomous and post(post)modern philosophy of organizational thinking/acting in which we understand organizations as both fragmented and unitary, actors within them both as managers and managed, but with these concepts inhabiting each other, whilst maintaining both contradiction and the appearance of integration. In other words this is an application of the theories of Janusian and homospatial thinking of Rothenberg (1979) to an understanding of organizational thinking/acting. Here, we find cognitive understanding of the divergent equilibrium of the creative managerial mind, holding seemingly contradictory concepts to be valid simultaneously, without assuming the necessity of conflict, and without resolution through any Hegalian synthesis (Gadamer, 1976).

We consider the ability to manage effectively - where the different groups of managers/ managed Will perceive 'effectiveness' differently as being derived from the inherent capability for seeing support and nourishment of divergence and difference, in the context of frameworks that are not ones of unity and shared-ness. Rather they are frameworks that are underpinned by creative and spontaneous response in a context of 'difference, complexity, and ambiguity without reduction and exclusion' (Beech and Cairns, 2001). So, what are the metaphors that we might apply, in order to give such abstract conceptualizations meaning for those in organizations?

Creativity requires unusual respect for forces and phenomena that appear chaotic, confused and irrational (Barron, 1958). For the purposes of our argument, a suitable metaphor for organizational creativity might be found in music specifically in jazz (Velleman, 1978: 31). Here, improvisation is seen to exist not because those who improvise cannot read the 'reality' of the 'text' the 'original' composer's score and not because they wish to subvert and reject this text in favor of anarchy. Rather, they adopt an anarchistic approach, in which there is diminished concern for the law and order of the score, but without resort to chaos or to purposelessness. There is a certain egalitarianism in which the score is a framework, but one that is rewritten in performance by the players in an individualistic way. However, as individuals, players also have to be aware of, and contribute to, the context of potential juncture and disjuncture with other players. So, one is 'playing off the score, oneself and the others, and the others reciprocally 'play off' you.

A further metaphor that may be helpful is that of language (Beech and Cairns, 2001), where the different 'realities' of groups and the communication between them can be conceived in terms of single language, dialects, different languages and language games. In the case of single language, individuals and groups have a totally convergent model of language in terms of vocabulary, syntax and semantics. However, this social setting is highly unlikely due to differences of professional and social cultural pre-programming, and to the 'natural' variations in meaning that exists within any language, even in its formal structure and usage (such as in 'the Queen's English'). Groups may also have different dialects, in that they use the same basic syntactic and semantic models, but with some variation to content or usage. These variations can, however, cause problems of eliciting shared meaning. Beyond this, groups may speak different 'languages' with, for example, those who speak 'accountancy' (Belkaoui, 1990) failing to understand those who speak 'HRM' (Armstrong, 1989). Finally, individuals within any language-using community may play language games (that could be in the same, or different, languages) (Wittgenstein, 1958) that are indicative of different ontologies.

Whilst we consider that these and other metaphors can be useful in helping us to reframe our thinking about organizations, we acknowledge that by and large, organizations are not egalitarian and pluralist 'multilanguage' contexts for thinking/acting. They are not apolitical or politically neutral arenas devoid of power/knowledge interplay and demonstrating Habermas's (1987) idealistic freedom from domination or Rorty's (1999) pragmatic social hope.

## STRATEGIES FOR COPING AND CREATING

In conducting this discussion, our intent is to seek to facilitate and enable the strategic conversations of those within organizations those who require to construct meaning that will inform thinking/acting. Morin (Morin and Kern, 1999) differentiates the concepts of strategy a process of interaction and self-generation of context for dealing with the unforeseen and that of program a rigidly defined course of action that imposes order and structure. We assert that rationalism seeks to understand the program of human activity and that postmodernism denies the validity of such a program. Also, that much of what uncritical managerial literature posits as knowledge - that which might inform creative strategy - is mere data - that which contributes only to the functional program. However, our concern is for how individuals may reframe their actions, rather than deal only with rational programs, or with strategies of resistance (Montuori, 2000) to the negative aspects of power.

In order to assist groups and individuals to think, talk and act strategically with meaning, a complex and ambiguous understanding of organizational context is necessary. One in which it is accepted that organizational actors may conceive their own situation relative to others in terms of unity, divergence or 'no-such-thing-as-reality' at different times or at one and the same time. We argue that attempts to achieve convergence and coherence in organizations are likely to be flawed in application, where they are based on binary-- oppositional and dichotomous thinking. For example, problems may be over-simplified to consideration of dichotomies such as 'right or wrong', 'good or bad', etc.

We propose not only that management practice that seeks to unify can, in effect, disunite, but that coping with disunity is a proper aim of management; moving beyond preferences for singularity or for simplistic and unhelpful false dichotomies (Feyerabend, 1999) to maintenance of complexity and ambiguity. In referring to 'coping' with disunity, we are not using the term as in the pejorative common usage that of not coping or in a negative manner as in the case of coping strategies as employee defensive response (Hayes and Allinson, 1998; Gabriel, 1999) to organizational controls. Rather, we use the word in the sense of 'grappling with success' (Fowler and Fowler, 1964). Both coping and improvisation are conceived in largely negative terms in the organizational context, where not finding the 'real' solution to the problem is viewed as failure, whilst not believing that there is any real solution to a problem is seen as destructive. Most of us have experienced the response to the question "How are you getting on?" with "I'm coping", by which the respondent means exactly the opposite.

Our own experience of one organization growing rapidly by acquisition and with groups of senior managers from diverse backgrounds in public sector engineering and in private sector entrepreneurial development is of those managers from an 'engineering values' background adopting strategies of resistance to the improvisational activities of the entrepreneurial managers. To them, all problems had to be defined in terms of scientific rationale and be capable of solution through reduction in order to find the 'right answer'. This dichotomization of engineering/entrepreneurial values, of right/wrong and of (un)acceptable behaviors was a major barrier to effective action, both to the new chief executive and to those being managed by, and managing their own, responses to the conflicting parties. Within a program of management development, intended to leverage competitive advantage from the diverse internal competencies of these different groups, the first challenge to be met was that of 'coping' with the differences between cultures. This was supported through organizational investment in cross-business unit projects that lay outside the 'day-to-day' business processes, that required recognition and understanding by members of the divergent values within groups, but without attempt at reconciliation and reduction in search of unachievable shared values and unitary shared vision. These multi-disciplinary teams were encouraged to initiate project ideas from within their own strategic conversations. In this arena, one of the external facilitators' key roles became that of supporting the move from groups playing 'language games' to developing translation and

understanding across the different languages of engineering and entrepreneurial values. This move did not involve belief - or pretence - that any reduction in the resort to language games was indicative of reduction in political activity and power/knowledge interplay. Conflict did not necessarily reduce. Rather, it became more overt and constructive.

## INCREASING GRANULARITY

Whilst the tradition of postmodernity rejects the tradition of the Enlightenment project, we consider that it might be seen as replicating it through setting it in the very binary opposition that it opposes. We would offer the view that a positive postmodern approach is not one of opposition to modernity. Rather, we see the relationship as one of mere dissonance but, as Schoenberg states, "dissonances (are) merely 'more remote consonances'" (Rothenberg, 1979: 187). In line with Feyerabend's (1993) scientific philosophy that sees a place for rationalism in anarchism, we do not promote rejection of modernity as a necessary part of promoting postmodernity.

If we accept arguments that meta-narratives are dead, then meta-purpose and meta-- forms of explanation are removed. In addition, there is an impact on expectations. The response of the scientism meta-narrative to the failures of prescriptive management theories, such as the Excellence theories, has been to seek to enhance scientific replication. The problem is cast by modernists as a need to be more accurate in the nature of the prescriptions. However, the real problem is that replication cannot work because it requires movement of solutions from one complex context to another, over time and through perception, and across divergent experienced reality(ies). The impact on expectations arises when people expect scientism to deliver what it claims it can and, given its (necessary) failure, there is an expectation that alternatives to scientism will deliver on its promises - to develop generic solutions and best practices that can be replicated. Clearly, this would be outside the potentialities of postmodern approaches. However, postmodern analysis can be used to recast forms of explanation, purpose and expectation such that an action focus is retained.

We argue that the supposed action-orientation of traditional prescriptive management theory lacks a genuine understanding of action because it seeks generality that does not represent the experienced realities of managing and being managed. What is needed is a greater concentration on fragmented understandings. The granularity of approach needs to be increased so that there is a greater magnification of difference, impact of context and subjective meaning. Weber (1968) focused on action as the basic or elementary concept in sociology. He argued that to start analysis assuming that groups had shared characteristics, or that there were stable entities such as status group structures, was mistaken. Rather, he argued that status was mobile and related to the operation of power. Contextual factors, such as status grouping or religious belief, provide the framework within which action is meaningful, but it is that meaning which is the subject of sociological study. Thus, explanations that are meaningful in the situation of an (hypothetical) actor, relating to their subjectivity, are those that sociology should pursue. His creation of 'ideal' or 'pure' types does not generate prescriptions that should be aimed for, but rather supports frameworks for understanding divergence. As Rex (1969: 174) puts it: "...the greatness of Weber lies precisely in the fact that he never merely described what he saw but, in setting up a pure type, also indicated the principal directions in which actual cases might deviate from it". In so doing, Weber is not asserting the type of generality espoused by the meta-narrative of scientism - i.e. direct causal explanation and prescription for action. Instead, he is proposing a way of establishing these frameworks in which actors may judge their differences, and through which subjective meanings may be highlighted as the focus of understanding.

This type of understanding is both good and bad. What might be constructed as 'biases' may also be labeled 'bad'. What might be constructed as 'genuinely meaningful' may also be labeled 'good'. But all this labeling can be deconstructed as, of course, the terms 'good' and 'bad' inhabit each other (Derrida 1973). The problem of dealing with such contradictions arises when the focus is at

an inappropriate level of (non)granularity-i.e., when generalized, prescriptive theories are expected. However, if the focus is on action, localized purpose (that is, subjective meaning for the actors involved) and explanations on that basis, then the contradictions do not prevent action. The finer grain of focus removes the problems of seeking spurious meta-purposes and explanations, in favor of a focus on immediacy.

In conceptualizing an action-orientation focused on immediacy, the dangers of relativism and inertia, highlighted by Marsden and Townley (1999), are avoided because it is not that any action is equally meaningful (or meaningless) and equally preferable. In reality(ies), bias is good or bad in practice, even though it is both in theory. The loss of meta-purpose does not imply that there is no purpose; similarly, the loss of (attempted) scientific explanation and prediction in organizational studies does not imply that there is no explanation or expectation of what is more or less likely. Rather, it implies that there will be variance and divergence in line with the meanings of actors.

In terms of acting in organizations, this conceptualization can lead to a focus on coping and improvisation, rather than the traditional managerial preoccupations with transformational leadership, visioning and directing. Coping and improvisation are thought of in pejorative senses in the normal management discourse, but we would argue that they offer a more realistic and action-oriented (if less sexy) approach to management.

Coping does not seek reductive resolution towards a unitary perception of the purpose and processes of the organization. Rather, the aim is to understand the different understandings of actors, as in the illustrative organization. Weber (1968) argues that we are capable of putting ourselves into the position of others in order to imagine how we might have acted in similar circumstances. As he says: "One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar" (1968:5). It is a matter of working out an understandable 'sequence of motivation', and to do this, the primary skills of managing are questioning, sensing and imagining - similar skills to those employed in improvisation. Given that any idea of someone else's sequence of motivation and subjective meaning has to be tentative, the next set of skills is about 'frying out'- trial and error testing of perceptions with the actors in the situation. This can only happen where the manager is in a position to be potentially wrong, and where he or she can experiment without causing offence. The manager also has to be open to the feedback systems that will provide information with which to adjust his or her understanding and approach. Such skills of 'management as coping' are in contrast to the traditions of strong leadership (which entails not being wrong, or not admitting it), decisiveness (instead of tentativeness), visioning (instead of listening and sensing) and generating integration and coherence (instead of perceiving and working with difference). Because of these contrasts there will be a considerable challenge for managers to consider such an approach, but we argue that they are more likely to succeed if they adopt an anti-meta-narrative understanding and a local/micro and dynamic conception of what constitutes good management.

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