THE PRODUCTION OF
MANAGERIAL KNOWLEDGE
AND ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Series Editor: Michael Lounsbury

THE PRODUCTION OF MANAGERIAL KNOWLEDGE AND ORGANIZATIONAL THEORY: NEW APPROACHES TO WRITING, PRODUCING AND CONSUMING THEORY

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INTRODUCTION

DISMANTLING THE MASTER'S HOUSE USING THE MASTER'S TOOLS[1]: ON THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Tammar B. Zilber, John M. Amis and Johanna Mair

ABSTRACT

In this introduction, the authors outline some critical reflections on the sociology of knowledge within management and organization theory. Based on a review of various works that form a sociology of organizational knowledge, the authors identify three approaches that have become particularly prominent ways by which scholars explore how knowledge about organizations and management is produced: First, reflective *and* opinion *essays that organization studies scholars offer on the basis of what can be learned from personal experience; second,* descriptive craft-guides *that are based on more-or-less comprehensive* surveys *on doing research; third, papers based on systematic* research *that are built upon rigorous collection and analysis of data about the production of knowledge. Whereas in the studies of organizing the authors prioritize the third approach, that is knowledge produced based on systematic empirical research, in examining our own work the authors tend to privilege the other two types, reflective articles and surveys. In what follows the authors highlight this gap, offer some explanations thereof, and call for a better appreciation of all three ways to offer rich understandings of organizations, work and management as well as a fruitful sociology of knowledge in our field.*

As organizational scholars, we are accustomed to using theoretical lenses to understand organizational practices and outcomes. That is, we conceptualize what people do, feel and think in their everyday organizational interactions through the use of theoretical language and models to uncover individual and/or social antecedents and outcomes. We tend to ignore, however, how our own day-to-day work as scholars – doing research – is subjected to the same pressures and biases, affected by similar factors, and should be accounted for through similar modes of analyses. Rarely are we "looking at ourselves as we look at others" (Nord, 1985, p. 76). We treat our studies and theories as anchor points and as objective truths rather than as constructions embedded within individual, organizational, field, and societal contexts.

This volume is dedicated to applying a reflective and critical gaze to the production of knowledge within organization studies. We aim to explore the "underbelly" of our scholarly endeavors, "those thoughts, actions, constraints, and choices that lurk beneath the surface of our well-dressed research publications" (Staw, 1981, p. 225).

In this introduction, we outline some critical reflections on the sociology of knowledge[2] within management and organization studies. Based on a review of the relevant literatures, we identify three approaches that have become particularly prominent ways by which scholars explore how knowledge about organizations and management is produced. In this context, approaches are defined by their substance and form – the diverse uses of "tools of our trade" and their claims for truth. In particular, we ask what is the epistemological basis of a sociology of organizational and management knowledge? What serves as the basis for making claims about the productions of knowledge in our field? We identified three different approaches for using data and theory in a sociology of organizational knowledge: first, *reflective* and *opinion* essays that organization studies scholars offer on the basis of what can be learned from personal experience; second, *descriptive craft-guides* that are based on more-or-less comprehensive *surveys* on doing research; third, papers based on systematic *research* that are built upon the rigorous and systematic collection and analysis of data (in this case, examining methodologies, theories and research practices in organization studies and using various theories in order to explain them and their outcomes).

Adopting a sociology of knowledge approach in our field offers important insights about our own work. Still, whereas in our studies of organizing we prioritize the third approach, that is knowledge produced based on systematic empirical research, in examining our own work we tend to privilege the other two types, reflective articles and surveys. In what follows we highlight this gap, offer some explanations thereof, and call for a better appreciation of all three ways to offer rich insights about organizations, management, and the fruitful sociology of knowledge in our field.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

Let us first situate our sociology of knowledge approach in its broader historical and social context. That scientific knowledge is embedded in and influenced by social interactions and forces was acknowledged early on by philosophers such as John Stuart Mill (1859) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1878). These early reflections were overshadowed by a long period of "big science" and scientism – a limiting belief in science's role in the modern enlightenment project, as expressed by the philosophy of the Vienna circle, American pragmatism and logical empiricism. Much later, during the second half of the twentieth century, and with the rise of more critical approaches within sociology and other fields, the more naïve perceptions of science's objectivism and realism were replaced by critical gazes at the ways science develops in the context of social forces and taken for granted paradigms of thought. Hence, adopting ideas from philosophy, notably Karl Popper (1963), and from sociology and history, particularly Thomas Kuhn (1962), a new generation of sociologists suggested that science is determined not only by its quest for empirical truth but also by social interests and politics (Barnes, 1977; Collins, 1983; Shapin, 1982).

The two versions of a sociology of knowledge – the macro-analytic Strong Program (e.g. Pickering, 1984; Shaping & Shaffer, 1985) and the micro-sociological approach (e.g. Knorr Cetina, 1981; Latour & Woolgar, 1986) both argued that science is embedded within social structures and develops through social interactions constructed within power relations. In particular, sociologists of scientific knowledge argued that the social structure of the scientific community, and the social practices that constitute scientific work, both influence the knowledge produced and legitimated by scientists (cf. detailed reviews by Longino, 2016; Shapin, 1995).

From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, discussions and debates on the sociology of scientific knowledge became increasingly prominent within sociology (Shapin, 1995). The interest in the sociology of knowledge sprang outside of sociological circles, and took hold in a variety of disciplines, including philosophy (Longino, 2016), anthropology (Franklin, 1995), history, literary studies, and feminist and cultural studies (Shapin, 1995). These debates across the social sciences were not trivial with Shapin (1995, p. 292) declaring, "what is at stake is nothing less than the proper interpretation of our culture's most highly valued form of knowledge – its truth." While earlier studies in the sociology of knowledge focused on the natural sciences, they later moved to explore the social sciences themselves (Leahey, 2008). They thus expanded to include what was termed a sociology of sociology of knowledge (cf. Polner, 2010, p. 6).

The Sociology of Organizational Knowledge

Not all scientific disciplines were as receptive to this reflective and reflexive line of thinking about scientific knowledge. Some scholars took it to be a radical assault on the epistemological status of scientific knowledge. The North American version of organization theory tended to be particularly averse to any critical gaze at the production of knowledge (Meyer, 2006). This aversion may be related to a fear of mixing up subject and object: "studying phenomena too close to one's self," and of studying "phenomena that they themselves participate in" (Leahey, 2008, p. 35).

Still, in recent years there has been a body of research in the tradition of the sociology of knowledge in management and organization studies that may be explored thematically, highlighting the diverse issues involved in the various stages in the production of scientific knowledge. These explorations include the philosophy and politics of the paradigmatic basis of organization and management theory (Amis & Silk, 2008; Astley, 1985); the limits and problematics of the peer review process (Abu-Saad, 2008; Bedeian, 2004; Burgess & Shaw, 2010; Siler & Strang, 2017; Strang & Siler, 2015, 2017); the dynamics of writing and publishing (Cetro, Sirmon, & Brymer, 2010; Cummings & Frost, 1985; de Rond & Miller, 2005; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Macdonald & Kam, 2007); the interrelations between methodological tools and theoretical conceptualizations (Nord, 2012; Reay & Jones, 2016; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006); the transformations and cross-disciplinary diffusion of theoretical concepts (Bartunek & Spreitzer, 2006; Bort & Kieser, 2011; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011; Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002; Whetten, Felin, & King, 2009); the ways theorizing takes place (Klag & Langley, 2013; Langley, 1999); the way theories are actually used (Glynn, Barr, & Dacin, 2000; Golden-Biddle, Locke, & Reay, 2006; Judge, Cable, Colbert, & Rynes, 2007; Zupic & Cater, 2015); and, the tensions between North American and European scientific communities and practices (Battilana, Anteby, & Sengul, 2010; Grey, 2010; Usdiken & Pasadoes, 1995; Zilber, 2015).

To assess these dispersed efforts on the production of knowledge in organization studies more systematically, we review the literature in light of how the "tools of the trade" are used. Based on our reading of the sociology of organization knowledge literature, we identify three widely used approaches for producing knowledge on how knowledge of organizations and management is produced – reflective and opinion essays, survey-based craft-guides, and papers based on systematic research.

Reflective and Opinion Essays

These works are based on what can be learned from personal experience. One example is a series entitled "Vita Contemplativa," run by Organization Studies (e.g. Argyris, 2003; Bartunek, 2006; Clegg, 2005; Donaldson, 2005; Mangham, 2005; Schein, 2006; Scott, 2006; Starbuck, 2004; Weick, 2004;Whitley, 2006), inviting scholars to reflect on their (intellectual) life and offer hagiographical insights:

> The purpose of the series is to inject some reflexivity into our field by asking leading scholars, who have spent most of their careers in organization studies and have distinguished themselves with advancing new perspectives, theories, and/or research agendas in our field, to describe the key contribution their work has made and, more crucially, to reflect on their work and the way it has developed over time. In other words, we have invited leading organizational theorists to write paper-length versions of their intellectual autobiographies. (…) What we are aiming at with such autobiographical essays is to help organizational researchers contextualize the development of knowledge in our field, something we tend to overlook in our pursuit of "the logic of discovery," at the expense of the context of discovery. We hope that the autobiographical essays you will be regularly reading in these pages will be insightful contributions to the history and sociology of ideas in organization studies. (Tsoukas, 2003, p. 1177)

Another notable example was the edited volume by Cummings and Frost (1985) exploring how scholars experience the review process. In some of the chapters, "authors have shared their experiences, expectations, feelings, and insights with us in a refreshingly candid and thoroughly professional manner" (Cummings & Frost, 1985, p. X). This issue still stands at the center of scholars' attention, as is evident from a recent paper by *Journal of Management Studies* editor Gerardo Patriotta (2017, pp. 747–748):

> Journal editors certainly have an exciting job: not only do they read studies at the cutting edge of management research, but they also play a role in developing the community of scholars. At the same time, when one is handling large volumes of submissions, manuscripts start to look worryingly similar. This may lead to alienation, unless one acquires an interest in learning from these similarities, identifying patterns, and understanding how they speak to the norms and conventions that define academic knowledge and work. If one distances oneself from the content of submissions and their specific foci, papers can be viewed under a different light, not as individual products but as communicative artifacts that constitute a genre in their own right. A number of interesting questions then begin to arise: why are academic articles written the way they are? What distinguishes a first submission from a published paper? How do we – as editors, reviewers, and readers – recognize strength and novelty in a contribution?
>
> In 2015, with the assistance of editorial colleagues, I began running a series of workshops on crafting papers for publication on behalf of the Journal of Management Studies (JMS). I had been with JMS for about two years at the time, and I thought this would be a good opportunity for reaching out to the international community of PhD students and junior faculty. My inter-action with a number of brilliant young scholars at various institutions all over the world raised my awareness of the normative, cognitive, and emotional underpinnings of academic writing. This editorial represents my attempt to share what I have learned from these workshops with the readers of JMS.

A final example is Geppert's (2015) polemic essay on how to strengthen scholars' awareness of the political and critical aspects of their research, based on his own experience. Specifically, Geppert (2015) examines the power of institutional theory jargon to hide political interests and power relations within the field of organization studies, and asks what can be done to counter such tendencies, and to what effect. These reflective articles, offering insights based on the experiences of their authors and their normative positions, form the dominant approach in the sociology of knowledge within management and organization studies.

Survey-based Craft Guides

These works are based on surveys in order to get a broader and richer understanding of how research is being done in our discipline. Take for example Alvesson, Hardy, and Harley's (2008) paper on reflexivity, in which they identify "four sets of textual practices that researchers … have used in their attempts to be reflexive" (p. 480). For their review of reflexive textual practices, the authors

> selected texts in OMT that have explicitly addressed issues related to reflexivity, as well as texts that are frequently referred to in contemporary writings as being reflexive, based on our general familiarity with the literature as well as recommendations from colleagues, reviewers and the editor; although we acknowledge that our selection is illustrative rather than exhaustive. (p. 482)

Based on these texts, the authors identified four different kinds of reflexive practices –multi-perspective, multi-voicing, positioning, and destabilizing. They highlight the shortcomings of each set of practices, especially when employed in ways they deem ineffective, and offer an integrated reflexive approach that combines these practices.

Another example of work that offers insights by highlighting how certain practices are deployed is Siller and Strang's (2017, p. 31) investigation of "how scholarly work is criticized and changed in its evaluation." They draw on authors of articles published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* and analysed their self-reports "concerning the criticism they received and the revisions they made in the peer review process." They then surveyed the actual changes made in the manuscripts throughout the review process. Based on this, they scrutinized the tension between innovation and tradition in the production of knowledge in management and organization studies.

Likewise, Liu, Olivola, and Kovacs (2017) explored the continuous rise in coauthorship within the field of management by surveying published papers and also

> asking management researchers about their perceptions of coauthorship trends and their reactions to specific authorship scenarios. Comparing the "facts" and the "perceptions" of coauthorship, we suggest that the increase in coauthorship in management reflects not only quality considerations and the need for collaborations, but also instrumental motivations. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings for the processes of peer evaluation and education in management. (p. 509)

These studies, based on surveys of best practice or anecdotal data, offer a craft guide that have become quite common in the sociology of organizational knowledge.

Papers Based on Systematic Research

These works adhere more closely to a scientific model of knowledge and insight generation. They are based on the systematic collection and analysis of data and include attempts to offer explanations and theoretical implications of their findings. In other words, this form of sociology of knowledge relates to knowledge in the field as data and applies to the knowledge produced in organizations studies the same theoretical and methodological tools used to explore other empirical phenomena in organizations. Nicolai and Seidl (2010), for example, tap into the "intense debate amongst scholars on how to increase the practical relevance of research" (p. 1257). To contribute to this debate, they go beyond sharing their personal opinion on the matter as such, nor do they build on surveying other scholars' experiences and opinions or the relevant literature. Rather, they explain that

> the present article aims at making two contributions to the current debate on the practical relevance of organization and management science. First, it develops a taxonomy of different forms of relevance, based on a systematic analysis of a sample of 450 articles from three leading academic journals, as well as of the literature (in English) on the practical relevance of management science, which, at the time of writing, comprised 133 articles, chapters and books. The aim of the exercise is to identify the forms of practical relevance that are explicitly or implicitly referred

to in the academic management literature. In contrast to the majority of contributions to the debate on relevance, this article draws on insights from the philosophy and sociology of science in order to discuss the more fundamental obstacles to relevance that are rooted in the social process of scientific knowledge production. Thus, the article's second contribution is that it assesses the extent to which the different forms of relevance fit the social dynamic of science, and consequently examines what forms of relevance can be expected from management science. (p. 1258)

Likewise, Stambaugh and Trank (2010) build on a systematic collection and analysis of data to explore to what extent new theoretical insights diffuse into widely used textbooks in strategy. In particular, they sampled 18 textbooks in strategy, and analyzed whether "institutional research has penetrated the texts" By building on "a comprehensive list of authors, articles, and key terms from institutional theory" (p. 668). Stambaugh and Trank (2010) used both quantitative analysis to measure the coverage of institutional theory in strategic management texts and qualitative analysis to examine the depth of coverage of institutional theory and its modes of use. They found a significant variation in the integration of institutional theory into strategy textbooks. Drawing on theoretical insights from the sociology of knowledge, they explain this variation in light of discrepancies between institutional theory and the discourse of strategy; pressures in the process of textbook publishing; and authors preferences. All in all, Stambaugh and Trank (2010) build upon the sociology of knowledge tradition in that it assumes the importance of textbooks in the legitimation of scientific knowledge, and also contribute to it by highlighting the cultural and social construction of those textbooks. Their research is thus theoretically relevant to the study of the diffusion of theoretical concepts within our field (cf. Bort & Keiser, 2011).

A further example of research-based sociology of organizational knowledge paper is Podsakoff, Podsakoff, Mishra, and Escue's (2018) study of high-impact studies in our discipline. Podsakoff et al. (2018) were motivated to study the issue after one of them served as a panelist on the Academy of Management's Organization Behavior Division's Junior Faculty Workshop at the Annual Academy of Management Meeting. Panelists were asked "how junior faculty members can balance the sometimes-conflicting desire to work on high-impact research in their pre-tenure years, while at the same time recognizing that such research might require more than the normal risks associated with publication, or take longer to develop, than less impactful research." Panelists shared their contradictory opinions on the matter, but there seemed to be lack of clear empirical evidence – hence the Podsakoff et al. study. Focusing on extreme cases, they sampled 235 articles each with over 1,000 citations from 33 management journals, and compared them with two matched samples of less highly-cited articles. They found that about half of the high-impact articles were written during the pre-tenure period of the authors. Further, the comparisons they made allowed the authors to "identify some of the key attributes that make these articles so impactful." Their study, then, offers research-based-insights as to how to balance productivity and impact in academic careers (see also Haley, Page, Pitsis, Rivas, & Yu, 2017).

A final example is McLaren's (2018) critical-hermeneutic analysis of the Gordon-Howell report, usually "blamed" for the diffusion of the "research-based model of business education." Using the report itself and also drawing

on secondary data (journal articles, conference proceedings and book chapters), McLaren contextualizes the report in the historical and social moment in which it was written, demonstrating that the report was only part of a variety of factors that pushed US business schools to develop a research-oriented curriculum. Through this study, McLaren sheds a new light on the debate around rigor and relevance in our discipline, and offers insights for its future (for similar historical studies, see Bridgman, Cummings, & McLaughlin, 2016; Cummings, Bridgman, & Brown, 2016; Dye, Mills, & Weatherbee, 2005; Hassard, 2012).

Also within this approach are theoretical articles in which authors develop a theoretical model – in an *Academy of Management Review* style – of the production of knowledge within management and organization studies. One example is Bitektine and Miller's (2015) model exploring how the availability of and restriction on various resources, such as available data, and various institutional pressures, such as institutionalized research methods, drive paradigm evolution and decline.

Three Approaches for the Sociology of Organizational Knowledge

Works in the sociology of organization knowledge fall then within one of three main approaches – reflexive and opinion essays, survey-based craft-guides, and papers based on systematic research. These approaches are considered legitimate sources of data for the production of management and organizational knowledge, and they all offer relevant and timely insights. Still, their claims for truth are based on very different grounds. These differences are manifested in how similar issues are tackled by each approach, as we exemplify below.

Martin (1981) built on her own experience to explain the gap between "rational rhetoric" of methodological sections in texts books and research papers, and the messy reality of actually doing social science research. She offered a reading of the choices researchers make during the research process in light of common theories of organizational decision making. Providing "a realistic descriptive model of the research process" (p. 133), she rejects "rational choice models" of doing research that assume a logical sequence of problem formulation, design, analysis, interpretation and theoretical implications. Instead, Martin (1981) highlights the messy practice involved in producing scientific knowledge. The garbage can model of decision making (Cohen, March, & Olson, 1972; March & Olson, 1976), argues Martin, is well equipped to capture the somewhat accidental flow of problems, resources, choice opportunities and solutions that are involved in a research project. Textbooks and mentors should acknowledge this messy practice in order to train new scientists to be "street smart" when doing research.

Kulka (1981) also deals with the choices made by researchers throughout the research process. But unlike Martin (1981) who used theoretical models to illuminate her personal experiences, Kulka (1981, pp. 157–158) draws on a semi-systematically collected data set:

> The rest of this article contains a number of examples of such choices and constraints in the social research process that may serve to illustrate the "state of the art" with regard to how methodological decisions are actually made in behavioral and social science research.