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Postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory to the practicing manager: A Reflexive Account

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an exploration of the usefulness of postmodern theory to today's manager. In particular, the paper asks whether it can be applied in practice. Decentring the self through a two-voice device aids in this analysis but leads to another dilemma. Where does the questioning end? The paper ends with a challenge about authenticity.

In a nutshell I am an undergraduate student that has been engaging with a journey through postmodern theory and critical thinking within the context of my management degree. As part of the sense-making process I have been scribing my thoughts about the problematics of seeing postmodernism as a 'body of knowledge' and the attendant difficulties of attempting to put into management practice ideas which are both deeply theoretical and which refuse to be 'pinned down'. I am a naïve student at the end of my studies, but at the beginning of making sense of the world and myself. This paper is trying to gain an understanding of the postmodernist versus modernist debate in relation to the practicing manager. The tools that help me achieve where I stand in this debate are reflexivity and decentring the subject.

This paper is somewhat unusual as me and myself are in joint-authorship of this paper. We have adopted this critical approach to the paper from the paper by Pinch and Pinch (1991). In this approach we will be able to see whether postmodernism is useful to the practicing manager.

Finally as junior author I get my say. We didn't adopt this approach; I just disagreed with your opinions on this matter. So I think that we decided to show both our opinions for once, instead of being the perfect student, if there's

such thing. We just happen to write this paper like the Pinch paper.

Okay, okay. Maybe that's right, but that's your opinion. You may have also noticed the irony in this paper. I (the bold typeface) take the postmodernist approach to this argument and I am the senior author, and for once the modernist has to take a seat in the junior division on this occasion.

Hey, stop there a minute! This is a joint-authorship, so we are equally important to this paper.

A good way to start this paper would be a definition of "pomo" (post-modernism). What is postmodernism? Defining postmodernism is challenging because a complete and agreed upon definition remains elusive. Hassard (1993) begins by outlining the distinction between postmodernism as a periodization of organisational and social forms (postmodernity - an ontology) and postmodernism as a set of problems with the representation of knowledge about organisations (an epistemology). I have decided to discuss postmodernism from the epistemological approach.

Stop right there. What do you mean define postmodernism. I thought that postmodernism

couldn't be defined. And that postmodernist's don't put a label to their work. This is ironic isn't it?

I haven't defined postmodernism because there isn't a definition; currently we possess no firm agreed meaning for the concept. Instead we find a range of meanings associated with this generic term. Postmodernism could be seen as a new period of time. It could be seen as a theoretical framework focusing on the role of language and symbolism in the phenomenon of social and psychological control (Feldman, 1998). It could also just be a name given to the most open examination of what knowing in the contemporary circumstance signifies (Letiche, 1996).

So when you mean a new period of time, you must be talking about a new discourse. Already, romanticist discourse is largely displaced by modernist understandings. Is the modernist discourse going to be displaced by postmodernist understandings? This seems hard to believe?

I'm not suggesting that. I'm just signifying that there is a different discourse (i.e. postmodernism) available when trying to understand a problem. But there seems to be a contradiction in the postmodern literature.

I knew it! Postmodernism claims to be speaking of a 'different epoch', but it is dependent on the dominant and coherent culture of modernism to communicate its beliefs about the impossibility of belief (Rieff, 1991). Hence, postmodernism is necessarily a subcultural movement and its peculiar goal of decentering culture can only exist as a goal on a subcultural level (Feldman, 1998).

That could be true, postmodernism could be a subcultural movement for now, and I state just for now. We can now look at the five concepts that

Hassard uses to examine the consequences of Derrida; Lyotard and Baudrillard's writings have on organisational theory.

These five concepts are representation, reflexivity, writing, difference/differance and decentering the subject. As I said earlier, I will be looking at these from the epistemological perspective.

Would you say that this is a wise decision, rather than commit himself to an absolute position, Hassard argues for a middle ground that recognises the instability of knowledge but is at the same time engaged in an attempt to say meaningful things about organisation.

Well there doesn't seem to be time to take the middle ground as well as being able to discuss all five concepts in depth. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen just two concepts to discuss - reflexivity and decentering the subject.

But before we can examine organisational theory with the two concepts above, we should probably define organisation theory. Organisation theory is the most fundamental and pervasive of the management specialisms. Organising is endemic to all the specialisms and, indeed, is not infrequently identified as the very medium of management (Hales, 1993). Organisation theory is also the most important for critical management theory as it has the greatest knock-on effects in the other specialisms (Alvesson & Willmot, 2001). Here is a brief description of the other three concepts argument.

- o **Representation, attempts to discover the genuine order of things, must be regarded as naïve and mistaken.**

- o **Writing - 'the logocentric image of writing (which sees language as a sign**

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system for concepts which exist independently in the object world) must be overturned.'

o **Difference - 'we must develop a strategy which reflects but does not capture the process of deconstruction.'**

Shall we now look at the two concepts that were chosen - reflexivity and decentring the subject?

Lets start with decentring the subject. This concept develops Derrida's analysis of the deconstruction of presence in terms of its implications for human agency. This is achieved through the notion of decentring the subject as the locus of understanding.

Yeah but, deconstruction poses serious problems for the discipline of organisation theory in that its calls for an 'opening' of cultural and linguistic forms will destabilise already unstable ethical structures (Feldman, 1998). Organisational theorists, despite its general acceptance, basically ignore management ethics. With this happening the threat posed by deconstruction is hardly noticed.

Yes but, ironically, you owe thanks to postmodernism in that its greatly exaggerated quest for liberation from cultural forms draws attention to the neglected role of ethics in the cultural aspects of organisations and organisation theory.

In order to 'de-construct' we need to 'de-centre' the 'subject' of focus. Tell us something about your work.

Well, where shall I start? The other day I had a falling out with the manager. I decided to ask for a pay rise because I have worked there for four years now and I'm still getting paid the same as someone who's been there six months. I only asked this because I seem to be doing all the work, the new employee's still don't know what to do. I have now

refused to work with the new employee's and I'm working at a slower rate. This problem wouldn't have occurred if they decided to train the new employee's better. They only believe in training the top section of the company (i.e. managers and supervisors).

Good. Now deconstruct the story and then reconstruct it from the manager's point of view.

Ok. The other day I had a falling out with one of my colleagues. He asked for a pay rise because he has worked here for four years. He complained that he is still getting paid the same as someone who's been here for six months. He claims he only asked this because he seems to be doing all the work in his opinion, the new employees don't have the experience he has. He has now refused to work with the new employee's and his work rate has dropped. This problem wouldn't have occurred if he worked with the new employee's more, in helping them progress. The shop floor employees don't need much training.

Now you can see that there are different discourses surrounding this problem. You could have even written this story from the new employee's point of view as well as the customers. All the discourses seem to have complicating factors towards the managers, old and new employee, and the customers. In considering the different discourses and by trying to interpret them, a clearer picture becomes apparent of the complications that the company now faces. Training has been presented as the main discourse.

Well I could have told you that. So applying a postmodern approach to the situation, it seems to identify the problem. So what about the solution, where does that come from? The title of this paper is an investigation of the usefulness of postmodern organisational theory to the practicing manager. This title seems inappropriate because your intentions are to just identify the problems, and not

provide the solution. It seems to me that because postmodernism is at a subcultural level, you need the modernist approach to analyse the problem for a solution. I should have guessed postmodernists don't supply answers, they just criticise the notions of modernist theory.

That's typical coming from a modernist. With contrasting the epoch and epistemology positions, you could argue that in their present form neither offers an adequate basis for a postmodern organisation theory. Instead you could argue that the middle ground between these extremes represents a more promising location for theory development. And this is what this paper is about. Postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory, thereby limiting its usefulness to the practising manager. But postmodernism challenges these modernist organisational theories and tries to develop these for the future of these practising managers. This is where postmodernism will influence the practising manager and organisational theory.

Now let's analyse reflexivity's examination of organisational theory. In a postmodern approach to knowledge we must also possess the ability to be critical or suspicious of our own intellectual assumptions (Lawson, 1985). This is achieved through the notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity is known as a postmodern irony. The reactions to this irony are varied. For example Derrida has pursued intentionally ambiguous and self-negating practices in seeking to deconstruct his own propositions (Hassard, 1993).

So what I find disturbing is that the postmodern theorist can neither find truth beyond mere personal opinion or practical usefulness. I understand that being critical of

our own assumptions can help because we are biased towards them, but when does this come to an end. This is what makes me unsure of the postmodern approach. There isn't a definite answer. They finish off analysing a problem with more questions than when they started. So if reality is so indeterminable, how is it possible for postmodern writers to analyse it? This explains why postmodern writers present their ideas in mostly abstract, one-sided polemics with little historical analysis (Feldman, 1998).

Do you believe that postmodern management is useful to the practicing manager?

To be honest where can it enter an organisation? What's wrong with what we have already?

Well there are advantages of postmodern management. It does provide an opportunity to develop management theorising and practice by embedding management research in broad postmodernist academic traditions. With this we will be reflexive in hope of trying to improve how we practice management.

But my problem is that, postmodernism offers little in the way of organisational theory. Organisational theory is what practicing managers adopt to help manage their organisations. So if the practicing manager adopted this postmodern management it would take ages in trying to implement it. All of the organisation must be postmodernists as well as being ready for it. It seems in the short term nothing will be done because of all the criticism.

But once it has been implemented the long-term goals will be easily achieved. I also agree with (Feldman, 1998) what is needed above all else is a moral framework that is superior to economic activity and capable of evaluating and restraining it. This is something that

must eventually involve all of society. But it must begin somewhere. The leadership must come from the universities. It is here that a broader perspective than profit-maximisation has a reasonable chance of being considered, and it is here that the intellectual resources are available to rediscover a moral tradition that is capable, through the teaching discipline, of gaining adherents in a society that prefers to adhere to nothing. This answer by Feldman is not new, although it appears to be somewhat forgotten in the debate between modernism and postmodernism in the field of organisation theory.

In Thomas Stewart's words, universities are 'dumb organisations' that are 'high on human capital' but 'low on structural capital' (Fuller, 2001). Steve Fuller sees universities as self-serving bastions of conservatism, all about management and little about knowledge. I agree that a moral framework must begin somewhere, but universities aren't this place. New knowledge is spontaneously generated, much like a mutation that eventually becomes the basis for a new species. Universities are knowledge hoarders that have co-opted the profit motive like so many other organisations.

So what about universities with research labs? Here the intellectual resources are available to rediscover a moral tradition, through teaching and researching.

It may well be that knowledge managers will persuade universities of the cost-effectiveness of allowing research to migrate off their grounds. In time research would become completely outsourced to facilities specially tailored to the needs of major clients. Academic employees would be then left with the perennial job of filling classrooms. But by the time this scenario came to pass, hopefully there will be enough holders of Executive Ph.D. degrees in public and private sector administration to undo the damage that will have been done (Fuller, 2001).

SO WHAT?

I am now going to write the rest of the paper as the senior author. Indeed, there has only ever been one author behind this paper. So, dear junior author, I have just killed you off. Pinch describes this paper as like playing chess with yourself by playing both colours at the same time. You can set a trap, and sometimes you may even find you can't get out of it, but it is not the same thing as playing chess against a real opponent. The Pinch and Pinch approach gave me the opportunity to understand the modernist versus postmodernist debate, and where I stand. This is why there are two voices, that doesn't mean there can't be any more; it's just that I chose to only have two voices. Another reason was that I thought it would be a good way to be reflexive in the paper.

The two tools I chose to use to help me in this paper were reflexivity and decentring the subject. I chose these because they just fell into place with the use of two voices. Reflexivity is about being able to be suspicious and critical of our own assumptions. I felt I achieved this by questioning my first assumptions with the second voice. Also are we able to shift our view of things in order to evaluate the situation from a different perspective? This is where decentring the subject related to reflexivity and the Pinch and Pinch approach.

The subject is not self-directing but is a location for the throughput of different discourses. You can see this emerge in the role-play of the two voices in this paper. I tried to locate the language in my first assumptions and reconstruct it by shifting my identity. The only problem with this was that I felt I was being biased in my arguments. I don't really like to be critical of myself. Who wants to prove their assumptions to be

wrong? If this was the case why make them in the first place.

Coming to the end of the paper left me with questions not answers. Neither did it lead me to either side of the argument. But that's fine because I don't like to be labelled, or put into a category; I like the thought of being critical and not just another 'cog in the wheel'. Being critical gave me a sense of individualism, but postmodernism seemed to push it to the extreme. I do believe that we may be moving into the postmodernism era, this is why there are so many outspoken 'organisational terrorists' in companies.

WHAT CAN I CREATE FROM THIS?

Maybe the reality that my answers aren't always correct! I have also noticed since studying postmodernism I have never taken any topic lightly. I find that I question everything, and worse of all I question my workplace supervisor's and manager's ideas. They see it as questioning his authority. So finally I will like to leave you some questions for thought. Am I just writing what I think you want me to write (being the perfect student)? Or do I actually believe in what I have just written?

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