The Coming of Age of Interpretive Organizational Research

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INTRODUCTION

The Coming of Age of Interpretive Organizational Research

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After decades of occupying a relatively subordinate position in the shadows of mainstream (i.e., positivistic) research, interpretive organizational scholarship appears poised today to come into the limelight and to speak in a stronger and more independent voice. Over the years, interpretive inquiry has steadily affirmed its relevance to management and organization studies by addressing questions that cannot adequately be answered by traditional experimental or survey methodologies and by enhancing our understanding of, among other things, the symbolic dimensions of organizational life. Different genres of interpretive research have also demonstrated (even to their critics) that they are as rigorous as positivist science even though their rigor necessarily needs to be judged by criteria that are markedly different from those used in conventional empirical research. This coming of age of interpretive organizational research provides us with an opportunity and a space for taking stock of some of its more noteworthy features and accomplishments, for grasping the complexity of the varied genres subsumed under this label, and for assessing the significance of certain crucial directions it might be taking. Toward these ends, this special issue of *Organizational Research Methods* brings together five scholarly pieces that exemplify, in different ways, the maturity and newfound self-confidence of interpretive organizational research and that address significant and complex methodological and epistemological questions designed to further an informed practice of interpretive organizational research (and, indeed, of organizational research, per se).

In many ways, the emergence of interpretive organizational research is linked to the explosion of so-called qualitative research during the past several years within the various disciplinary fields and subfields of management and organization studies. Qualitative organizational research, as we know well enough, arose partly in response to certain significant (some would say, fatal) limitations of conventional quantitative and

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positivistic organizational research. Some of these limitations followed from the desire of many organizational researchers to imitate the methods of the natural sciences. In this process, unfortunately, organizational researchers mostly lost sight of some important distinctions between the natural sciences (*naturwissenschaften*) and the human and social sciences (*geisteswissenschaften*). Although it is not our intention here to posit an essentialist distinction between the *naturwissenschaften* and the *geisteswissenschaften*, the two have often been seen to differ in terms of certain key dimensions (see, e.g., Bohman, 1991; Habermas, 1988), including their respective focus of inquiry (natural objects versus human, social, and cultural phenomena) and the methodological aim of inquiry (explanation and control versus understanding).

As a result of ignoring these and other differences between the natural and the social sciences, conventional management researchers have generally conceptualized human and organizational phenomena as belonging to a natural world of "facts" and have subscribed to a host of problematic methodological assumptions, including the givenness of reality or experience, and the researcher's objectivity, separation, and neutrality vis-à-vis her or his object of inquiry (Bohman, 1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). These questionable methodological maneuvers seem to have been motivated by a desire to produce universalistic and nomothetic organizational knowledge. Partly as a result of such methodological shortcomings, conventional quantitative organizational research, notwithstanding its use of increasingly complex statistical techniques, often proved to be somewhat simplistic, ahistorical, decontextualized, reductionist, aphilosophical, and nonreflexive. The turn toward qualitative (as distinct from quantitative) research in management and organization studies denotes, in part, an intense dissatisfaction with that state of affairs.

The popularity and explosive growth of qualitative research within management during recent years, however, has been accompanied by a degree of methodological or epistemological confusion as well. Hence, it is one of our aims here to briefly address this confusion and, in so doing, to draw attention toward some of the overlaps as well as differences between qualitative research, on one hand, and interpretive research, on the other. Interpretive research, we may briefly note, is more appropriately viewed as a subset of qualitative research. In other words, although one may usefully think of all interpretive organizational research as belonging to the qualitative domain, not all qualitative research is necessarily in keeping with the spirit of interpretive inquiry.

In organizational scholarship, any mention of qualitative research seems to conjure up images of diverse philosophical perspectives, research techniques and procedures, styles of presentation, and so on. Critical theory (Alvesson, 1987; Alvesson & Deetz, 1996), deconstruction (Derrida, 1976, 1994, 2000), discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Prasad & Prasad, 2000), dramatism (Burke, 1969; Czarniawska, 1997), dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983), ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1995), ethnomethodology (Boje, 1991; Garfinkel, 1967), feminism (Billing & Alvesson, 1994), grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), hermeneutics (Prasad, 2002 [this issue]), narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 1997), participant observation (Kunda, 1992; Thompson, 1983), phenomenology (Husserl, 1962; Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1967), postcolonialism (Prasad, in press; Spivak, 1999), poststructuralism (Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1980), symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Prasad, 1993), and so forth, all appear to be subsumed under the catch-all label, qualitative research. To reduce the confusion surrounding qualitative and interpretive research, it is necessary to disentangle these var-

ied approaches from one another. To begin with, therefore, organizational scholars need to recognize that although the different interpretive approaches do share a common ground, each of these approaches is also based on relatively unique methodological considerations that guide the conceptualization, design, and implementation of individual research projects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). That is to say, the various individual approaches differ from one another with respect to research questions raised, research directions pursued, research procedures employed, and so on. Developing an appreciation and understanding of such differences will go a long way in addressing the sense of confusion that sometimes seems to attend organizational researchers' engagement with qualitative and/or interpretive research.

Some of the confusion we have been speaking of is linked also to the fact that the various research approaches or frames of inquiry mentioned earlier are frequently identified—in the same breath, so to say—as being interpretive *and* qualitative. Such terminological imprecision does sometimes convey an impression that interpretive research is completely synonymous with qualitative research, broadly defined. However, as we pointed out earlier, the two terms, qualitative and interpretive, are not strictly identical. It is important, therefore, to differentiate between the two and to develop an appreciation of some of the key features that characterize interpretive organizational research today. We briefly take up this issue later in this article. Finally, some of the confusion surrounding qualitative and interpretive research seems to find expression in such questions as, Does interpretive research imply a relatively unique state of mind? Specific theoretical orientations? The use of particular field methods? Or the utilization of certain data collection and writing conventions? We hope and believe that the articles in this special issue go some way in meaningfully addressing these questions.

The omnibus term *qualitative research* typically refers to methodological approaches that rely on nonquantitative (or nonstatistical) modes of data collection and analysis. What is perhaps not immediately apparent is that qualitative research can be conducted within traditions that are positivistic as well as nonpositivistic. Indeed, a substantial body of research in the social sciences, especially in management and organization studies, can be described as constituting a form of qualitative positivism. Qualitative positivism uses nonquantitative methods within traditional positivistic assumptions about the nature of social or organizational reality and the production of knowledge. For the most part, qualitative positivism adopts a relatively commonsensical and realist approach toward ontological and epistemological matters. Reality is assumed to be concrete, separate from the researcher, and cognizable through the use of so-called objective methods of data collection. Hence, qualitative positivism may be seen as suffering from limitations similar to those that invest quantitative positivism.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the emergence of interpretive organizational research out of awkward adolescence into self-assured adulthood is characterized by a distinct break with all forms of qualitative positivism. In addition, the coming of age of interpretivism in organizational research signifies also a breaching of some of the intellectual boundaries set around "interpretivism" by Burrell and Morgan's (1979) influential paradigmatic schema. Contemporary interpretive research refuses to play by the rules of positivism, or to be confined, policed, and disciplined by outdated notions of its limits. In practice, this implies several things. First, interpretive research is committed to the broad philosophy of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), which sees social reality as a constructed world built in and through meaningful

interpretations. The goal of the researcher, therefore, is not to capture some preexisting or ready-made world presumed to be available out there but to understand this process of symbolic "worldmaking" (Schwandt, 1994) through which the social world is ongoingly accomplished. This ontological and epistemological commitment is at the heart of interpretive research and renders positivistic questions about its reliability and generalizability somewhat pointless.

One of the more lasting legacies of the Burrell and Morgan (1979) research classification was a presumed separation between interpretivism and critique, with the former being characterized as disinterested in any kind of radical questioning or facilitation of social change. As interpretive organizational research comes of age, such a separation becomes meaningless (except, possibly, for purposes of analytical convenience), and the lines between interpretation and critique turn increasingly blurry (Denzin, 1994; Prasad & Prasad, in press). Although it is still accurate to say that many interpretive organizational researchers may deliberately refrain from raising troubling questions about the status quo or from engaging in critique, many others, including the authors of the articles in this special issue, adopt an explicitly critical position while working in diverse interpretive genres such as hermeneutics, frame analysis, or Bourdieu's praxeology. As these authors demonstrate, the act of drawing interpretive thinking to its full potential practically demands some form of fundamental questioning that is not very far from an overtly critical orientation. The articles in this issue show also that as interpretive researchers become comfortable with erasing these previously theorized epistemological boundaries, they are increasingly confronted with difficult ethical and political questions about their own (and others') practice of the interpretive act itself. Hence, the coming together of interpretation and critique in contemporary interpretive organizational research is characterized also by an enhanced self-reflexivity on the part of scholars working in this terrain.

Interpretive research in management and organization studies has also traditionally been closely identified with the understanding of local meanings and everyday symbolic worlds. As a result, its domain is often seen as centering exclusively on the micro worlds of individual interactions and organizational language, culture, and the like and far removed from the more macro provinces of large-scale institutional processes, structures, networks, and so forth. Countless interpretive studies on phenomena such as local organizational subcultures (Gregory, 1983; Young, 1989), local stories (Boje, 1991), and local micropractices (Aredal, 1986) have only served to reinforce the overwhelming sense that interpretive research is all about the particularities of individual organizations and not about institutions and wider organizational contexts or effects. As interpretive organizational research comes of age, its scholars begin to bridge the gap between micro practices and macro structures and to work on establishing the connections between local subjective worlds and macro organizational and institutional processes and phenomena. The remainder of the present article offers brief summaries of the five articles that follow in this special issue.

The first article, "The Contest Over Meaning: Hermeneutics as an Interpretive Methodology for Understanding Texts" by Anshuman Prasad, focuses on an interpretive approach that may be traced as far back as ancient Greece. However, as the article points out, although hermeneutics began in distant past as a relatively narrowly defined method for interpreting difficult to understand textual passages, contemporary hermeneutics is a much broader interpretive genre that has expanded the very meaning of the term *text*. In brief, texts now refer not only to documents and the like but also to

social, organizational, and institutional structures and processes; cultures and cultural artifacts; and so on. The article (a) traces the evolution of contemporary hermeneutics, examining in the process the contributions of such major thinkers as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Habermas; (b) provides an in-depth discussion of the key concepts and debates that inform contemporary hermeneutics; and (c) offers methodological guidelines for conducting hermeneutic research in management and organization studies. While so doing, the article emphasizes the importance of linking the micro (i.e., the local text) and the macro (i.e., the global context), and the significance of critique and ethics-driven self-reflexivity in the process of hermeneutic inquiry.

The second article, by Creed, Langstraat, and Scully, introduces frame analysis as a useful methodology for organizational researchers interested in understanding the underlying institutional logics shaping policy and other debates. Although frame analysis (mainly under the direction of William Gamson) has achieved considerable standing in the social movement literature, it has hardly elicited any interest among organizational scholars. Creed et al. make an excellent argument for its use in organization studies with their analysis of two excerpts from texts employed by different groups in a recent debate centering on antigay firms in the Socially Responsible Investing community. Given the relative brevity of the two textual excerpts used, what is amazing is the sheer richness afforded by frame analysis in surfacing various politics, tensions, and contradictions behind these texts. With the help of this methodology, Creed et al. turn the texts into windows through which we can view a hidden world of clashing ideologies and subjugated voices in the debate over antigay discrimination and socially responsible investing. Their article is thus a remarkable illustration of accessing a larger (macro) domain of interests and cultural politics from the study of brief textual excerpts. Beyond the mechanics of what the article does, it is also important for the explicit questions it poses about the ethical responsibility and political choices of researchers engaged in interpretive research.

The concern with combining interpretation and critique, and linking the local (micro) and the global (macro), exhibited by the preceding two articles is maintained in Jeff Everett's article as well. His article introduces organizational researchers to the methodology of social praxeology, a genre of interpretive inquiry associated with the eminent French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu. Praxeology, as this article puts it, synthesizes an "objectivity of the first order" (or a social physics) with an "objectivity of the second order" (or a social phenomenology) and, in so doing, seeks to avoid both the Scylla of rigid abstracted empiricism and the Charybdis of "relativistic epistemological laissez faire" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 30, quoted in Everett, 2002 [this issue], p. 73). The article provides a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of praxeology's conceptual architecture and offers an in-depth discussion of doing praxeological research in management and organization studies. In addition, reflecting the foregrounding of researcher self-reflexivity in contemporary interpretivism, this article critically discusses the role of the scholar-inquirer as an ethical subject deeply imbricated with the object of inquiry and the societal field of power.

The issue of the researcher as an ethical subject assumes center stage in the next article, "Interpretation—Appropriation: (Making) An Example of Labor Process Theory" by Edward Wray-Bliss. Wray-Bliss focuses critical attention on organizational scholarship that has emerged in the United Kingdom during the past several years under the rubric of Labor Process Theory (LPT). An avowedly critical genre of organi-

zational research, LPT is concerned with issues of power, domination, oppression, and resistance and professes to be motivated by a deep interest in the emancipation of workers and other marginal groups. However, the Wray-Bliss article's analysis of British LPT research reveals some troubling contradictions at the very heart of such (supposedly emancipatory) scholarship. Wray-Bliss subjects sample writings of some leading British LPT researchers to a critical scrutiny and discovers that notwithstanding these researchers' espoused commitment to emancipatory interests, their writings exhibit two practices—namely, (a) the silencing and appropriation of women's voices and (b) the appropriation of workers' subjectivity—that are ethically and theoretically indefensible and that are markedly at odds with the wider critical project. Following this, the article reflects at length on the issue of ethics of interpretive research and offers some valuable suggestions in this regard.

The final article, "The Organizational Imagination" by Raza Mir and Ali Mir, is a trenchant reminder to organizational researchers working in interpretive and postpositivist genres about the need to examine the effects of organizational actions on the wider society they are embedded in, particularly on the lives of so-called ordinary people. The authors offer the work of American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, as a model of inspired scholarly engagement that makes academic work relevant not by mirroring the outside world but by systematically critiquing and challenging it. Echoing much of the current dissatisfaction with the failure of academe (especially that of a purportedly critical or alternate stripe) to confront questions of social inequality, cultural marginalization, and ecological crisis, Mir and Mir force those of us working within different interpretive genres to renew the project of oppositional scholarship and passionate advocacy within our own scholarly work. Their proposal, that we be guided by an "organizational imagination" modeled on the lines of Mills' sociological imagination, is a forceful rejection of the old unattainable ideal of research as a nonpartisan academic endeavor in favor of a tradition committed to connecting scholarship to social struggle and transformation. Like the other articles in this issue, their work also exemplifies the erasure of boundaries between interpretive and critical research that has come about with the former's assumption of self-confident maturity.

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