

CHALLENGING VALUES: AN EXAMPLE FROM JOHN RUSKIN

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We argue that because research agendas encompass values as well as techniques it is important to seriously question not only the technical contribution of research but to pay particular attention to its moral implications. The reasons for this prescription and an example of counter-values from John Ruskin's The Stones of Venice are presented. Implications for teaching and research are discussed.

Mainstream Management Research

Mainstream management research is grounded in precise definitions, public procedures and objective data collection (Behling, 1980) in an attempt to discover “laws” which will lead to more efficient or effective organizations. While the discovery of such laws is guided by a strict scientific ethos, which includes replicable, systematic, and public procedures, managements’ use of the laws so discovered is less stringently considered. Although there are some exceptions (e.g. Bedeian and Armenakis, 1998), simply put if a law or a technique increases profit, results in greater subordinate commitment to the leader’s ends, or results in a more “effective” organization, most researchers seem reluctant to question what those ends may be or the value implications of the techniques so discovered.

Why Should We Be Concerned?

The dearth of consideration and discussion of the underlying implicit value systems of management research is curious for two reasons. First, with the recent upsurge or at least increase in public discussion of questionable management practices there is a renewed emphasis on managerial ethics. Currently strong arguments are made that ethics are, or should be, a central management concern and a required part of managerial training. This position is laudable, but if ethical behavior is a requirement of practicing managers shouldn't we, as social scientists, be equally concerned with the ethical implications of our research and the laws or techniques we discover, especially if those laws are to be used by the practitioners in question? Can we not, at least, imagine that research which encourages consumption, which increases product homogeneity, which ties “meaning” to production, or which increases subordinates’ “blind” obedience to a leader should be subject to

ethical questions? If, as Bendix (1956: 13) holds, "...all ideologies of management have in common the effort to interpret the exercise of authority in a favorable light" can we not ask if we, through our discoveries, discoveries which often are approached from the perspective of managers or leaders, wish to support such ideologies? Should we not at least stop to question the ends to which our research will be put?

Second, perhaps we should be concerned with the ethical implications of our research since rather than *discovering* lawful interconnections we may well, along with other actors, *produce* (or at least reinforce) such interconnections in the social field, interconnections which may well lead to questionable ends. If this is so it seems reasonable to question what we have produced.

It may appear antithetical to the canons of science to argue that we produce, rather than discover, any lawful relationship, let alone ethically questionable ones. However the argument that social interconnections are created, rather than discovered, is well recognized. Broadly speaking this is the subjectivist position aptly described by Burrell and Morgan (1979). These authors argue that social science paradigms consist of ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions, as well as assumptions concerning human nature. From Burrell and Morgan's (1979) perspective realism, positivism and nomothetic procedures comprise a coherent ideology known as the objectivist approach, an ideology that is in marked contrast to the subjectivist approach, which assumes nominalism, anti-positivism, and an ideographic methodology. Further the objectivist approach is characterized by the assumption that laws determine human behavior --- an assumption that is in sharp contrast to the subjectivist approach where human beings are seen as having "free will" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It would seem then that the claim that organizational laws are created, rather than discovered, is therefore subjectivist and, in fact, this approach can specifically be classified as "interpretive sociology" which "...sees the social world as an emergent social process which is created by the individuals concerned" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 28).

Further to this approach a number of authors do argue that the social world is an emergent process where actions and language create "social fields" that appear "real" to us. Weick (1987), for instance, argues that leaders create organizational environments by their actions; when a manager acts as if events are tied together the ensuing interconnected environment arises from this behavior as a type of self-fulfilling prophecy (a concept that is well known, e.g. Jussim, 1986). Additionally, Emery and Trist (1965) argue that a specific type of organizational environment called a "Turbulent Field" will arise when the components of an organization's environment become so highly interconnected that the resulting environment becomes unpredictable. Turbulent Fields have several causes but most important for the current argument is that Turbulent Fields are created by "...increasing reliance on research and development to achieve the capacity to meet competitive challenge" a reliance which continues to the point where "...a change gradient is continuously present in the environmental field"(Emery and Trist, 1965: 26). In short managerial action, based on research, may contribute to the interconnection of environmental components and so their instability through the provision "new" techniques.

Emery and Trist argue that organizations in a Turbulent Field cannot successfully adapt through direct action or through a continued reliance on research and development. Organizations must, instead, rely on a system of shared values to bring stability to their environments. Emery and Trist state: “Unable to trace out the consequences of their actions as these are amplified and resonated throughout their extended social fields, men in all societies have sought rules, sometimes categorical, such as the ten commandments, to provide them with a guide and ready calculus” (Emery and Trist, 1965: 28). Thus, from this perspective, it would seem that environments may be created by specific actions of “leaders” and that environmental stability is at least partially value based. It is consequently reasonable to at least consider what environmental conditions our research may bring about and what ensuing “stability” will result from the values that we communicate through it.

Further and even more directly, it has been argued that much of our research is value-laden. For example McKendall (1993) argues that “power sharing” advocated by organizational change research contributes significantly to the current ideology of management. From Mckendall’s perspective power sharing techniques are really a means of reaffirming managements’ power rather than the dignity, freedom, autonomy or self-reliance for the followers (McKendall, 1993), a reaffirmation we might agree limits human growth and self-expression. Earlier, management pioneers, such as Mary Parker Follett, writing in the early part of the 20th century proposed that one person should not give “orders” to another insisting, instead, that behaviour should be coordinated not by a “leader” but by the situation (see Wren, 1994: 260-264) a position which when contrasted with our current celebration of “leadership” (e.g. Yukl, 2002: 1) clearly illustrates our research values which seemingly emphasize leadership and the “right” of command.

But, paradoxically, (again to cite results from the leadership literature), we may also wish to consider our research values if we believe, contrary to the argument presented above, that we have a limited effect on current management practice. This concern is obviously in conflict with possibility that we may create the events we are attempting to measure, taking the position instead that practitioners often rely less on our research than we would like. An example of this concern is the recognized “sharp split” between leadership researchers and practitioners, a split traced to the fact that the leaders portrayed in research are “...our own creations” (Calas & Smircich, 1988: 202). A split between the perspectives of the researcher and the practitioner may result from the fact that our unexamined values simply do not matter to practitioners or perhaps are part of the fund of “common management knowledge” [a value emphasis on profit comes immediately to mind]. In this case research reinforces current ethical practice rather than challenging it. From this contrarian’s perspective why should practitioners respond to particular research programs if these programs only reinforce existing management values and practices in a framework which is seen by practitioners as simply a compilation of excessive detail, presented in obscure language, which serves only to confirm those values they already “know” on an “intuitive” basis?

Some combination of the situations presented above are possible; in some circumstances we may be

ignored due to triviality of the value positions taken or because the values we advocate are contrary to the accepted norm and are not presented in a convincing way. In other cases we may have unintended impacts advocating a system of values which, once adopted, result in a new reality, one that we may not have wished to construct. Here our research may serve to provide categorical rules focusing the behavior of managers and through such values a particular reality may be created or maintained. While these positions are diametrically opposed the central message in both possibilities is that as researchers we must clearly and actively decide which values we wish to advocate rather than taking the position that our science is or can somehow be “value free”.

An Illustration of Current Values

At this point it might be asked: What are some of the current “management” values advocated in research? Well, it is difficult to summarize any particular set of values which encompasses business thought and research practice without making unwarranted generalizations, especially given the large number of publications that deal with some form of management, leadership, or business practice. However it seems that some guidance can be found in the work of management historians. For example Wren traces the complexity of management thought throughout recent (and not so recent) history, and in his summary chapters he notes that effectiveness and efficiency, which we would see as values, are the roots of management. Further in discussing the long term implications of the social environment he notes that there has been a shift of emphasis in society from individualism to affiliation, that self-help has been supplanted by government help, that self-direction has been supplanted by “other direction” and that profits and efficiency have declined as legitimate goals (1994: 438). He laments this fact and continues to note that “[a]lthough the work ethic is alive and well, an entitlement ethic persists among some who feel that the world owes them a living. These ‘birds who can sing and won’t’ in Frederick Taylor’s terms pose continuing challenges for business and other taxpayers” (Wren, 1994: 439).

Wren cites two other interesting viewpoints when discussing ethics and social responsibility. The first quotation is from R. W. Johnson who, when outlining the credo of the Johnson and Johnson company in the last century, noted that while a business should not be compelled to promote the public welfare at its owners expense it should “...meet the needs and desires of human beings.... (Johnson, 1949, cf. Wren, 1994: 409), and Drucker’s point that management “...has failed if it fails to produce economic result”, has not supplied the goods the customer desires “...at a price the consumer is willing to pay”, or has failed to expand or maintain the ability to generate wealth (Drucker, 1954, cf. Wren, 1994: 414). Wren (1994: 436) also notes “[t]he future will continue to challenge our will to manage and to compete efficiently and strategically”.

We might reasonably conclude, then, that at least some of the underlying values which are advocated by business, and at least partially found in “management thought”, are the values of individualism and self-responsibility, effectiveness and efficiency, competition, and meeting the demands of the customer, values which seem so commonplace as to often escape comment.

A Challenge From The Work of John Ruskin

A challenge to such values, for comparative purposes, can be constructed from the work of John Ruskin one of the most prominent 19th century critics of art, architecture, and society. One of Ruskin's major works *The Stones of Venice* (Ruskin, 1887) examines the social foundations of the architecture of Venice. When discussing "rude or rough work" which is the chief feature of the Gothic architecture, the style Ruskin most admired, he argues that we should forgo work "...as is to be got only by the degradation of the workman..." (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 165), even at the sacrifice of convenience, or beauty or cheapness and instead we should demand products, even if they are more expensive, that "...are the results of healthy and ennobling labor" (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 165).

To support this call Ruskin proposes three "rules" which are directed to the consumer:

"1. Never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which *Invention* has no share. 2. Never demand an exact finish for its own sake, but only for some practical or noble end. 3. Never encourage imitation or copying of any kind, except for the sake of preserving record of great works" (1887, Vol. II: 165-166, italics in the original).

Ruskin presents artistic, architectural and moral justification for these rules. For example, when discussing the second rule he argues that imperfection is admirable, that there can be no great architecture which is not imperfect, that imperfection is essential to all living things, and that imperfection is a requirement of "Nature" which, in its turn, is the foundation of all art. To banish imperfection, from Ruskin's point of view, destroys expression and vitality. Additionally, the type of product selected has what might be called "ecological costs" but ecological costs imposed on the worker instead of the environment. As an example when discussing the manufacture of Venetian glass, Ruskin states "Choose whether you will pay for the lovely form or the perfect finish, and choose at the same moment whether you will make the worker a man or a grindstone" (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 168), this after earlier arguing that we should "...never imagine there is a reason to be proud of anything that may be accomplished by patience and sandpaper" (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 167).

The result of Ruskin's rules is to question those things which are produced through standardization, to a common design. It is a plea to reject, on aesthetic and moral grounds, any product in which the worker has no individual input into the resulting form. It is also a plea to look for invention, for individual expression, and for variety in what is produced even if this results in a product which is imperfect. Finally it is an argument that imperfection and difference should be actively pursued unless there is an overwhelming technical reason to demand standardization of the product and perfection of the finish.

The ultimate moral foundation for this set of rules is Ruskin's interpretation of the "Medieval system of ornamentation" which he claims has as its moral base the religious confession of imperfection which resulted in the dictum "Do what you can, and confess frankly what you are unable to do; neither let your effort be shortened for fear of failure, nor your confession silenced for fear of shame" (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 159-160). Thus Ruskin makes a moral, in fact religious, argument for a non-standardized, roughly finished product which recognizes both the imperfect structure of Nature as well as the artistic accomplishments of each individual worker. He concludes that Gothic architecture results in buildings of high art because of their imperfections of design and execution, an imperfection which resulted from the contribution of the individual worker and because the builders, pursued greatness rather than perfection. As he puts it we should not "...set the meaner thing, in its narrow accomplishment above the nobler thing, in its mighty progress; not esteem smooth minuteness above shattered majesty; not to prefer mean victory to honorable defeat; not to lower the level of our aim, that we may the more surely enjoy the complacency of success" (Ruskin, 1887, Vol. II: 160).

More directly to the value of meeting the demands of the customer Ruskin states in another work, *Modern Manufacture and Design*,

"...you must remember always that your business, as manufactures, is to form the market, as much as to supply it. If, in short-sighted and reckless eagerness for wealth, you catch at every humour of the populace as it shapes itself into momentary demand, if, in jealous rivalry with neighbouring States, or with other producers, you try to attract attention by singularities, novelties, and gaudinesses, to make every design an advertisement, and pilfer every idea of a successful neighbour's, that you may insidiously imitate it or pompously eclipse, no good design will ever be possible to you.... the whole of your life will have been spent in corrupting public taste and encouraging public extravagance" [Ruskin, 1862: 138].

Together these statements provide a different set of values than efficiency, competition, and meeting the demands of the customer. They are an argument to minimize production, to encourage what might be considered by some less "effective" manufacturing procedures for the sake of art and morality and to shape demand, rather than meet it, even if the cost is less convenience or cheapness and to make a moral decision to reject standardized products for the sake of those who make them even if the customer seemingly desires a smoothly finished, "perfect", product.

Objections and Implications

At least two objections can be raised to the proceeding set of arguments. The first objection rejects the example of Ruskin because of the religious grounds on which Ruskin's argument is based or because of perceived impracticality. This is understandable, but our point is not that values must,

like Ruskin's, be anchored in religion. Our argument is that we should consider the values implicit in our research and Ruskin's suggestions encompass a set of values that serve as a counter-example to values which we may take for granted. In our argument we have used his work as a counter-point to highlight values which, to us at least, seem "obvious" in many discussions concerning how to produce and sell a range of standardized products which the market demands. Our point is not that we should adopt Ruskin's view, or that his suggestions are necessarily "practical", but that implicit values must and should be considered, at least through counter-example, in management research.

The second, more sophisticated objection concerns whose values shall be used. This objection might be phrased in the following way: Since it can be argued that values are culturally anchored, it is arguable that what is "right" and what is "wrong" changes from culture to culture. If so how do we know which values to advocate? The answer to this question is two-fold: First much of our research, by taking a "management" perspective, already implicitly argues for, creates, supports, or enforces a particular system of values --- sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly [e.g. the concept of "heroic" leadership]. Further many of these values may be "nested" or attached to other values that we seldom consider. For instance, as the above example illustrates, the rather explicit support of "efficiency" inherent in standardized production also implies an intolerance of rough or unfinished work and the implicit value that the demands of the market should always be met, especially if there is a profit in it. Second, in some arenas, value-based arguments are already consciously chosen and relativism does not always hold sway. Most of us, for instance, are unwilling to support the values of sexism or racism, or to conduct research which would further such ends. Our answer, then, to the second objection is that our research will, by its nature and by the problems we select to study, advocate particular values. We should consequently consciously choose which values are "better" and which are "worse" and carefully consider which values to support lest we find that we have unwittingly supported values that are contrary to our humanist perspective when they are put to into practice.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to argue that our research has not only technical but value implications for our society, some of which, such as an advocacy of efficiency or an advocacy of meeting the demands of the market, can be seen from a brief review of management thought. These value implications may reinforce established "management" values, which, if examined completely, we might rather not support. We have offered one counter-example as an illustration to some generally accepted values and have proceeded to argue that we can and do make value choices in some of our academic activities. Finally, we have taken the position that if we wish to be critical of managerial ethics we must examine not only managements' values but our own. We must examine and challenge those values imbedded in our teaching and in our research since we may, unknowingly and unintentionally, be the source of many of the values which deserve criticism.

Most management articles usually conclude with “implications for research and practice” or the like. This article, however, more appropriately concludes with a discussion of implications for curriculum design, future research on this topic, and the general practice of research.

On the teaching front, we would argue that some consideration should be given to including a discussion of values in business curricula which are explicitly contrary to apparently prevailing management value assumptions. Whether these “counter-values” are those such as Ruskin’s which question mass production, standardization, and low cost goods is not the main issue. What is important is that students be exposed to the basic notion that there are alternative value systems to those currently in vogue. This exposure can serve as a foundation for future practitioners to critically examine management practices and theories. In a sense this can be seen as an extension to the typical material found in a business ethics course.

Implications for future research are hopefully clear. Beyond the most base motives for producing research (i.e. tenure and promotion), we need to identify why, as a field, we do the work we do. Are we conscious of the underlying value systems we support? Alternatively, is it the case that value systems are not consciously considered? Are our fundamental values inherently ingrained through our training and education? In either case there should be some discussion to “surface” the values and subject them to scrutiny.

Finally, in terms of the practice of research we would call for a requirement of some discussion of values in most, if not all, managerial research. An example of the type of consideration we would like to see is found in Shamir, House and Arthur’s (1993) article on Charismatic Leadership. In it they have a lengthy discussion --- albeit in a footnote --- where they recognize that the tools and techniques of charismatic leadership can raise ethical concerns:

“In the analysis that follows, we do not distinguish between “good” or “moral” and “evil” or “immoral” charismatic leadership. Indeed, our analysis suggests that the psychological mechanisms relied up by the “Hitlers” and the “Gandhis” may be similar in certain respects. This means that the risks involved in following charismatic leaders are at least as large as the promises” (Shamir, House, and Arthur, 1993: 581-582 (footnote 1)).

Such disclosures can serve several purposes. They force authors to consider the value implications of the research they produce. They alert critical academic readers of the research that such values have been considered. Finally, they inform practitioners and future practitioners (students) of those considerations that could and should be taken into account when putting such research into practice.

We feel the above recommendations for curriculum design, research, and the practice of research are necessary to fully understand ourselves, our role in management education, and to potentially improve our contributions to society.

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