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Emotions, Values, and Methodology:

Contributing to the Nature of the World We Live In Whether We Intend To or Not

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Abstract: Traditional management research has advocated arms-length, systematic studies that treat organizations and the people in them as subjects. It advocates that the emotions and values of the researcher be set aside in order to have an objective measure and analysis of the phenomena. This paper argues that it is not desirable nor possible for a researcher to abandon emotions and values. Organizations are continually built and rebuilt by their members in order to accomplish purposes and they have profound influence on the quality of life and of the world we live in. True connection with them requires that the researcher be fully in tune with and open about purposes, values and emotions.

The article by Gail Whiteman () raises an important question about whether and how a researcher should bring the heartbreak that is experienced in studying extremely upsetting and tragic phenomena into the research process. I believe she has correctly pointed out that the field of management and organization studies, characterized primarily by normal science in search of objective truth, does not encourage or perhaps even acknowledge as legitimate the expression of researcher emotion as an integral part of the research process. She has poignantly and analytically described her own field experience using a stakeholder analysis approach to study the extractive industry and Indigenous people, where she encountered heartbreaking examples of brutality against women by the laborers in the mining industry. She has described how she excluded the emotion she felt about this brutality from the data she considered and reported in her analytic research process. But, during an academic presentation of her results, the emotion she was feeling but not reporting became overwhelming to the point that she broke down in tears.

I feel gratitude to Professor Whiteman for raising this difficult and important subject. She rightfully points out that management scholars study many situations that may evoke in us powerful emotional reactions that cannot help but influence the way we experience the phenomena we study. She thoughtfully argues that by acknowledging the emotion we experience in our research, and by treating it as analytic and interpretive clues, a more profound understanding of management phenomena and an enriched field of investigation may emerge. She also suggests that the profession will benefit if researchers are able to express their multiple facets and connect more directly with broader life purposes.

This issue and Whiteman's arguments connect to a broader set of issues pertaining to the conduct of management science and its contribution to the changing nature of organizations and social systems in the context of significant economic, ecological and societal upheavals. I have elsewhere argued that "This is a time in history when organizational studies can and should contribute to the shaping of organizations and institutions that have immense impact on the character and quality of life" (Mohrman, 2000, p. 57). To do so requires addressing and struggling with the complexity and both positive and negative consequences of new capabilities and connections for humankind. Understanding the dialectic between the dehumanizing aspects and the empowering aspects of efficiency, modernity and capitalism has been described as "...the most pressing problem facing organizational studies. ...[M]odernity is Janus faced: it enriches and impoverishes, empowers and represses,...enhances efficiency and dehumanizes (Marsden and Townley, 1996 p.671)." But we are unable to address this challenge if we do not address the moral ambiguity and complexity of the phenomena we study—if we do not acknowledge that our appropriate work is more expansive than the generation and testing of theory in normal science studies that require that we stand outside of and take an objective and dispassionate stance toward the phenomena we study.

In a final work, published posthumously, Sumantra Ghoshal argued that the mission of organizational research should be to build a better world for the future (2005). He pointed out that strict adherence to the scientific method and the examination and analysis of narrow questions has obscured a fuller understanding that includes the role of human purpose. In his view, basing the field largely on economic theory has further pushed out moral and ethical considerations critical to understanding the complexity of a world in which multiple

stakeholders are pursuing their preferred outcomes. He argued that theory is not value-free, and that choices of theories and research agendas depend on personal preference and viewpoints about human nature.

There is little room in normal science to explicitly grapple with these issues that Ghoshal raised, despite the fact that inherent in our frameworks and theories are political perspectives and values that shape the way we see the world and determine our influence on the kind of world we live in. We study and reify our own value-laden theories, often gathering data to confirm or disconfirm them rather than to generate knowledge useful in creating a humane organizational world that enables the accomplishment of purpose. Yet we study the world of artifact—of organizations, roles, and systems created and redesigned by people to accomplish their purposes. They are replete with power relationships that determine whose purposes will prevail, and they are formed through the interactions of people guided by emotions, values and beliefs, as well as rationality. This is no less true of academia than of any other institutions and organizations we may study.

We researchers see the artifacts that we study through our eyes and through our theories--theories purported to elucidate organizational phenomena. Our eyes in some cases may never light on the phenomena we are investigating, as we use secondary archival data that in itself represents a particular set of purposes and values. We act as if our theoretical lenses do not distort and shape the very phenomena we try to understand. But we know better than that. We know that our values are inherent in our theories, and in the way we choose to pursue our academic careers, and in the impact or the lack of impact that we have on practice. Wittingly or unwittingly we may fall into an academic game of studying and reporting things in

a distant, aseptic, and publishable manner, far from the purposes of those who constitute the systems we are studying, rather than carrying out research to inform organizing and managing. In choosing our focus and methods, we both distort and shape the phenomena we claim to understand.

We know from recent debates in the academies and journals of the field that for the most part we do not yield useful understanding that will help people organize to address their needs and aspirations (e.g., Rynes, in press; Hambrick, 2007; Starbuck, 2006). Our work is not widely used nor viewed as useful by those who are on the front lines of creating and changing organizations—who deal daily with complexity, moral ambiguity, emotions and aspirations. We strive to remove our emotions, our political agendas, and our biases through the pristine methodology we try to employ—as if our work is somehow privileged and as if we produce truth about “them”, our subjects. We choose the lenses through which we will examine phenomena and use our protected positions as academics to portray ours as the chosen and correct interpretation because it confirms our theory, fits with the data we choose to collect, and passes peer scrutiny. How we conduct and report our research relates to expectations that have become embedded in the institutions in which we practice our profession, and to our personal and career aspirations. We have apparently created research paradigms and research institutions where much of the research output is not used or viewed as useful. In so doing we have had impact on the nature of the world we live in, for we have created management and organizational sciences that do not and often do not aspire to contribute to the solution of the problems that organizations and managers face.

Yes, I agree with Gail Whiteman that the profession will be enriched if we acknowledge the emotions, and, by implication, the values we hold. Toward this end, we have an obligation to acknowledge the emotions we feel when we study phenomena that disgust us or break our hearts, or those such as Dutton and Morhart (2010) describe that warm our hearts. In so doing, we make clear to ourselves and to our colleagues our values that lead to those emotions, and the political agendas we may hold, and we contribute information critical to our own and others' interpretation of our research results.

In my view, there is another important reason to share emotions and values associated with our research. Only then can we hope to make a difference. We are among the disparate actors contributing in ways small and large, purposefully or unintentionally, to the unfolding of society and its organizations and institutions. We, among others, are guided by many different values including rationality, adventure, challenge, competition, power, autonomy, equity, integrity, and morality. We are also guided by emotions—love, ambition, greed, fear, compassion, jealousy, heartbreak, and anger among them—and by disparate theories and beliefs including of economic man, rationality, spirituality, community and identity. Our voices are some among many. We choose which aspects of organizational life we will study and report, and which we will suppress in our professional work and remove from our focus. By excluding explicit treatment of these issues from our academic work, we also remove them from the discourse that potentially leads to impact.

The questions we may choose to ask include: Will we be heard by those who are shaping the organizations and institutions which will influence the quality of life in the future? Are we carrying out our work in a manner that is congruent with what we value? Will we make

a difference? Will the world be a better place because of what and how we have theorized, studied, and learned?

It is within this set of questions that I think we must consider the contribution that has been made by Gail Whiteman to discourse about the nature of the profession. The question for each of us includes but goes beyond whether we should acknowledge emotion in order to lead to a more honest, inclusive, and profound understanding of organization and management—and whether in doing so we will contribute to an enriched profession connected to life goals and purposes. These questions lead us to ponder the very way in which we carry out our research. Van de Ven (2007), for example, argues that academics should consider engaged scholarship that combines the knowledge and perspectives from many stakeholders to address important problems. He points out that there are already a number of research approaches, such as collaborative research, action research, and evaluation research, that fit this descriptor. He challenges us to acknowledge many different theories, perspectives, and methods may be required to try to understand and be able to address important issues—and to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of these issues.

Societies are dealing with complex issues such as the relationship between economic advance and exploitation, the tensions between regulation and incentive, and the choices we face that balance the focus on today's growth and prosperity and the devastating impact this may have on the ecology of the world and the lives our progeny will lead. We cannot address these problems if we do not confront our own emotions and values and those of others – for all stakeholders these are the underpinnings of the theories we choose, the phenomena we find important and interesting, the problems we feel need to be addressed, and the way we go

about our work. These are the foundations upon which we can build bridges to others to develop a more profound and impactful way to understand and contribute to the future of a world whose nature will be shaped in large part through the organizational, institutional, and relational social systems that we, humanity, construct.

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