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Mundane Reason *and* Epistemic Culture as Organizational Theory

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Abstract

Of great interest to organizational theorists are problems that arise within the sense-making domain. The paper introduces two important theories, both of which were results of empirical work. These are the theory of mundane reason and that of epistemic cultures. These theories together have a powerful impact on organizational theory. Building upon what we know, a Theory of Mundane Reason *and* Epistemic Culture is proposed. It is suggested that this constructivist approach to research may be justified as a meta-ontology. Mundane reason has been chosen because it has both a factuality and universality. Consequences of this include assumptions that directly impact on the ability to penetrate others' reality. This in turn impacts upon the ability to communicate effectively. Traditional models of communication used in the literature of management and marketing were a product of their time. Theories like the one presented here allow a re-thinking and re-theorising of communication models such as the one chosen as the example in the paper. The paper concludes with a formula for analysing faulty communication resulting from an unawareness of mundane reason and epistemic cultures.

Key Words: Effective communications, mundane reason, epistemic culture.

Introduction

> "A theory, as I teach in my class, has to fit all the facts. If it doesn't, you have to examine the facts. If the facts are correct, and the theory doesn't work, then you have to alter the theory."   DeMille N. (1997:357)

How is it that some gaps are hardly ever bridged? Take for example, a set of senior managers who have spent some time away at a retreat or a special meeting room formulating a strategy for the future. After two days of very hard work, the strategy is formulated. Knowing from past experience that sometimes these things are not followed through, the group has spent some time on developing comprehensive action plans of the 'who does what, when and how' variety.

The time comes to pass the strategy down the line. Achieving clarity is a special consideration and the communication is done with much and enthusiasm. In spite of attempts to make the strategy as clear as possible, it seems somewhat difficult to transmit the spirit of the strategy across the various work groups tasked with implementing the strategy. Coming together for the senior executive meeting, there are war stories from all fronts. "What does it take for these people to show some ownership?" one of the executives asked. "We have bent over backwards to be integrative, to keep our people in the information loop through meetings and presentations and team briefings".

This paper uses two theoretical perspectives to argue that facts are actually socially constructed things. Attached to a fact is the world of reasoning within which the fact is incorporated. Groups of people, often unconsciously, develop basic and meaningful structures through which the factuality[1] of descriptions is built and used to inform ongoing consciousness as well as day-to-day activities (Potter 1996). To use the example of the decision makers, the executives have developed their own ways of structuring meaning so that, for them, facts emerge. They have basic procedures that allow them to construct and legitimate what makes up 'a fact'. The procedures provide a window into the factual world of the senior executives.

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[1] 'Factuality' is used here s a noun meaning restricted to or based on fact Longman (1984).

As will be discussed later in more detail, there are two assumptions that accompany these constructions. The first assumption, it is argued here, is the fulcrum around which many of the dilemmas such as the one above revolve. The assumption made by the senior executives is that there is one objective world of facts shared with the various work groups, who might include, say, engineers, administrators or customers. Not only that but, holds the second assumption, this is a factual world we are talking about and these other groups have access to it in such a way that they can actually experience it. What the senior managers fail to realise is that their 'real' world is what Morgan (1997) calls a 'partial' world-view. Each of the other groups who will be implementing the strategy mentioned in the example above will also have a partial world-view. These views are not transferable and all have their own mundane reasoning procedures and epistemic cultures[2].

There is a big difference between the effects of this theory of the world-view and the conventional psychology of perception which are familiar to most of us. It is widely accepted that people perceive things in different ways. In many ways the perception argument is easier for the senior executive in our example to deal with than the factuality one of mundane reason. The executive is aware that other groups might see the world differently, *but within the same world-view*. S/he will go to some trouble to gather others' perceptions. The difference in understanding the 'reasoning' or factuality gap and understanding the 'perception' gap is a big one. I might 'come to where you are' and try to find out how you see things but I can only do that in the confidence that we share the same factual world. It is something like the difference between part of the same world but in a different way and being part of a different world. Strangely, the more successful we are at exploring and gathering perceptions, the less likely we are to look for and deal with the factuality gap. A central characteristic of the factuality assumption is that there is a sense of realism to it. This realism is assumed to extend to other groups. The senior executives assume their 'real world' extends to other groups and other groups do the same.

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[2] An epistemic culture is "those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms … which, in a given field, *make up how we know what we know*. Epistemic cultures are cultures that create and warrant knowledge…" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:1)

A rather poignant example is the case of the criminal who is being tried in the courtroom. The judge, lawyers, clerk of the court, other officials and the criminal all have access to the physical characteristics and procedures of the courtroom. In this sense they are sharing an objective world. People who have sat in on courtroom sessions may have observed that judges appear to assume that the criminal also shares the same reasoning that is going on as the trial develops. The only problem is that the criminal exists within his/her own world of reasoning. The criminal's organizing framework for judging which descriptions make up factual accounts of reality and which ones do not is based on the world of reason adopted in the criminal world. The criminals assume that the courtroom officials inhabit the same factual world as they do (although they might acknowledge that they are on different sides within the same reasoning world).

In the two examples above, and many more could be found in most organizations, there is no awareness of the need to penetrate the factual world of others. The assumption is that 'we all share the same one'. We just see things differently within a shared world - not of meaning, but of fact.

There is a second issue that we would like to present. That is the issue of knowledge. Within our mundane reasoning worlds, how do we know what we know and what sort of knowledge is valued over other sorts? The researcher who demonstrated the existence of epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) used scientists as her example. We will discuss this in more detail later but as an introduction, we would mostly agree that scientists 'know' what they know through the organizing frameworks that allow the factuality of their scientific descriptions to emerge. Descriptions that match the 'rules' of scientific method will be accorded the status of objectivity and factuality. Those that do not, for example, where descriptions have been contaminated by some 'subjective' factor, will not be considered as 'real'. Concerning what sort of knowledge is valued to this group of mundane reasoners has been made very transparent to us since our schooldays. Within the mundane reasoning world of scientists, objective, factual concrete kind of knowledge is highly valued whilst for the subjective, perceptual kind this is not the case. What do such scientific researchers do when confronted with highly qualitative researchers? Literature will show that they

apply the criteria for scientific research (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). They judge the qualitative research by these standards and, inevitably find it wanting.

The task of research in management is to make sense of social life in the organisation. At its simplest, the process of social research is a dialogue between theory and evidence, with
theory helping to make sense of evidence, and evidence modifying theory (Ragin, 1994). We introduce these two theories, mundane reasoning and epistemic cultures, (both based on empirical findings), as being useful for gaining a deep understanding of organizational life. They are offered in the hermeneutic sense presented by Geertz (1979) when he talks about tacking between the global and the local. On the one hand there is the evidence of mundane reason (Pollner, 1987) and epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). On the other hand there is the theory of mundane reason and epistemic culture as presented in this paper. This 'tacking' between theory and evidence is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.Tacking between theory and evidence
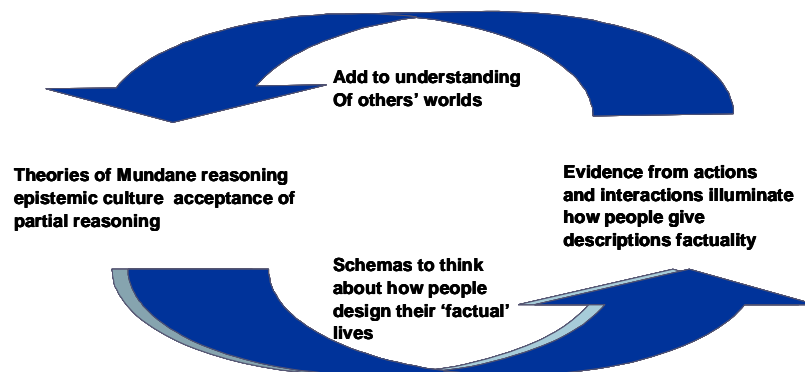
In summary, the theory of mundane reason is described, followed by that of epistemic culture. The ontological position by each of the researchers - Pollner (1987) on mundane reason and Knorr-Cetina (1999) on epistemic culture - is stated followed by the proposal that, when taken together, they constitute a meta-ontology. Very often terms such as 'ontology' and 'epistemology', as in epistemic cultures, are saved for the rarefied world of the researcher. However, from experience and also from the

literature, there is much evidence that the study of these two theories could well become as necessary to contemporary managers as the study of spreadsheets and technical specifications.

Mundane Reason

The Notion of Mundane Reason and its Origin

Ethnomethodology emerged in the mid-1960s as a theory and a self-conscious critique of conventional sociology (Marshall, 1994:203). Garfinkel (1967/1999) was the leading exponent and many academic researchers were attracted to his contention that "the most commonplace activities of daily life… are a phenomena [worthy of empirical research] in their own right" (Garfinkel, 1967/1999:1). Among these were Zimmerman and Pollner (1970) who argued that conventional sociological inquiry shared "identical conceptions of social fact" as the enquiry of the person in the street:

> each mode presupposes the existence of objective structures of activity which remain impervious to the procedures through which these features are made observable [and] each mode of inquiry addresses the same substantive domain (Zimmerman &Pollner, 1970:119).

By 1974, Pollner had developed his theory of mundane reason which was described as follows:

> The assumption of an intersubjective world[3] taken together with the inferential operations for which it provides comprises what we shall term the idiom of *mundane reason.* A well-socialized mundane reasoner…assumes a world which is not only objectively present but a world to which he has continued experiential access and, further, which others experience in more or less identical ways.(Pollner, 1974:35)
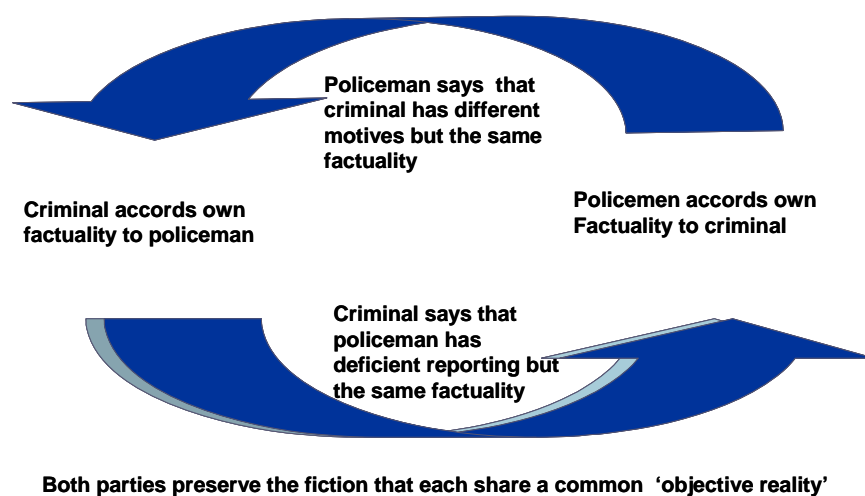
Of course when we look at our examples of the senior executives/work groups and the judge/criminals, we can see that to assume that senior managers and workgroups as

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[3] 'Intersubjective' mean: accessible to or occurring between two or more conscious minds, as in 'intersubjective reality'. (Longman, 1984)

well as judges and criminals share the same objectively present reality does not fall far short of fiction. People seem to want to preserve a fiction that they have experiential access to a single reality in an intersubjective way. Of particular interest in Pollner (1974) is his analysis of the ingenious way in which this fiction of intersubjective reality is maintained. We can think of reasoning as being done at two levels, the 'edifice' or surface level and the 'foundational' or deep level, As long as people can explain away evidence that only one reality is in play by addressing the edifice they can explain away discrepancies by pointing to such things as deficiencies in language, poor education, poor memory and so on. In this way, fundamental issues such as 'the same descriptions are being accorded different factualities' need not be an issue.

Pollner (1987) calls this syndrome where different factualities are being accorded for the same descriptions, reality disjunctures. Reality disjunctures, (that is when two people interpret 'reality' differently) he maintains, are never fundamentally questioned – it is always the methods or motives of observation and reportage which are responsible for differing perceptions of the same event. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2   Example of a Reality Disjuncture

Policeman says that criminal has different motives but the same factuality

Criminal accords own factuality to policeman

Policemen accords own Factuality to criminal

Criminal says that policeman has deficient reporting but the same factuality

Both parties preserve the fiction that each share a common 'objective reality'

By 1987, Pollner had consolidated the case for mundane reasoning as a significant social phenomenon (Pollner,1987). However, the main theme remained the ethnomethodological concern to "transcend the constitutive and constraining character of the dominant form of life" (mundane reason) while at the same time having to return to the mundane reason of sociology "if it [ethnomethodology] is to contribute to the understanding of social life" (Pollner, 1987:6).

In summary, Pollner (1987) showed that:

- "The mundane idiom is the product of historical and cultural processes which have implanted the idiom deep within our discourse and consciousness" (Pollner, 1987:128) thus

- "For most contemporary Western adults the assumption of an objective reality is virtually self-evident and thus truly mundane" (Pollner, 1987:x).

- Sociology is mundane "like the rest of the sciences, and, for that matter like all modes of inquiry, it is directed to the explication and analysis of a world whose 'thereness' is considered to be essentially non-problematic (Pollner. 1987:7).

- Mundane reason is socially constructed. However, "Mundane reasoners always represent themselves as confronting a ***real world.*** Whether it is a world of concrete events such as 'what really happened…', a world of symbolic events such as 'deviance' or a world of abstract theoretical properties such as 'the practices through which social reality is constructed'… mundane reasoners describe the world as ***independent of the reflecting, experiencing, and describing***" (Pollner, 1987:127) (Emphasis added)

- The danger from mundane reasoning is the power it exercises in society, discourse and consciousness as "a fundamental resource for conceiving of oneself, others and the collective relation to reality" (Pollner,1987:128) and

- Pollner (1987) reviews the resources available for the deconstruction of the idiom.

A Contemporary Interpretation of the Idiom of Mundane Reasoning

The value of Pollner (1987) today lies in the analysis of his fieldwork which identifies and describes in detail the complexities of the process of mundane reasoning. This analysis has stood the test of time, yet does not appear to have been taken up by many other writers.

Pollner's (1987) misgivings about mundane reasoning are encapsulated in the following:

> Mundane reason is not simply an idiom founded on the assumption of an objective world. Rather it is an idiom which is composed of a network of interrelated, mutually defining terms for specifying both subject and object: it includes all of the terms whose meaning implicates and is implied by an objective world (Pollner, 1987:128).

Thus, Pollner (1987) reflects a concern far wider than that of ethnomethodology for his contribution is a part of the reaction of the social sciences to the smugness of the natural sciences' claims of objective knowledge; and his philosophical critique of mundane reason is a part of the emergence of postmodern thinking in many disciplines.[4]

The importance for this paper of Pollner's work lies in his research methodology: "The ethnomethodologists emphasize the interactional activities that constitute the social facts" (Coulon, 1995:50). Through studies of records of conversational interactions and the analysis of reality disjunctures Pollner (1987) showed how mundane reasoning sustains the assumption of an objective world to which all observers have access in everyday life.

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[4] See Rosenau (1992)

Epistemic Culture

The Notion of Epistemic Culture and its Origin

The term *Epistemic Culture* was coined by Karin Knorr-Cetina (1999) who was building on research started in the 1970s. She describes the phenomenon as follows:

> Epistemic cultures are "those amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms - bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence - which, in any given field make up *how we know what we know.*
> Knorr-Cetina (1999)[5]

Over a number of years Knorr-Cetina (1999) researched two groups of scientists – in high energy physics and molecular biology - using a form of conversation analysis and documentary evidence, to determine the "construction of the machineries of knowledge" in each group.

She observed that "The differentiating terms [discipline/scientific speciality] we have used in the past were not designed to make visible the complex texture of knowledge as practised in the deep social spaces of modern institutions. To bring out this texture, one needs to magnify the space of knowledge-in-action, rather than simply observe disciplines or specialities as organizing structures" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:2).

In summary, she concluded that:

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[5] During the preparation of this section the question was raised as to the difference between 'epistemic culture' and 'communities of practice'. The two appear similar as the following definition shows:

> Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise if this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Synder, 2002).

However, there are fundamental differences: the existence of epistemic cultures was the outcome of fieldwork and analysis. 'Communities of Practice' is a common-sense management idea which is currently being advocated. "If communities of practice have been so pervasive [author's claim], why ***should*** organizations suddenly focus on them?" (Wenger et al:6) (emphasis added).
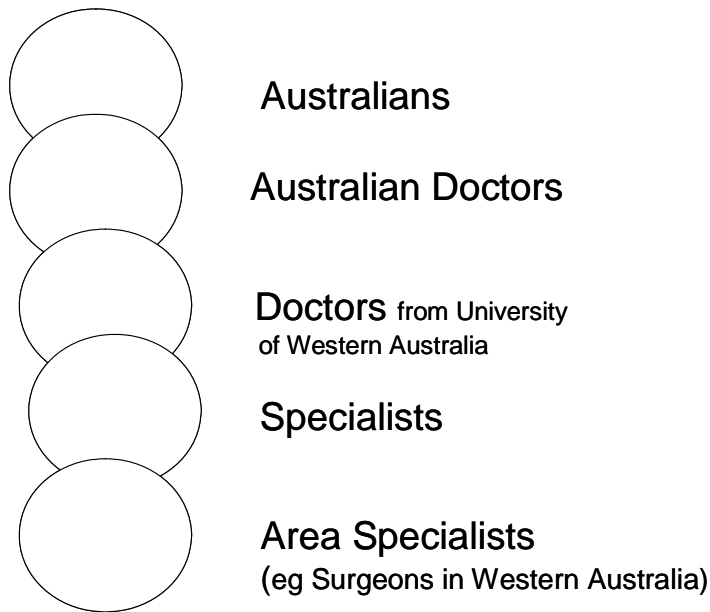
- There is a wide diversity in the ways in which epistemic cultures within science create knowledge.

- The notion that there is "only one kind of knowledge, only one science, and only one scientific method …" is no longer plausible and there is ontological difference and methodological divergence within the practice of contemporary natural sciences. (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:3).

- "The traditional definition of knowledge society puts the emphasis on knowledge seen as statements of scientific belief, as technological application, or perhaps as intellectual property. The definition I advocate switches the emphasis to knowledge as practised – within structures, processes and environments that make up *specific* epistemic setting.…" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:7). There is support for this broader interpretation of 'knowledge' from Giddens (1984) who asserts that 'knowledge' equals accurate or valid awareness.

A heritage of functionalist ways of knowing and ways of evaluating knowledge (Morgan, 1997) is that what Knorr-Cetina calls the complex texture of knowledge has been slow to become recognized. The fact that there are 'deep social spaces' and that these need to be made socially intelligible to those interacting and conversing together. In other words, theories and practices aimed at helping people to communicate effectively need to rise above the traditional communication methods (active listening, summarising, confirming) to more reflective and analytical ones.

Broadening the Notion of Epistemic Culture

The work of Knorr-Cetina (1999) has an immediate appeal partly because it 'makes sense' and partly because of a natural respect for a researcher who goes to such detailed lengths to record and observe the creation of knowledge in practice. It takes very little imagination to apply the definition of an epistemic culture to society in general. For example, one might model the professional influences on a general practitioner in Western Australia as in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3   Modelling the Overlapping Epistemic Cultures which might influence a Medical Practitioner in Western Australia

Australians

Australian Doctors

Doctors from University
of Western Australia

Specialists

Area Specialists
(eg Surgeons in Western Australia)

However, the question must be asked as to whether we are justified, on the basis of Knorr-Cetina's (1999) empirical work, in extrapolating her findings. They are based on an exhaustive study of those working in the two scientific disciplines of high energy physics and molecular biology, to other groups in society.

The argument proposed for the legitimacy of this move is as follows:

- At present, the interpretation of the word *culture* is broad and general. For example, "in social science culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted…" (Marshall, 1998:137). In management, culture is "something that is shared by all members of some social group"; something that older members of the group pass on to the younger members"; something (as in the case of morals, laws and customs) that shapes behavior or structures one' perceptions of the world" (Weinshall, 1993:29). In summary, *culture* is a theoretical concept concerned with aggregate patterns and dynamics.

- The traditional interpretations of culture take a macro-perspective while Knorr-Cetina (1999) used a close-up lens to study the machineries of knowing based on actual practices. In doing so she magnifies the epistemic machinery of two research cultures to reveal the fragmentation of the traditional notion of

a homogenous science. This approach has a fractal quality. Regardless of how much you narrow down and zero in on any specific area of culture, it contains essentially the entire structure of the object. This property of endlessly manifesting a motif within a motif is known, within complexity theory, as "self similarity" (Coveney & Highfield, 1995).

- Knorr-Cetina (1999:252) herself argued that the results can be used "not by generalizing them, but by using the patterns I illustrate as templates against which to explore the distinctive features of other expert domains, and as pointers to dimensions in other areas".

- On methodology, Knorr-Cetina (1999:252) argued that "the liminal epistemology explored in Chapter 3….illustrates the working of ethnomethods such as unfolding, framing, and convoluting. These notions can be used as sensitizing concepts[6] in any other study of epistemic cultures to determine how these cultures are figured, what similarities might exist, and how to account for them".

- In the United States, it has been argued that the concept of culture can provide ways of explaining belief systems, values and ideologies (Marshall, 1998:137). The Knorr-Cetina (1999) interpretation would stress the importance of the mechanisms by which values etc. are created and passed on, rather than the values themselves.

Ontology

Ontological questions are present in any attempt to conceptualize the individual within his or her social life. For philosophers, ontology has implied an investigation into the most general nature of things – into their 'necessary' structure. From this view, logical principles may be principles of being as well as principle of inference (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:253)**.**
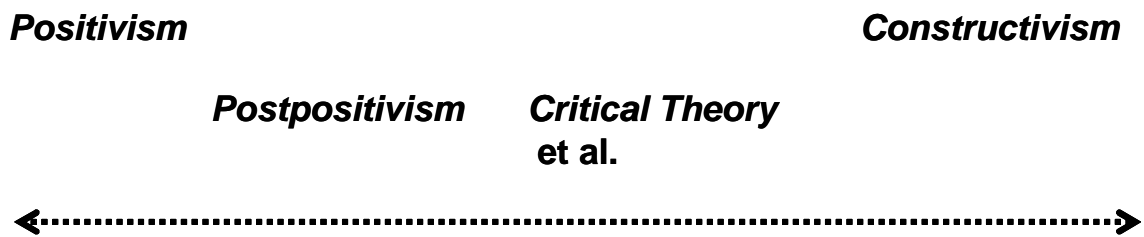
Mundane reason is the folk ontology upon which both everyday and sociological discourse are dependent. Mundane reason is the production of 'objective' accounts of

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[6] For the role of sensitizing concepts in qualitative research see Ragin, 1994, pp.87-88.

human behaviour which are constructed while at the same time assuming there is a 'real' world out there (Pollner, 1987).

Researching epistemic cultures is not, according to Knorr-Cetina (1999), a matter of fixing ontology in advance of the empirical investigation. Each epistemic culture creates its own "forms of being or structures of existence" within its area (Knorr-Cetina, 1999:253). Thus, taken separately, the practice of mundane reason and the behaviour in epistemic cultures appear to be at opposite poles of the qualitative researcher's conventional view of ontology. This interpretation of ontological positioning is illustrated by Figure 4, taken from Guba and Lincoln (1994), reinforced by Lincoln & Guba (2000) which appears to have established a benchmark for qualitative researchers.

Figure 4 The Traditional Ontology Choice *using mundane reasoning*.

Positivism   *Constructivism*

Postpositivism   *Critical Theory*
                           et al.

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(Guba and Lincoln, 1994:109)

The mundane reasoner assumes a positivist or postpositivist position in discourse but his/her individual life is personally constructed. Epistemic cultures, on the other hand are socially constructed so that the individual may believe, in common with the others in the group that his/her ontology may lie at any one of the four points on the continuum.

The theory of mundane reason *and* epistemic culture is in a position to take a bold step with regard to ontology because it recognises the multiplicity of approaches but cannot tolerate being assigned to one pole. Furthermore, the theory recognises the common ground thrown up by each empirical research: both show, without question, that the ultimate ontological position is constructivist when one looks behind the rhetoric of discourse.

Thus, it is proposed that it is more appropriate to represent the ontology of the theory of mundane reason *and* epistemic culture, which is essentially constructivist, as a meta-theory[7] which is illustrated in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5   Locating the Theory of Mundane Reason and Epistemic Culture as a Meta-Ontology

Constructivism

Positivism   Postpositivism   Critical Theory** et al.   **Constructionism
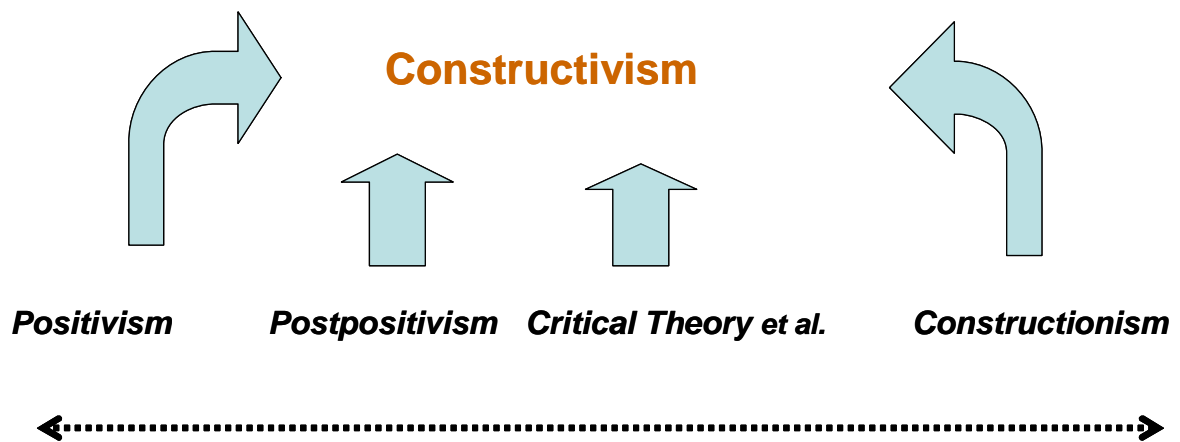
(based on Guba and Lincoln's (1994:109) four paradigms for qualitative research)

This allows mundane reasoners to subscribe to a positivist position in the conduct of daily life (for example the 'rule of law') while taking part in the debate, a socially constructed activity, which creates the 'rule of law" (for example the abortion debate). At the same time each epistemic culture socially constructs it's ultimate beliefs, such as the sanctity of life in Western cultures, which is expressed in discourse from a positivist position as an objective value.

There is no suggestion that the constructivist nature of the meta-theory is cognitivist with its emphasis on the individual mental process (Harré & Gillett, 1994; Potter, 1996). There is the belief, however, that each individual person has a sense of reality

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[7] Schwandt (1994) draws a clear distinction between constructivist thinking (pp.125-127) and social constructionism (pp.127-8). Guba and Lincoln's *constructivist paradigm* is described on pp 128-9, This proposal of a constructivist meta-ontology and a + *constructionist paradigm* enriches their perspective.

totally distinct from any other individual. It is *the practise of mundane reason* which overcomes the essentially idiosyncratic world of the individual allowing him or her to become part of a collective and shared reality. In other words, the isolation element from being a unique human being is overcome in everyday life through the functioning of mundane reason.

Mundane Reason *and* Epistemic Culture as Theory

The body of knowledge that constitutes our understanding of mundane reason and of epistemic cultures is a socially constructed product. The empirical observations of Pollner (1987) and Knorr-Cetina (1999) are inevitably mediated by our theoretical preconceptions. Among these is Giddens' (1984:xvii) assertion that "Social theory has the task of providing conceptions of the nature of the human social activity and of the human agent which can be placed in the service of empirical work".

However, in a socially constructed world, the relation between theory and practice is a two way process which is illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6   Theory to Practice and Practice to Theory

The subjective world-view through which we perceive data shapes the interpretation of data, while concurrently the data influences our world view. As we conduct research and present the results to colleagues, we initiate a 'reflective conversation' (Astley, 1985). This social process is encapsulated as follows:

> Data can be used effectively as a form of illustration having persuasive appeal
> for a theoretical interpretation…Empirical documentation, in this case, serves
> not as a device for verifying a theory's agreement with objective fact, but as
> rhetorical support in persuading others to adopt a particular world-view.
> Because empirical data is always theory dependent, its main function is to

embellish rather than validate the theory from which it was generated (Astley, 1985:510).

Neither mundane reason or epistemic culture are theory: both are the product of empirical work, but it is proposed that, when combined, they take on a new entity, that is a separate, self-contained, independent existence. The Theory may be articulated as follows:

The Theory of Mundane Reason and Epistemic Culture

Mundane reason is the predominant way of reasoning in the society in which we live. It assumes an objective world "out there" and some of the reasoning devices which support this assumption are known. Society organises itself into multiple epistemic cultures which function to underpin and create mundane reasoning. The differences in the quality of the mundane reasoning in the various epistemic cultures is largely determined by the strength, sophistication and power of the epistemic culture.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate the theory. First consider the courts of law which Pollner (1987) used to demonstrate mundane reasoning. In Western society "justice is blind" – a phrase which asserts the belief that impartial and objective judgements are capable of being made. In some countries, centuries of common law reinforced by the accumulation of statute law have served to provide the foundation for the epistemic culture of the nation state, expressed by citizenship and implying acceptance of the national law and the mundane reasoning upon which it relies to function.

A second example is that of the multiple epistemic cultures within the academic world. Even within the study of management there is no discipline-wide agreement about analytical perspectives, methodology and even what constitutes the study of management itself! However, subgroups within the discipline, often based upon a

professional organisation or journal, converge on a given world view establishing conventions and orthodoxy (Astley, 1985). These are epistemic cultures.

Re-theorising the Communications Process

For sixty years the epistemic cultures of academic marketing and management have embraced a model for the study of communication which was based upon a theory which had no empirical justification .The American academic Wilbur Schramm (Schramm & Roberts, 1971; Schramm, 1948) proposed a model for the study of communication which was intuitively appealing – Figure 7 below.

Figure 7

The Schramm Model of the Communications Process

SENDER ⟶ MESSAGE ⟶ CHANNEL ⟶ RECEIVER

Who   What   How   To Whom

Feedback
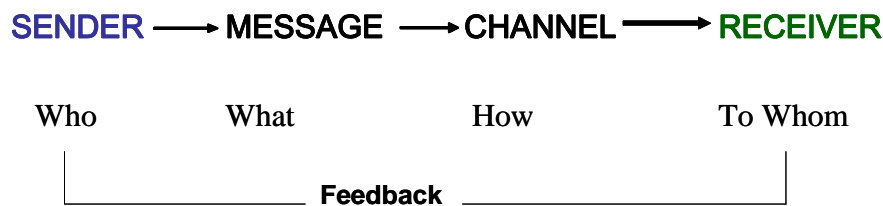
(Schramm, 1960, in DeLozier, 1976)

The power of this model was such that it was adopted by a wide range of academic disciplines. At that time there was some justification for this. The emphasis was on behavioural and cognitive psychology. This approach favours the study of an individual's understanding of communication. Curiously, the 'role' of individuals in aggregate was left to disciplines such as the social and political 'sciences' to think about and theorise upon.

The significance of cultural influences on communication is a comparatively recent phenomenon (Mantovani, 2000; Weinshall, 1993). Given the compartmental isolation of academic thought it is not surprising that academic communication researchers allowed model, such as the Schramm model, to become orthodox in their disciplines.

The problem with orthodoxy is that the deep foundational thinking upon which it was originally built ceases to be questioned. The Schramm model appears to be a case in point and it still remains the starting point for textbooks (the received wisdom) both in management and marketing.

The empirical research on mundane reasoning and epistemic culture, which was not carried out with this model in mind, exposes a basic flaw in the assumptions of the Schramm model.

The Schramm model is, itself, the product of mundane reasoning which accounts for its natural common sense attraction. Communication is not a simple dialogic process in which senders and receivers exchange messages so that, through feedback it is supposed, mutual understanding results.

The theory of mundane reasoning *and* epistemic culture offers an alternative for the study of communication. The basic model may be expressed as follows – Figure 8.

Figure 8 Epistemic Culture as a context within which Mundane Reason takes place

EC

MR

I¹   **I²**
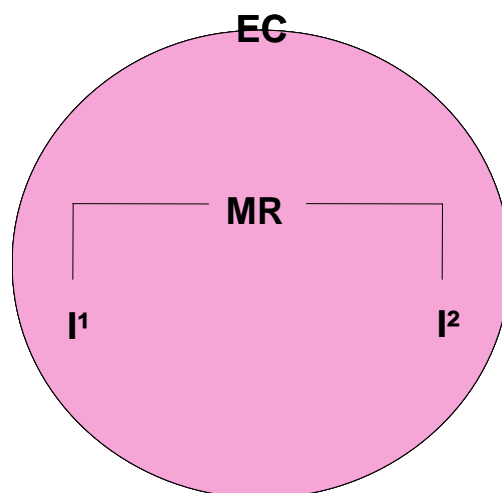
Individual (I¹) communicates with Individual (I²) through mundane reason (MR) which is shaped by the epistemic culture (EC) of each individual.

A basic formula to analyse communications would look like this:

$$\textbf{C = MR} \quad\rule[0.5ex]{2em}{0.4pt}\quad \boxed{\textbf{EC}}$$
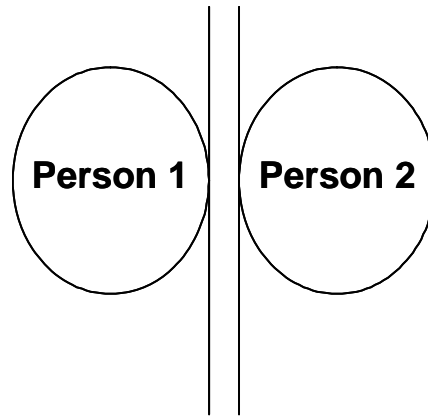
Where   C = Communication

     MR = Mundane Reason

     EC = Epistemic Culture

The Theory in Action.

Let us return to the Schramm model and apply the formula as above: **C = MR** ─ **EC**
The sender sends a message. In order to send the message it will be given a factual status, according to the mundane reasoning of the sender's MR group and also the kind of knowledge that is legitimated and valued within the sender's epistemic culture. Where these are shared with the receiver, then communication is happening within the same basic framework that allows the same descriptions to become factual in nature. In other words, person one can talk to person two (either verbally or in print) in a way that each reasons like the other and each acquires and values knowledge in the same way. There are no reasoning or epistemic cultural barriers to the communication.

If, however these conditions were not met, then there are several 'thick' barriers to the communication as soon as the message leaves the sender. The first barrier is the journey of the message through the communication channel. The metaphor is a one way street with cars coming in both directions. They are busy avoiding both each other and a collision. It is very likely that communication is something like the "1+1 =1" picture as in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Each person is communicating within the vacuum of a different MR and EC

Moving on to the feedback loop featured in the Schramm model, we can see that each communicator is in an autopoietic loop. This means that a communication will be self-perpetuating in the sense that it will attempt to preserve the status quo required for mundane reasoning and epistemic culture preservation, illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10   The Communications Process Where MR and EC are Different
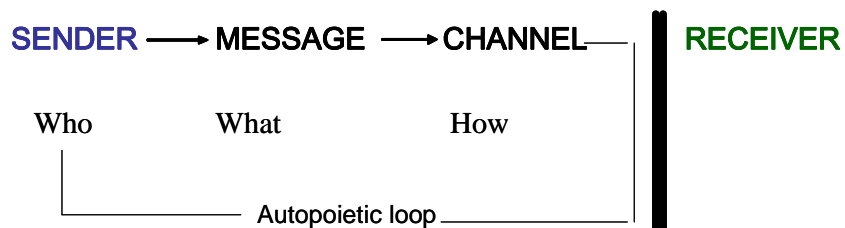
(Schramm, 1960, in DeLozier, 1976)

Going back to the example at the beginning of the paper, the frustration of the senior executives lies with the fact that they have done everything within their power to couch the message in clear terms. Perhaps they have even gone to pains to make the language plain and everyday. Perhaps it is not the language that is the problem. Perhaps it is the organizing frameworks that executives use to give elements of the business strategy factual status. Or maybe the problem lies in the executives' assumption that the work and customer groups share their world of mundane reason

when in fact it is likely that they will use different organizing frameworks to accord factual status.

Conclusion

Why, one may ask, did this paper not start with an exposition of the formula:

$$C = MR \longrightarrow \boxed{EC}$$

The reason is that academics in our discipline depend on the mundane reasoning of the management academic epistemic culture for these ideas to be communicated.

Only when this has been pointed out, such as through the argument in this paper, are we able to strip away the building blocks of traditional representation. These often obscure understanding between individuals. An awareness of this helps us move towards a common understanding by recognising this new basic formula which is drawn to our attention by empirical research. The potential for applying this formula to other disciplines, such as communications and engineering, is both promising and exciting. At the very least, the theory of mundane reason *and* epistemic culture should send unsophisticated models like Schramm back to the drawing board.

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