

Developing a Field with More Soul: Standpoint Theory and Public Policy
Research for Management Scholars

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DEVELOPING A FIELD WITH MORE SOUL: STANDPOINT THEORY AND PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH FOR MANAGEMENT SCHOLARS

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We believe that the question put to us (whether we should be more involved in scholarship and research that is relevant to public policy) is of paramount importance for the development of the Academy of Management (AOM) and for each of us as scholars of management. We live in a world of immense and unnecessary suffering and destruction. Immense: this needs no explanation; this season's news reports suffice. Unnecessary: much human suffering and environmental destruction are not the inevitable result of our earthly existence but are rather of humanity's own making. They are the result of wanton exploitation and, therefore, are remediable. Facing this human-made misery, a posture of quiet acceptance would mean tacit endorsement. In our view, this position cannot be defended ethically. The ethical imperative is even greater for people like us whose comfort is due, in part, to these processes of exploitation. If we must choose action over inaction, then what type of involvement would put us on the right side of the issues and would help us contribute to solving such problems?

The stakes associated with these questions, as highlighted in the editors' introduction to this *Academy of Management Journal* forum, involve esteem and funding for our profession and its members. More importantly, the questions also raise provocative ethical issues about the nature of the profession and about the research each of us undertakes. Attempting to answer these questions brings us face-to-face with some of the thorniest issues in contemporary philosophy of science—and with some severe limitations of management research as it is currently practiced.

The “AOM Code of Ethical Conduct” and Research in Management and Organization

It is against this backdrop of exploitation, suffering, and destruction that we find inspiration in the “AOM Code of Ethical Conduct,” which includes the statement, “Members of the Academy can play

a vital role in encouraging a broader horizon for decision making, by viewing issues from a multiplicity of perspectives, including the perspectives of those who are the least advantaged.” How successful are we as a community of scholars and educators in articulating the perspectives of the least advantaged, understood as exploited people and natural environments? This is an enormous question and one that we raise here to provoke thinking more than to provide a complete answer.

Let us start with some data. In a recent study, Walsh, Weber, and Margolis (2003) coded every empirical article published in *AMJ* and its predecessor, the *Journal of the Academy of Management*, for the years 1958–2000. Using an expansive definition, they classified each dependent variable as *welfare* if it addressed any facet of health, satisfaction, justice, social responsibility, or environmental stewardship. They classified the dependent variable as *performance* if it addressed technical, accounting, or financial performance at any level of aggregation. Over this period, some 13 percent of articles addressed welfare but not performance; 22 percent addressed performance but not welfare; 7 percent addressed both; and 58 percent addressed neither. The trend is even more telling: since 1978 the proportion of articles that have addressed welfare of any kind at any level of aggregation (with or without addressing performance) has declined almost continuously from a high of around 32 percent to an average of around 15 percent in the last five years of Walsh and colleagues' period of study. The proportion that addressed performance has grown continuously. These data may not be definitive but do lend credence to Walsh et al.'s conclusion that our research has focused little—and progressively less—on the social welfare objectives of enterprise. To the extent that this pattern is a valid estimate of tendencies in one of the field's flagship journals, it raises questions about the values and politics that generate this set of research priorities and about the interests that are served by this emphasis.

In a study of a similar type, but focused on the natural environment, Jermier, Forbes, Benn, and Orsato (2006) found rapid increases in the absolute numbers of scholarly articles published on environment-related topics over the period 1990–2004.¹ However, even for the most recent period, 2000–2004, articles on environmental topics constituted only a tiny proportion of the total published—about 1 percent. This same tiny ratio also characterized the 15 top-rated management and organizational studies journals for the years 1996–2004. (Ratings of the journals were based on the citation impact quotient in the *Social Science Citation Index* for the year 2004.) This means that for every study on an environment-related topic in the management and organizations literature, there are 99 others that do not significantly address environmental issues. In light of the rapid and continual deterioration of the health of our ecosystems, this pattern again raises questions about the field's research priorities and the interests being served by this emphasis.

If the pattern that is reflected in these two studies accurately gauges tendencies in the management and organizational research literature, it is difficult to see how we are advancing the perspectives of the least advantaged. Without a strong articulation of these perspectives, we are limited in our ability to contribute positively to public policy, which surely depends on fuller knowledge about social and environmental problems. How can we do better?

Alternative Standpoints and Conscious Engagement with Public Policy Issues

The main point of our commentary is that entanglement with public policy issues is inevitable in our field, but this entanglement is often unrecognized. Bill Ouchi's recent work devoted to remedying problems in public education in the United States is one good example of how management research can consciously and explicitly speak to pressing issues of public concern. However, all management research inevitably implies political values and, therefore, has implications for public policy.

We realize that this point of view will seem misguided to some readers. Many management scholars believe that all forms of partisanship should be purged from scientific research and theory development. They contend that politics should not enter into processes of knowledge creation, and many hold that it is inappropriate for scholars to engage actively in the application of knowledge. They believe that value-neutral objectivity is the hallmark

of proper scientific work and that advocacy would undermine that objectivity.

We urge our colleagues to consider another view, one that is more skeptical of the goal of value neutrality and that advocates *reflexive inquiry* about the values underwriting our work. In a world with so much unnecessary suffering and destruction, Agger's critique of value neutrality rings loudly: "The seeming avoidance of values is the strongest value commitment of all" (1991: 111). Various writers in the philosophy of science have addressed the question of values; one of the best-developed approaches is *standpoint theory* (see Anderson [2004] for an overview and a comparison with other epistemologies). Standpoint theory challenges aspirations of value neutrality with the argument that these aspirations require scientists to "do the God trick" or adopt a "view from nowhere" (see Harding, 2004a). That is, they require scholars to speak authoritatively and without bias, and to do so as if from no particular human position or social location. Standpoint theorists contend that this is impossible. They argue that objectivity and understanding are better served if we are aware of, and make explicit, our epistemological and political baggage rather than deny we carry any (cf. Kinchloe & McLaren, 1994). Because there are no facts without theories, and because all theories are based on a standpoint that is shaped (at least in part) by political considerations, scholars should reflect on their underlying epistemological assumptions and develop an awareness of their standpoints. It also follows that we should consciously choose our standpoints and take responsibility for the impact (or lack of impact) of our scholarship on the world.

Standpoint theory advocates challenge conventional research philosophy, arguing that if our research is going to help alleviate, rather than ignore or exacerbate, the human-made suffering and destruction around us, our concern for this suffering and destruction should guide the entire research process. According to standpoint theory, all the phases of a research study—identifying issues, theorizing research questions, gathering and analyzing data, drawing conclusions, and using the knowledge produced—are conditioned to some extent by the researcher's standpoint (Jermier, 1998). Deeper and more objective knowledge results not from attempting to eliminate politics from science but from embracing politics and reflexively (consciously) adopting an appropriate standpoint.

But what standpoint should we adopt? To adopt dominant elite standpoints inevitably encourages legitimization and naturalization of the status quo, creating unacceptable limits to what can be learned and what change is possible. The standpoint theory

¹ Data were from the ABI/Inform ProQuest Database.

argument is that although all standpoints are limiting and all knowledge is partial, the view “from below” has greater potential to generate more complete and more objective knowledge claims. As Harding put it, research should begin with the concrete circumstances and lived experiences of the “systematically oppressed, exploited and dominated, those who have fewer interests in ignorance about how the social order actually works” (1991: 150). That is, if our desire is to heal the world, we will learn more about how the root mechanisms of the world work and about how things can be changed by adopting the standpoints of those people and other parts of nature that most deeply suffer its wounds.²

Standpoint theory thus provides guidance for where to begin inquiry and what and how to study. Its primary recommendation is for researchers to “study up” (to begin with the exploited) with the intent of mapping the ways “dominant institutions and their conceptual frameworks create and maintain oppressive social relations” (Harding, 2004b: 31; also see Wedel, Shore, Feldman, & Lathrop, 2005). Our goal should be to create knowledge that raises consciousness about exploitation and helps movement toward emancipation.

Some readers might think our mandate as scholars of management requires us to choose the standpoint of managers. Some might argue that researchers who place such emphasis on social and environmental issues are simply in the wrong field. Some might assert that our primary audience (outside of academics) is managers themselves, and that managers are obligated by their fiduciary responsibilities to consider social and environmental issues if and only if they promote short-run profit maximization. We are all familiar with arguments that society is best served when firms maximize profits and leave welfare concerns to philanthropists, government, and civil society. This line of argument is neither theoretically nor practically defensible, especially in the face of evidence that such an approach endangers the planet and that business performance itself is enhanced when managers are accountable to a broader range of stakeholders (e.g., Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003). Managers’ lives

may not be made easier by a greater awareness of issues as they are experienced and interpreted by the exploited; but as managers, as employees themselves (in most cases), and as human beings, they owe the exploited their solidarity—even if they are simultaneously tugged in other directions.

As management scholars, therefore, we see no reason why much more of our research might not take as its primary referent exploited groups and the broader abused natural environment. Clearly, fields that rely only or primarily on elite standpoints have blind spots that fields with a more pluralistic epistemology are able to avoid. There is, therefore, good reason to encourage more management scholarship that takes alternative standpoints, such as those of lower-level employees, women in poverty, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, disadvantaged communities, and the natural environment. We believe that there is much to be learned if we begin the research process by formulating questions from these alternative standpoints and then examine the reality of management and organizations from these perspectives. This seems entirely consistent with the letter and spirit of the “AOM Code of Ethical Conduct” referenced above.

If this epistemological pluralism were taken seriously,³ we could expect to witness the development of a field with more soul. We could expect to find more management research motivated by the desire to understand the challenges facing, for example, union organizers, or low-wage women workers, or undocumented immigrant laborers, or local community activists fighting a polluting factory—topics central to discussions of contemporary social and environmental policy. Thus, even if our specific expertise may not often equip us to work *directly* on public policy problems, our research always has public policy *implications*, and it can provide actionable knowledge for the exploited and their advocates. In this way, it can promote more just and more democratic public policy debate.

A more complicated issue is how private and public policy makers might use knowledge that is produced from alternative standpoints and that has an underlying emancipatory intent. Some advocates of the exploited might fear appropriation or cooptation; we see a greater probability that this type of knowledge would persuade some elites (even owners and corporate managers, who are far from monolithic in their values and interests) to

² We advocate standpoint epistemology because it provokes thinking about the sometimes hidden and otherwise unexamined assumptions that can guide scholarly inquiry and because it makes a reasoned case for working with alternative assumptions and exploited referents. In the space available for this commentary we cannot do justice to the complex philosophical issues involved in affiliating with the exploited (see Harding, 2004a).

³ And here we want to be clear that by epistemology we refer to whole domain of research methodology, and not merely whether we choose quantitative or qualitative data analysis—see Harding (2004b)

take enlightened steps in the direction of humane and ecocentric policy making.

By way of illustration, consider a program of research by social scientist Al Gedicks. This research begins from an explicit standpoint, is driven by an emancipatory intent, and has both scientific and activist objectives. Gedicks (2004) described his involvement as a researcher, consultant, and advocate for the native Sakogon Ojibwe people of Wisconsin in their successful struggle against Exxon and BHP Billiton. This struggle involved an unusual alliance of Native American, environmental, and sportfishing interests. Gedicks's account highlights a different way in which scientists can contribute to public policy: not as servants of elite power, but as a resource helping to empower other actors by amplifying their voices in policy debates and building supportive action networks.

Our research community faces some challenges when it comes to steering the discipline in the direction of greater positive impact on a broader range of public policy issues. First, the prevailing philosophy of science tends to emphasize disengagement with the real world of politics in favor of attempts at value neutrality and nonpartisan objectivity. Although this philosophy of science still garners respect and seems attainable, it is inevitably misleading because all research has a political dimension. All research moves in the direction of either reinforcing or undermining existing relations of power, even if the researchers are not aware of these possible impacts. Second, where there is intentional engagement with the real world of politics, it appears more often to be on behalf of managers as agents of owners and other elites. The standpoints that are adopted (implicitly or explicitly) make it more likely that the knowledge produced will be useful to the relatively privileged rather than helpful in generating policy to protect the less privileged and the natural environment. The "AOM Code of Ethical Conduct," which encourages a multiplicity of perspectives, should serve as a basis for more reflexive inquiry and more progressive contributions to public policy.

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