One Sociologist's Reply to Wieland's Review Essay

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use words as bludgeons or beatitudes rather than as instruments of exact communication.

The terminology of the so-called "behavior sciences" is, as yet, far from behaving scientifically, i.e. from being exact. This imprecision tends to "spill over" into the discussion of management. The ambivalence already noted in using the term "organization" is a fruitful source of confusion and conflict, not about the facts, but merely about the labels used to indicate the facts.

Is it not time that management had a terminology of its own, free from the semantic immaturities of many of the underlying "disciplines"? Indeed is not "discipline" itself too flattering a title for bodies of knowledge whose terminology is still unstandardized and in disarray? In the study of and writing about management itself, ambivalence in using the term "organization" has led to incalculable, and quite unnecessary, conflict and confusion.

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One Sociologist’s Reply to Wieland's Review Essay

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George Wieland’s survey of organization sociology texts represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the essential nature of sociology that distinguishes it from other academic disciplines and psychology in particular. Wieland’s confusion probably represents the management field's thinking about organization sociology.

Wieland’s review of organization sociology texts (9) is reminiscent of My Fair Lady’s ‘enry ‘ig-gins who lamented that women weren’t just like

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men. Wieland’s chief complaint is that organization sociologists aren’t just like organization psychologists, whom he much prefers. His particular regret is that organization sociologists do not focus upon individual personalities and attitudes within organizations. This is rather like regretting that botanists do not study electrons. It misses the very point of sociology which is to purposely ignore individual personalities and biographies while examining causes of behavior at the level of structure, environment, goals and tasks. We learn some things about behavior in organizations when psychologists study individuals. We learn other things when sociologists look at whole systems where the uniqueness of people and their motives wash out in larger causal patterns. Sociology is not psychology aggregated. 1

Wieland’s pleasure, measured by the frequency of his approving adjectives, increased as a reviewed organization sociology text approached the psychological perspective. Conversely, if a text asserted the behavioral effects of structure, Wieland considered it an unfortunate failure. If he allowed that structural variables are in any way relevant to the behavior of people in organizations, it wasn’t revealed in his review essay.

Behind Wieland’s distress, that sociologists are not more like psychologists, is his fondness for manipulation and “management sanctioned modes of behavior”. He discovered that organization sociology texts do not deal with ways for aspiring managers to manipulate employees. Indeed, they are sadly lacking in tips and tools for guiding “sanctioned” behavior. Wieland’s disappointment is surprising for he wrote his review at the crest of the Watergate scandal, the lesson of which was that we have had enough of manipulation and sanctioned behaviors, whether in government presentations or management tool kits.

**The Long, Slow Curve . . .**

Wieland’s next complaint is that sociologists mostly study what he considers to be “trivial” or-

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1 For a longer discussion of the difficulty which students of management have in appreciating the crucial distinction between sociology and psychology, see Charles Perrow (4).
have access to corporate samples while sociologists are largely limited to Wieland’s so-called “trivial” organizations.

Another crucial distinction between organization sociology and organization psychology is that the former is essentially scholarly while the latter is largely ameliorative. Indeed, organization psychology owes part of its development as an academic discipline to the patronage and access rights granted by corporate managers. These managers are faced with nagging, elusive “people” problems: performance, turnover, absenteeism, and communication. They need to have their problems solved quickly so they can get on with the running of organizations. Quite naturally they do not want to hear a sociologist explain that the chief hope for, say, increasing production on a sustained basis is to alter work flows or company structure. They prefer the more immediate fix-it remedies of vagrant snake oil peddlers who tell them what they can afford to hear, which is that solutions are available without changing much about the basic settings of the problems. Sociologists, by contrast, are rather touchy about being co-opted by research subjects; they are wary of unwittingly moving from the role of investigator into the role of apologist or trouble-shooter.

Wieland also complained that organization sociology is steeped in abstract concepts while lacking empirical data. Considering the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, this curious lament exposes either his ignorance of the sociology literature or his intractable preference for the psychological perspective. Indeed, his own resistance to the idea of structural effects on behavior is made in the face of the voluminous empirical works of Pugh (6, 7, 8), Woodward (10), or Blau and Schoenherr (1) to name but a few of the prominent studies of structure and organization behavior.

Sociology, in reality, suffers from a lack of well defined concepts at the very time it is fairly smothered by a surfeit of empirical analyses that are impotently limited to a concrete level. Abstract concepts are the building blocks of theory. Theory building is a particular application of the process of abstracting from experience and perceptions into higher level concepts. It is also the essence of the academic research enterprise. Sociologists, therefore, tend to be “academic” in the sense that they are more concerned with how organizations actually work than in helping them to work better. One precedes the other; students of organization cannot help organizations until they can understand them. To understand organizations requires better theories than we now have: theories about the effect of organizations on people and of people on organizations, and theories about the way organizations grow and change across time.

Not needed now in organization theory building are mountains of data from more one-shot case studies (2) based upon attitudinal responses to questionnaires. Nor do we need more data from replication studies that predictably support our pet notions (3). Science does not advance by deliberately supportive replications but by deliberate attempts at disproof (5).

Wieland needles the authors of organization sociology texts for not being at the top of management reading lists. They are not, of course, precisely because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of sociology perpetuated in the management community by essays such as Wieland’s. His very arrogance on this point is at once amusing and regrettable. The damage it does is not to sociology but to management’s understanding of its own working world. The insights and analytic models developed by organization sociology could greatly help in the refinement of management theory. However, management theorists and clinicians will have to listen closely, for sociologists are a quiet and gentle folk not given to huckstering their lore. Not clearly seeing the level at which sociology actually works, many students of management may be condemning it for failures to do things that are not a part of sociology at all.

... And Then the Fast Break

To return the needling, the most notable
thing about management schools, in a sociological perspective, is that they are in the curious position of building their curricula around leadership, while an essential fact of organization life for most of their graduates is followership. The ferment of ideas and action in the business world is unlikely to come from the narrowly specialized products of management departments. Rather, it will come from the young entrepreneurs in bib overalls who were too bright for an anesthetizing regimen of managerial grids or social responsibility doctrine. Having started their own businesses from scratch, they will someday be hiring business graduates but only to find tax loopholes or optimize inventories.

The sort of hollow rhetoric that keeps sociologists far, far away from their brethren in management departments is captured in Wieland’s patronizing conclusion that “it is possible to agree (with Argyris) that the scientific understanding of organizations can benefit from experimentation and the creation of new organization forms.” For sheer vacuity that statement is right up there with “there’s always room for improvement” or “what we need are better leaders”. It is, however, possible to agree that the scientific understanding of organizations can benefit from a close examination of the anti-intellectualism which is perhaps unfairly the public symbol of management departments, if Wieland’s essay is representative of the quality of their thinking. Hopefully, for the sake of management theory, it isn’t.

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