A VOLUME IN QUALITATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

Qualitative Organizational Research

Best Papers from the Davis Conference on Qualitative Research
Volume III

edited by
Beth A. Bechky
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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress
http://www.loc.gov

ISBN: 978-1-68123-390-1 (Paperback)
978-1-68123-391-8 (Hardcover)
978-1-68123-392-5 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

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A volume in
Qualitative Organizational Research
Jean M. Bartunek, Kimberly D. Elsbach, and John A. Wagner, *Series Editors*

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CHAPTER 1

BOUNDARIES, BODIES, AND BELIEFS

Social Relations in Work and Organizations

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The third volume of collected best papers from the Davis Conference on Qualitative Research demonstrates the benefits that qualitative methods provide for understanding organizations. Qualitative investigation generates data that is rooted in close accounts of action, lived experience, and examinations of meaning and process. Through their participation, observation, and interviewing, scholars explore firsthand the nature of social relations. One of the rewards of observing and talking to people about their work lives is that we have the opportunity to unpack how social interactions play out between people, and across time and space.

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By being present in the organizations they studied, our chapter contributors gained insight into social dynamics along three main lines of inquiry: boundaries, bodies, and beliefs. These investigations help us understand the ways in which people navigate boundaries in organizations, projects, and careers. They describe the embodied, lived experience of working in organizations as varied as construction sites, choral groups, and hospitals; and they explore the dynamics that unfold as people enact their beliefs in their daily work lives.

BOUNDARIES

Social and symbolic boundaries are increasingly important to how we understand the relationships between people and organizations (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). The boundaries created within and between organizations, occupations, and industries can have significant impact on how people work, learn, feel, and act in organizations. In this volume, four chapters explore what happens in interactions that span, create, or result from boundaries.

First, two chapters describe how indistinct boundaries influence knowledge and jurisdiction in fields: Andrew Nelson (Chapter 3) describes the university/industry differences that characterize scientific fields of collaboration, while Steve Kahl and Greg Liegel (Chapter 4) uncover the overlapping occupational jurisdictions resulting from the spread of computers in organizations.

In Chapter 3, Andrew Nelson explores how university and industry research collaborations affected the diffusion of knowledge in the field of rDNA and PCR. He shows that the boundary between university and industry science is much more indistinct and permeable than prior scholars suggest. Specifically, he finds that scientific collaborations in rDNA and PCR research brought together scientists with unique capabilities who engaged in two-way exchanges of tacit knowledge at the lab bench. These collaborations enabled scientists to not merely diffuse knowledge through contagion, but to advance skills and knowledge through mutation of techniques across projects. The permeability of the boundary between industry and university science enabled collaborations that were geared toward advancing the knowledge of a scientific field rather than focusing on either scientific credit or commercial interests.

Steve Kahl and Greg Liegel (Chapter 4) focus on a different type of indistinct boundary, one between the occupations involved in managing computer systems in business organizations. They address the emergence of programming work, and show that by looking at the historical record of how the different computer occupations evolved within organizations, we can better understand why programmers failed to professionalize. Kahl

and Liegel take the perspective that the social relations associated with the adoption and implementation of computer technologies shaped the boundaries of the programming profession. Specifically, they show that the work of programming emerged at a time when computer use in business organizations was shifting due to changing technologies. In the 1950s, data processing comprised occupations such as systems men, who planned the computer work, machine accountants who managed the physical interface, and clerical workers who punched the cards. These three occupations worked together, and their tasks largely overlapped. When computers evolved and software became a distinct subsystem of the technology in the late 1950s and early 1960s, computer programmers were also needed in business organizations. However, at this time computers were modularizing, and programming work split into different subtasks: different knowledge was needed to do applications programming, systems programming, and data communications. This fragmentation of programming work, combined with the already crowded and overlapping field of systems men, machine accountants, and clerical workers, meant that outsiders to the data processing department had trouble differentiating who was doing what. As a consequence, programmers couldn't define a core body of knowledge, and failed to establish a strong boundary around their jurisdiction. Understanding the indistinct occupational boundaries in the field of programming demonstrates why programmers were unable to professionalize.

These two chapters show how properties of boundaries across occupations and social groups influence field level outcomes such as knowledge production and professionalization. In Nelson's study, the joint research conducted in collaborations across industry and university boundaries resulted in advancement for the field, regardless of group norms. The blurring of boundaries in the field of business computing was not as clearly beneficial for computer programmers, who had trouble advancing their occupational goals because they could not distinctly demarcate their work.

Second, two chapters investigate how crossing boundaries of space and class influences work and knowledge: Natasha Iskander and Nichola Lowe (Chapter 5) describe the local work economies that affect the work experiences of construction workers in Mexico and the United States, and Lauren Rivera (Chapter 9) examines class differences that create expectations in hiring for elite legal and consulting jobs.

Rivera (Chapter 9) shows that the class boundary faced by less privileged college and graduate school students manifests as a social barrier to entry into elite jobs. These jobs tend to reproduce class differences because elite firms hire students from elite schools, who tend to come from families at the top of the economic hierarchy. However, through her qualitative study of employers and applicants, Rivera uncovers the ways that some students with less priveleged socioeconomic backgrounds successfully break through to

elite jobs. Job applicants who surmounted this barrier negotiated their way through the hiring process by engaging in a set of behavioral strategies that helped them meet interviewers' expectations. These strategies included absorbing cultural knowledge through exposure earlier in their schooling, being coached by cultural insiders on appropriate ways to socialize in an interview, mimicking elite friends' and roommates' behaviors, caricaturing their differences from elites, or being sponsored by organizations that compensated for their differences such as Sponsors for Educational Opportunity. In this study, she shows how moving into a new occupational milieu requires job seekers to learn through their social relationships.

In contrast, Iskander and Lowe's study (Chapter 5) focuses primarily on how immigrants' movement into new local communities to obtain jobs changes the way they develop skill and knowledge about the work itself. Her ethnographic work in Philadelphia and Raleigh-Durham points to institutional differences in the local construction market that significantly influenced the learning of immigrant construction workers. In Philadelphia, Mexican immigrants worked in the informal, low-end housing rehabilitation market, and were mostly left alone by the site managers to work as a team, much the way they worked on buildings in Mexico. In contrast, in Raleigh-Durham immigrants were employed in commercial and large-scale residential construction, and were therefore constrained by formal job structures, rigid hierarchies, and narrow tasks. Iskander finds that these institutional differences resulted in early gains in tacit knowledge, which were shared among teammates in Philadelphia, while in Raleigh-Durham, knowledge was not transformed until immigrants rose in the formal job hierarchy.

In the case of elite hiring, Rivera's study demonstrates that crossing a class boundary requires drawing on established and new social relations to provide opportunities and models for behavior. In Iskander and Lowe's work on Mexican immigrants, the workers use their social relations within work teams to learn how to transform their knowledge from one context to the next. In both cases, successful action across a significant social boundary requires mobilizing social relations to learn and develop new attitudes and skills.

BODIES

In a second line of inquiry, several chapters in the volume discuss the importance of understanding how our bodies are relevant to our work in organizations. How we experience the world is mediated by our physical interaction with it, which affects meanings in organizations (Ashcraft, 2013). Although compared to 50 or 60 years ago, today's workers are much less

likely to engage in physical labor, this does not mean their work requires no bodily engagement. As Heaphy, Locke, and Booth point out in Chapter 6, "a worker's body is always still present when he or she is working" (Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 55). Thus, while we no longer need to study work in the manner of Frederick Taylor's time and motion studies in order to maximize the efficiency of physical labor, we still need to better understand the role of embodied work in today's organizations. As the chapters in this theme illustrate, such understanding can be best developed through spending extended time with informants, watching and discussing their work lives.

For example, in Chapter 6, Emily Heaphy, Karen Locke, and Brandy Booth describe the embodied relational competence that enables patient advocates to span the boundary between hospital staff and patients and their families. While the literature suggests that structures, differentiated roles, and enduring relationships often help boundary spanners succeed in gathering information, Heaphy's experience shadowing and interviewing patient advocates cued her into investigating the bodily competence of boundary spanners. She noticed that advocates talked about embodied experiences such as touching patients, reflecting on their physical relationships to others in their work, and even physically responding to interview questions about their work. These experiences suggested that the advocates' embodied relational competence, an attunement to the bodies and emotions of others and self, enabled them to become successful boundary spanners in their work setting. Further, it illuminated an aspect of work that is largely hidden in our research and teaching about work.

Taking the notion of embodied competence a step further, in Chapter 8, John Paul Stephens examines how an amateur choral group developed and used tacit, embodied cues to help them achieve the aesthetic goal of a "beautiful performance." Similar to other types of "action teams" (e.g., firefighting teams, surgery teams), choral groups need to coordinate and adapt their actions in a dynamic environment, responding to cues within and outside the team environment. Yet, different from these more traditional action teams, choral groups are working toward an ill-defined and highly subjective goal (i.e., there is no agreement about the "best" way to perform Verdi's Requiem). Instead, members of choral groups rely on tacit "feelings" to determine if something is right or wrong, and if they need to adapt their own performance. Stephens reports that many of these "feelings" were both physically felt by members and physically communicated by other singers and the conductor. For example, if the alto section missed their entrance to a piece because their timing was off, this became evident from the physical cues given by others such as scowls from the conductor or hurried entrances by other singers. Further, in response, singers experienced their own emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions, such as surprise or physical withdrawal, that served as additional embodied cues. Together,

these observed and felt bodily cues helped the group adapt quickly and flexibly to the situation both through rehearsal and performance. By closely watching and engaging in the activities of the choral group, Stephens is able to explicate the agility with which action groups (even those with subjective and ill-defined goals) can adapt in pursuit of a collective goal. Relying on and using embodied cues is part of what makes that possible.

BELIEFS

A third line of inquiry in which qualitative research can shine a light on organizations is by demonstrating how social relations at work create beliefs and meaning for workers. Uncovering beliefs and meaning requires delving into how people experience and make sense of organizations, which often can only be accomplished through watching and asking questions. Two papers in this volume explore how work experiences and social relations condition people's beliefs about their work and themselves. These include hospital cleaners' feelings of being valued and devalued at work (Debebe, Dutton, & Wriezniewski, Chapter 2), and service professionals' understandings of availability and professionalism (Mazmanian & Erickson, Chapter 7).

In Chapter 2, Jane Dutton, Gelaye Debebe, and Amy Wrzesniewski describe how hospital custodial staff perceive their self-worth through their interactions at work. In some cases, these interactions led staff members to feel devalued and perceive that others in the work arena, such as doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors, saw them as "unimportant." Interactions where cleaners' presence was unrecognized, as when others blocked the path of their work, were commonly reported as silent signals of their unworthiness. More overt signals of cleaners' unimportance came from doctors' or nurses' direct complaints about room cleanliness, negative evaluations of cleaners' work to supervisors, and acts of disrespect that made cleaners' jobs more difficult, such as throwing items on the floor. At the same time, there were also interactions that communicated worthiness to hospital cleaners, including doctors, nurses, and patients' recognition of cleaners' presence, treatment of cleaners as in-group members, making cleaners' jobs easier, and providing positive and complimentary feedback to cleaners. Together, these findings illustrate the powerful nature of brief interactions in creating beliefs about a group's societal value and worth, and show that through our enactments of our work and roles, we can create more positive beliefs at work.

In their chapter, Melissa Mazmanian and Ingrid Erickson (Chapter 7) focus their analysis on how technology enabling temporal availability has influenced service professionals' behavior and beliefs about what it means

to be professional. Specifically, in observing and talking with various types of service professionals, including lawyers, investment bankers, hotel managers, and hotel and footwear sales representatives, they noticed that these professionals were concerned about the speeding up of their professional lives. This phenomenon was not limited to the introduction of smartphones but included fax machines, FedEx weekend deliveries, and other aspects of what Mazmanian and Erickson label the "marketplace of availability." They show how being continuously available to clients has been normalized across a variety of professions. The belief in availability as a proxy for professionalism, while not universally accepted by their informants, has implications at multiple levels of social relations. Not only does it alter the balance of power professionals perceive in their relationships with their clients, it impacts their work/home life balance and is changing the landscape of the professional economy.

CONCLUSION

The papers in this volume show that with a close exploration of meaning, process, and work experiences we can learn a tremendous amount about organizations. By tracing what people do when they encounter an organizational, occupational, or work related boundary, the authors of these chapters help us understand how projects create learning, professions fail to coalesce, and people obtain jobs and skills. Other authors focused on the embodied aspects of work, which creates new understandings of how attending to the movements and feelings of others helps move work forward both for individuals and in groups. Finally, the chapters exploring the dynamics of meaning and belief in workplaces leads us to a richer understanding of how we create feelings of value and availability at work.

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CHAPTER 2

BEING VALUED AND DEVALUED AT WORK

A Social Valuing Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how people who clean hospitals experience everyday interactions as both occasions in which their value as individuals is diminished and as occasions in which their value is enhanced. The core of the paper focuses on the different ways that interactions with others grant or deny felt worth. We use stories told by hospital cleaners to build a description of the valuing and devaluing acts that help to compose the meaning that people derive from their work. We use the cleaners' vivid and deeply felt accounts to

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build a framework to describe key elements in the social valuing process that takes place at work.

In most jobs, the conduct of work requires interaction with others. Interactions with peers make jobs less boring (Roy, 1959) and have consistent effects on work attitudes, withdrawal, and effectiveness (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Interactions with bosses incite fear or inspire nurturing (Jackall, 1988). Interactions with clients and customers provide enjoyment (Cohen & Sutton, 1998; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988) as well as provoke anger and frustration (Hochschild, 1983), affecting the overall quality of one's experience at work. This paper builds on a line of research on how interactions with others shape employees' feelings at work. We began with a simple research question: How do people doing hospital cleaning work feel about doing this kind of work, and how do other people at work affect the experience of this job?

Our initial question was descriptive and consistent with sociologists (e.g., Gold, 1964; Hughes, 1971; Perry, 1978) and organizational researchers (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) interested in how individuals react to doing "dirty work" in organizations. Dirty work is a term used by sociologists to describe work that is experienced as onerous and odious as judged by self, colleagues, and co-workers (Emerson & Pollner, 1975). Using an analysis of the stories told by hospital cleaners in a large university setting about their experience of this work, we develop a perspective that focuses on the process of social valuing that occurs in interactions with others at work. Using a grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we build a social valuing perspective for understanding how individuals derive a sense of worth on the job. While this perspective is built from a study of one type of job, social valuing provides a way of thinking about how interactions with others compose felt worth at work that pertains to a variety of different kinds of work in organizations.

A social valuing framework proposes that employees actively interpret the meaning of how others treat them at work to gauge a sense of worth. Felt worth describes individuals' sense of importance accorded to them by others. Felt worth is similar to the idea of conferred status from sociology, by assuming that one is granted a social good (status) based on others' level of regard for who one is and what one does (Kemper, 1972). Felt worth is similar to the idea of self-esteem from psychology (e.g., Rosenberg, 1979; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) in capturing individuals' beliefs about their significance in the eyes of others. Felt worth captures an individual's cognitions and feelings about the level of regard that others accord him or her as opposed to a more internally-held belief about one's own worth (self-esteem). We argue that felt worth is a fundamental gauge of social inclusion

and respect from others. In Goffman's terms (1956), felt worth indicates the degree of sacredness granted to the self by others.

The social valuing perspective suggests that felt worth is composed daily on the job as individuals interact with others at work. During the course of the work day, everyday encounters turn into valuing acts. Consistent with the basic premises of symbolic interactionism, we propose that individuals look to the reflected appraisals of others to derive a sense of significance (Cooley, 1902). Interactions with members and non-members of the organization play a part in social valuing. Members of the same group (in this study the relevant groups are doctors, nurses, patients, and patients' families) engage in interactions that are actively interpreted as valuing or devaluing depending on the content and context of the encounter. Aspects of the encounter that seem important include both situational and personal characteristics that allow an individual to infer the motives or the intent of the "other" involved in the interaction. Consistent with attribution theory (Kelley, 1972, Weiner, 1985), when situational constraints cannot account for another's behavior and another's actions are seen as personally rather than situationally motivated, valuing and devaluing is felt more acutely.

Our perspective of the social valuing process is derived from cleaners' stories of their daily workplace interactions. These stories were of two types. The first were stories of interactions in which others engaged in valuing acts, signaling that the cleaner was regarded positively as an individual and a member of the organization. The second were stories of interactions in which others engaged in devaluing acts, signaling that others regard the cleaner as lacking in social worth as a person and a member of the organization. These valuing and devaluing acts reveal two pathways in the social valuing process. One path is comprised of pairs of valuing and devaluing acts that are in converse relationship to each other. The other path is composed of valuing and devaluing acts that appeared to be unique and independent of one another. Thus, acts that are felt and experienced as valuing may not always imply the opposite of acts that are felt and experienced as devaluing, suggesting that valuing and devaluing are related but distinctive social experiences for employees working in this setting. However, a social valuing perspective suggests a coupling between the meaning of other's acts for a person's work and the meaning of the acts for the worth of the person. Work valuing is person valuing. Work devaluing is also person devaluing.

The paper offers five contributions to thinking about how employees experience their work. First, at a very basic level, it introduces ideas from symbolic interactionism for understanding how the meaning of work is constituted in the everyday interactions that occur on the job. It is complementary to our earlier work on interpersonal sensemaking that argues that noticing and interpreting interpersonal actions from others informs how employees make meaning of their jobs, their roles, and themselves (Wrzesniewski,