

Cultivate Interest

Intentionally striving to develop interesting ideas is an important thinking tactic. We have just begun to understand how to develop those ideas. This section relies wholly on Murray Davis's (1971) analysis of interesting theories in social science and what contributes to their appeal. The relevant arguments from Davis's analysis are the following:

- 1 All interesting theories share the quality that they constitute an attack on assumptions taken for granted by an audience.
- 2 People find noninteresting those propositions that affirm their assumption ground (that's obvious), that do not speak to their assumption ground (that's irrelevant), or that deny their assumption ground (that's absurd).
- 3 Laymen and experts have a dilemma that Davis labels *the double dialectic*. Anyone who wishes to assert something that both laymen and experts will find interesting is up against the following situation: "On the one hand, his proposition will interest experts only if it denies the ground assumption of their discipline. On the other hand, his proposition will interest laymen only if it denies a ground assumption of their common sense world. But since the ground assumption of experts is already a denial of a ground assumption of laymen, he will find that any proposition which interests experts (because it denies their ground assumption) will not interest laymen (because it affirms their ground assumption), and vice versa. What will be interesting to one will be obvious to the other" (Davis 1971, p. 331).

Davis suggests 12 categories into which interesting propositions can be sorted; these categories are quite relevant for propositions about organizations. To reconstruct the 12 categories from memory, the reader can use a mnemonic device suggested by Ben Auger, "Go cover faces." Those 12 letters stand for assumptions about:

- 1 Generalization
- 2 Organization
- 3 Causation
- 4 Opposition
- 5 Co-variance
- 6 Co-existence
- 7 Co-relation
- 8 Function
- 9 Abstraction
- 10 Composition
- 11 Evaluation
- 12 Stabilization

When someone makes an assumption about, say, generalization and reads a theory, experiment, survey, case study, or even an opinion that denies that assumption, then the person is apt to respond, "That's interesting." This is most likely if the assumptions are weakly held (Davis 1971, p. 343). We will go through each assumption briefly so that you can see how to work consciously toward developing interesting statements about organizations.

GENERALIZATION

If a person assumes that a phenomenon is local and if it turns out to be general (e.g., Freud asserts that sexual behavior is not confined to adults, it's also found in children) or assumes it to be general and it turns out to be local (e.g., in no other country do people smile as much as people in America do), then that person should find these observations and ideas interesting. The same pattern should hold true concerning organizational theory. If it is assumed that organized anarchies are found only in public-sector organizations (e.g., Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976) and they are in reality found also in private organizations, then those latter observations should be interesting. If hierarchy, an organizational form assumed to be universal, is not found in organizations that are still successful, then this should be interesting (e.g., Maruyama 1974).

The same determinants of interest should also hold true for practicing managers. This is where the power of Davis's suggestions becomes even more apparent. All people in organizations have assumptions and things they take for granted, and all of those assumptions contain some hint of extent or pervasiveness in them. Any assumption, be it "organizations are incapable of admitting it when they make a mistake" or "organizations are obsessed with forming committees," is assumed to hold true for everyone or someone or some group in between. Whatever the assumed scope of generality, data that

deny that scope should be interesting. Any assumptions that practicing managers make about something being either general or local create the background for interesting new assertions to be made.

ORGANIZATION

Interest will develop when people assume that a phenomenon is disorganized or unstructured and then discover that it is really organized, or when they discover that a phenomenon is disorganized when they in fact assumed it to be organized. The fact that people who seem to be autonomous and into their own thing in actuality are responsive to an organized underground with specific limits on acceptable behavior illustrates the first half of this assumption; the second half is illustrated by the observation that the presumed unity in women's movements in fact is not there (Curtis 1976).

Those who find order and organization amidst the apparent chaos of crowds and mobs (e.g., Milgram and Toch 1969; Swanson 1970; Berk 1974) are perhaps the best exemplars of this category, as are those who show a lack of structure in government decision-making where structure was presumed to exist (Allison 1971).

CAUSATION

What seems to be the independent variable in a causal relationship turns out to be the dependent variable (deviant actions don't cause deviant labels, deviant labeling causes deviant actions) or what seems to be the dependent phenomenon in a causal relationship is in reality the independent phenomenon (participative management styles don't increase productivity, the presence of productivity leads managers to adopt more participative management styles).

OPPOSITION

This assumption involves things that are similar and opposite. What seem to be similar phenomena are in fact opposite (radio and television were thought to be similar until McLuhan argued that they were opposite), or what seem to be opposite phenomena in reality are similar (people who join opposing social movements are in fact similar because both show the pattern of a true believer).

CO-VARIATION

What seems to be a positive co-variation between phenomena is in reality a negative co-variation, and vice versa. Davis cites two relevant examples of this assumption. The assumption that lower-income people are charged less for goods and services turns out to be wrong and lower-income people in fact pay more for these goods. To exemplify the other point, it was thought that a social group's desire for revolution decreased as the group's standard of living went up, but in fact it increases.

Davis describes another form of this assumption: that a presumed linear co-variation between phenomena is in reality a curvilinear co-variation. These disconfirmations come in many forms: the upper and lower class have more similar traits with each other than either does to the middle class, top management and workers are more alike than either is to the middle management. In all of these cases the extremes are more similar to each other than they are to the mean.

CO-EXISTENCE

Love and marriage, thought by many to be compatible, have been asserted to be in fact incompatible. Phenomena assumed to be incapable of existing together in reality can exist together (for instance, love and hate can co-exist in an ambivalent person or relationship). Davis makes the further interesting comment that propositions involving co-existence are relatively rare in the social sciences, where there seem to be very few things that are so incompatible with one another that they deny the existence of one another. This very assertion by Davis, however, may be culture-bound because the "social psychology of the nice person where everyone is presumed to get along with everyone else appears to be a peculiarly American product" (Moscovici 1972, p. 18).

CO-RELATION

The pattern of assumptions and denials for co-relation is this: what seemed to be independent phenomena are in reality interdependent; those phenomena assumed to be related and interdependent are in reality independent. As an example of the first difference, social class and mental illness were thought for some time to be unrelated, and were later found to be related. Climate was assumed to be related to suicide, and was later shown to be unrelated, which exemplifies the latter pattern of disconfirmation.

The category of co-relation probably accounts for much of the boredom associated with organization inquiry. People have heard repeatedly that everything is related to everything else. Having heard this often enough, people begin to assume it in most cases. As a result, when a social scientist reports the "news" that birth order is related to personality, the discovery is actually fascinating, but to many people it simply fits within the general expectation that things are related; the discovery, then, is branded as obvious. There are, however, some current examples that go against this tendency. Cancer and fast-food burgers were assumed to be unrelated until Barry Commoner suggested otherwise, a report that was branded absurd more than it was labeled interesting.

Among organizational theorists, especially those who prefer systems theory, the assertion that organizational parts are coupled less often and less

tightly than they presume is the occasion for the experience of interest. This may be one reason why concepts such as loose coupling, organized anarchies, and garbage cans have received so much attention so quickly. It is not that these ideas are so much better than other ideas, but rather that they are so much different from prevailing assumptions of interdependence, systems, and tightly coupled events. If these newer images of independence and autonomy diffuse widely, then it shouldn't be long before people who emphasize the presence of rich linkages among phenomena will once more be making the interesting assertions that promise to revitalize organizational inquiry.

FUNCTION

The assumption here is that what seems to be a phenomenon that functions ineffectively as a means to attain an end is in fact a phenomenon that functions effectively. Again, the reverse of this assumption is also included in this category.

The assumption that long meetings accomplish nothing is a good illustration for this category. Evidence suggests that during long meetings where nothing much seems to get done on the manifest agenda, a great deal of information is in fact being exchanged, and members are learning more about each other and how to accommodate to each other's idiosyncratic styles; this learning improves meeting productivity over the long run. Something that was assumed to be dysfunctional turns out to be functional, and that's interesting.

Propositions that fall into this category seem to have political implications. Propositions of the form "what seems to function ineffectively in fact functions effectively" have conservative implications. People should not try to change an obviously defective social institution which in reality has useful consequences (Gans 1972). Radical implications are associated with assertions that seemingly successful social institutions in fact are dysfunctional and should be changed (e.g., schools make pupils stupid, jails create criminals, doctors produce disease, affirmative action hastens segregation).

Analyses of functions are unusually good starting points in organizational theory. Looking for unexpected functions and dysfunctions is a useful pretext to become absorbed into a phenomenon and to think about it carefully. I mention this because many people are highly critical of functional analyses, not so much because they are a fallible form of analysis, but because of the political implications mentioned earlier. Once these political overtones—which are not as black and white as they are said to be—are stripped away, there remains a useful way to begin examining any phenomenon.

ABSTRACTION

This pairing is built on the following disconfirmation: what seems to be an individual phenomenon is really holistic; what seems to be holistic is in reality

individual. Suicide, thought to be an individual characteristic, is in reality a societal characteristic; territoriality, thought to be a societal characteristic, is in reality an individual characteristic.

Earlier we saw this category in Nord's argument that one advantage of the term *organizational behavior* is that it preserves a word from each of the two root disciplines. Some of the tension within organizational research stems from the fact that both psychologists and sociologists indirectly try to deny the assumption ground of the other. If I believe that the real locus of human phenomena is at the individual level, then every piece of well-crafted sociology should seem interesting to me, unless I hold my assumption strongly (sociology is absurd) or if the sociology seems so removed from individuals that it has no bearing on my assumptions (sociology is irrelevant). And the same thing holds true for people who assume that the social level explains most phenomena.

As a further complication, the field of social psychology—which is summarized within the Kiesler series, of which this volume is a part—seems to cover an intermediate position on the individual-social dimension. The field is about individuals in social settings, and this means that it's partly psychology and partly sociology. Viewed in terms of the present analysis, this intermediate position could be the death knell of the field. No matter what assumptions an individual has, whether they be social or individual, social psychology, because of its intermediate position, should affirm them. This means that *everyone* should regard the findings of social psychology as obvious, which should in turn mean that the field agonizes over its identity and value more than most. It does (e.g., I. Silverman 1977).

In a way, the agonizing of social psychologists is unnecessary. The very fact of intermediacy could mean, first, that social psychology is relevant to every person, whether that person assumes that individual characteristics or social characteristics predominate. More importantly, whatever a person assumes about crucial determinants, social psychology should contain findings that deny the sole importance of that which the person assumes to be crucial. Everyone should find social psychology interesting because of this dynamic. The fact that in the eyes of social psychologists no one seems to find them interesting suggests either that they are masochistic or that they have strayed from their original mixed character (they are now nothing but psychology or nothing but sociology) or that eclectic positions incorporate all possible assumptions anyone can make, and through their continuous affirmation of these assumptions they produce endless obvious findings.

COMPOSITION

What seems to be heterogeneous phenomena are actually composed of a single element; what seems to be a single phenomenon is in reality composed of assorted heterogeneous elements. As an example of the first part of this

assumption, Simmel (Wolff 1950) argued that the three-person family and the three-class society are alike in sharing the triadic form (Bonoma 1976 disagrees).

As an example of a phenomenon assumed to be singular that in fact turns out to be heterogeneous, stratification appears to be composed of a variety of independent phenomena including economic class, status, prestige, and political power.

Inquirers who use the first pattern in this category use a reduction strategy in which they look for the simple in the apparently complex. Occam's Razor provides the cutting edge for people who favor this strategy, a strategy that is in the Platonic tradition. The opposite strategy, a strategy in the Aristotelian tradition, is one in which interesting propositions are generated by finding complexity in the simple.

EVALUATION

What seems to be bad is really good; what seems to be good is really bad. Cancer is good because it's evidence of growth. Families are bad because they stifle adult development. This form of generating interest involves selective highlighting of accepted values.

Davis outlines two strategies that involve interest and evaluation.

First, a person can generate interest in a phenomenon by first assessing his audience's appraisal of an object and then choosing as his indicator of the phenomenon those aspects that represent the opposite of their appraisal.

Thus, if a social theorist wishes to counter his audience's appraisal of American Society as great or as awful, he need merely select, to serve as his indicators of the moral worth of American Society as a whole, those of its aspects which are generally considered bad (like pollution, pockets of poverty, materialism, etc.) or those of its aspects which are generally considered good (like technology, average income, abundant consumer goods, etc.) (Davis 1971, p. 321).

The second way to control interest using evaluation is to change the standard against which the phenomenon is being compared.

Comparison baselines for a social phenomenon include (1) other social phenomena of the same logical type, (2) the same social phenomenon in the past (recent or distant), (3) future projections of the social phenomenon (short run or long run), and (4) some positive or negative ideal version of the social phenomenon. Thus if a social theorist wishes to counter his audience's appraisal of American Society as great or as awful, he need merely compare it to (1) other societies (Sweden, Nazi Germany, etc.), (2) its past history (the "gay" nineties, the depression, etc.), (3) its potential futures (2001, 1984, etc.) or (4) some utopian or dystopian society (Marx's pure communism, Hobbes' state of nature, etc.) (Davis 1971, pp. 321-22).

Adjustments of indicators and baselines are common among theorists and practicing managers alike. When one experiences the sensation of hearing an interesting assertion, and when that interest seemingly is tied to an unexpected difference in evaluation, the listener would be well advised first to discount the sensation by so much as it has been inflated by selective use of indicators and baselines; then, having removed these confounds, the listener should see what remains as the core of the interesting suggestion. When someone starts out with the assertion that we've been doing everything wrong (i.e., what we thought was good is bad), be attentive to what the person does *not* say and what the person omits as plausible indicators and plausible comparisons.

And that certainly holds true for evaluating the assertions made in this book. I will repeatedly highlight instances where what seems good is bad (managers disrupt controls, they don't impose them) and where what seems bad is good (chaos preserves adaptability). These assertions can be interesting because they deny background assumptions, but they accomplish this denial by relying on indicators and comparisons that not everyone attends to regularly. The reader may agree or disagree with my choices of indicators and comparisons, but the reader should be aware that I have made choices and that it is those choices in part that make these assertions interesting. I'm not unique in doing this, however. Any piece of social science that has any bearing whatsoever on accepted values will invariably provoke judgments of interest, irrelevance, obviousness, or absurdity, depending on the values it connects with and the strength with which they are held. Evaluation, like other categories we've reviewed, is a pervasive ground for judgments of interest.

STABILIZATION

What seems to be unchanging does change; what seems to be changing is unchanging. Organizations, thought to be stable, in fact keep falling apart and need elaborate maintenance mechanisms to ward off threats to stability. Conflict-ridden organizations, thought to be unstable, can often continue indefinitely.

The assertion that what seems unstable is in fact stable is well exemplified by arguments that conflict is functional and persists. Models of apparent instability in organizations—models that describe anarchy, irrationality, aimlessness, and disjointed incrementalism—are not sufficiently developed that they can demonstrate clearly that the apparent chaos they depict is durable. But such development seems likely, and it should not be long before such temporary structures as organizational tents (Hedberg, Nystrom, and Starbuck 1976) are seen to be quite stable structures, their flimsy appearance notwithstanding.

Leaving aside now the 12 categories and looking at the phenomenon of interest itself, any person who inquires into organizations and tries to make assertions about them would be naive to neglect the assumption ground of the audience. Suggestions made concerning the nature of organizations need not intentionally strive to deny whatever assumptions are found or consolidated, but potential reactions of observers should be understandable in terms of arguments developed here.

Intentional cultivation of interest is not quite as ludicrous as it might appear. If any theory is true somewhere, sometime for someone, then you as an inquirer might as well work with theories that interest you as theories that don't, since whatever you find interesting should be found interesting by someone else and be relevant to still other people. Pursuit of an interesting inaccurate theory can also be justified because the offshoots of the thinking, the things observed in the process of speculating, may themselves be more accurate. Interest is a good point of departure and can lead to relevant material.

Figure-ground reversals, a metaphor that we use repeatedly throughout this text, are an ideal medium for generating interest. The ground is the background assumption that is taken for granted. If that ground suddenly becomes figure, then what was assumed to be holistic in fact becomes individual; that which is organized (the original figure-ground configuration) becomes disorganized. The reaction is, "That's interesting." Try the demonstration described on page 181 to see this for yourself.

People seem to find a proposition interesting not because it tells them some truth they did not already know, but because it tells them some truth they thought they already knew was wrong. That's why organizational theory can be so interesting, but also why it risks the indictment of being obvious. Everyone is in constant contact with organizations, and as a result, everyone develops a thick, overlearned set of assumptions about organizations. The more diverse those assumptions are, the greater the likelihood that any assertion which denies one assumption will also affirm another one and thereby be branded obvious—a candidate for the Golden Fleece award (Shaffer 1977).

But underneath all of these considerations lies the fascinating, seemingly inevitable crunch between academics and practitioners, a crunch that seems especially intense in the field of organizational theory where ivory-tower types continually brush up against have-you-ever-met-a-payroll types. There seems to be no way around the dilemma that what will be interesting to one will be obvious to the other.

The propositions of these specialized journals and technical texts that are found interesting by their professional readers are actually of the form: "What everybody, except experts on the subject, believes is true is in fact

true." No one will recognize that the proposition is of this form until the proposition is brought to the attention of non-experts. However, the more a person's proposition is found to be interesting by the experts of his field, the more he will be tempted to bring it to the attention of these non-experts. Should he be foolish enough to reveal the proposition which interested his colleagues to his non-professional friends, he will usually find that they are not impressed. Should he be even more foolish enough to disseminate this proposition to a wider public through popularizing it in newspapers and magazines, he will succeed only in convincing more people of the poverty of his discipline (Davis 1971, p. 331).

Thus, it's understandable why managers and academics stick to themselves and dazzle the members of their own clan, and it's understandable why scientific popularizers are loved by the public and loathed by the academics. A popularizer such as Carl Sagan (Goodell 1977) bypasses the assumption ground of his colleagues and makes assertions that deny assumptions of the intelligent man on the street. Colleagues get miffed that Sagan gets credit for stuff that everyone else in the field knows. They fail to realize that had they been less parochial and had they understood that laymen assume differently, they too might have relieved the man on the street of his oppressive feeling that the world is no good and could have, at least for the moment, given him the experience of interesting times.