

**TITLE: THE CASE FOR ADAPTIVE THEORY FOR INVESTIGATING
MEANING IN THE WORKPLACE**

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THE CASE FOR ADAPTIVE THEORY FOR INVESTIGATING MEANING IN THE WORKPLACE

ABSTRACT

Most qualitative research studies in business utilise case studies, which on their own can fail to integrate wider, structural factors which may have shaped the observed events at the local level. This paper outlines the use of adaptive theory (Layder 1997, 1998) as a means of combining agency research (case studies of individual experiences and phenomenological research) with structural research (broader theories, surveys of societal issues). The paper focuses on the application of adaptive theory on a study of workplace conflict resolution. The findings indicate that adaptive theory would be most suitable for studies dealing with corruption, HR processes (training, performance development, organisational change) and other areas in which an individual's perception is required relating to workplace practices.

Adaptive theory, Qualitative research methods, case study research, alternative dispute resolution

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research methodologies abound in the field of business research. Many focus on case studies but fail to integrate with wider, structural factors which may shape the observed events at the local level. This paper outlines the use of adaptive theory (Layder 1997, 1998) as a means of combining agency research (case studies and individual experiences) with structural research (broader theories, surveys which focus on society rather than individuals). Specifically, the paper addresses the application of the combined approach in a study of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) in the workplace. ADR is often offered by private consultants and consists of a range of dispute resolution techniques such as mediation (third party assists negotiation), facilitation (third party chairs discussions), conciliation (third party

participates in the construction of solution), private arbitration (third party makes the decision) and med-arb (third party arbitrates at the request of the disputants).

An aim of the dispute resolution research was to avoid the three main problems associated with previous research in ADR: the problem of constructed meaning in the workplace, problems associated with interviewing workplace actors who are unable to critically evaluate their experiences; and problems associated with the agency/structure debates in methodology. The combination of a case study approach utilising adaptive theory with surveys, interviews and an extensive literature review, represents a way of addressing these problems because both agency and structural approaches are employed so they complement, and draw on each other for explanation. The utilisation of a variety of data collection techniques also ensures reliability and validity of the resulting data. Additionally, adaptive theory allows for theory generation to occur and this differentiates it from many other case study methods.

Structure and Agency in Research Design

Researching social phenomena has tended to take either an ‘agency’ or a ‘structural’ approach (Waters, 1994). Agency research focuses on human subjectivity, often at an individual level and within a defined context, for instance a workplace. It encompasses exploring an individual’s actions and reasoning as well as his or her experience within the intersubjective world and is concerned with local subjective accounts or situations and experiences. Giddens (1994) described agency research as an ‘interpretive’ form of analysis in which social activity shapes the productive capacities of people. This approach includes methodologies such as phenomenology (Moustakis, 1994) and ethnography (Torren, 1996). It has been argued though, that relying on the agency approach alone risks reducing social life to the micro-realm of human subjective experience (Layder, 1997) and may lead to the development of theories which are idiosyncratic (Eisenhardt, 1989) or laden with the ‘biased views [which] influence the direction of the findings and conclusions’ (Yin, 1984:21).

The other major form of social research is that of structural research, a broader range of research techniques focussing on assessing the economic or political factors which encompass (for example) theories of wealth and power, symbolism, mass communication, language and myth (Schwandt, 1997). Results from structural research are often highly generalised from macro data. Research reliant on structural analysis has been criticised for its neglect of local experience and phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

One response to the criticisms of both agency and structural methods has been to fold the two together. Combined agency/structure has been described as the link between 'human activity and its social contexts' (Layder, 1994:5). Structural researchers such as Marx (1976a and 1976b) and Parsons (1951, 1966) highlighted the effects of external structures on people's lives. Using these extant theories, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) has been used to research peoples' experience of a process by considering both agency and structural factors. More recently, it has been associated with the postmodern analyses of organisational life (Reed, 1997). A number of scholars have conducted social research in a way which supplements micro-level agency techniques with broader structural analysis (Giddens, 1984; Reed, 1997; Layder, 1997, 1998).

However, simply overlaying structural factors onto agency data has also been problematic. First, it has been criticised as being methodologically deterministic, theory driven and reliant on generalisations from theoretic knowledge (Deetz, 1996). Second, it does not help to distinguish why certain actors behave differently under the same conditions. This problem was considered by Bhaskar (1978; 1979) who put forward the method of critical realism as a way to explain the interplay between structure and agency in organisations. He explained that social structures pre-exist the social actions which reproduce and transform them. They form the extant limits within which social interactions occur. The actors within the structures draw from unequally distributed assets according to their institutionalised 'positions-practices' (Bhaskar, 1979). The multi-layered effect of 'positions-practices' reproduce and transform

social relations. Organisations, then, can be conceptualised as enduring structural forms which are maintained and transformed through the ‘engagement of people in ‘positions-practices’ at different levels of social organisation that designate the ‘points of contact’ between human agency and social structure’ (Reed, 1997:31). In this way an attempt can be made to ‘contextualise and explain social interaction by locating it within the broader, social structures of which it is a part’ (Reed, 1997:38). Thus, organisational research requires an understanding of the social hierarchy of the organisation, its norms and the effect of individual belief systems in its methodological approach.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Constructionist analysis shows how meanings that are socially constructed prevent people from seeing important features of the reality in front of them. Meaning can be constructed through relational patterns of discourse or within changing institutional and organisational structures (Mohr, 1998). For instance, research in organisational justice has established that disputants’ perceptions of procedural justice (the extent to which disputants experience a fair process in hearing their dispute) predisposes them to accepting the outcome (Tyler, 1988, 1991). Research in the field of ADR (Van Gramberg, 1997, 2001a) revealed that workplace actors expressed satisfaction with ADR processes in two case studies, leading them to accept outcomes perceived as unfair or disadvantageous. These findings informed the author’s future research to the extent that the case study methodology needed to consider that acceptance and legitimisation of ADR processes by workplace actors was an important prerequisite for acceptance of the result of the dispute. Thus, the challenge was to describe the ADR process through the eyes of the disputants within the hierarchical power structure of the organisation which has set the norms and values shared by the workplace actors. This has also been recognised elsewhere; for instance, Kumar (1995:188) wrote of the difficulty of using

organisational research to explain ‘the forces that lie outside the control and often the comprehension of place-bound actors’. At least one researcher suggested that an organisational research framework must be developed to overcome the ‘in depth interpretation of action by situating agents within a context of conditions of which they are ignorant’ (Thompson, 1989:177).

Researchers who couple agency with structure find that the construction of meaning for individuals occurs through their exposure to the news media, advocacy, political and other organisations which alter both meaning and structural conditions simultaneously (Glassner, 2000). Meaning is learned and legitimised through this process. The adoption of a program (in this case, ADR techniques) by an organisation is dependent on the social construction of ADR by organisational members. Trenchant union opposition can result in workers’ questioning the validity of the program. Arguably, the acceptance a management program in a workplace is an evolutionary process. For an ADR program, acceptance may stem from the rhetoric brought into the organisation by its own members or consultants regarding the merits of ADR. Training helps sustain and legitimate certain beliefs in the processes, as do reports in the media. The final step in the evolution of acceptance of ADR by organisational members is the rhetoric of success stories leaving the organisation and making their way into management literature and dialogue (Mohr, 1998). The implication of this for ADR researchers is that interviewees may view the work practices of their organisation, such as the application of ADR, favourably because of the normalisation and legitimisation of such practices.

In creating ‘organisational facts’, employees need not be conscious of what is happening. This is the essence of what Searle (1995) labelled ‘collective intentionality’. He likened it, rather dramatically, to a herd of hyena hunting a lion where each individual orients itself to the collective pursuit. Thus, the ‘individual intentionality derives from the collective intentionality that they share’ (1995:245). Social control within an organisation is dependent on the self regulation of the group (Janowitz, 1991). The conception of social control helps to

explain why individuals within an organisation might adjust themselves to a prevailing social reality, which may appear strange from the viewpoint of outsiders of that company (Chikudate, 2000). It may help to explain why corruption becomes normalised in some companies. In Tyler's (1988, 1991) research on ADR, disputants afforded procedural justice, were more tolerant of unfavourable or unfair outcomes even when those outcomes would surprise or shock others outside the context. The challenge for designing a research strategy for a project dealing with individual's experiences within a context such as the workplace, is to be able to use case studies in such a way that the interviews enable meaningful, critical evaluation which can be related to broader, environmental findings. This is addressed below.

ADAPTIVE THEORY AND GROUNDED THEORY

The term, adaptive theory, was coined by Layder (1998), from the ability of the methodology to identify emerging theory from case study analysis which then informs or adapts existing theories. Layder created adaptive theory as a methodological derivative of 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Because of the close links between adaptive theory and grounded theory, it is relevant to commence this discussion of adaptive theory with a brief description of grounded theory.

Glaser and Strauss' (1967) 'grounded theory' arose at a time when there was much debate among sociological researchers regarding the relative merits of qualitative and quantitative research methods. In the 1960s, quantitative methods in social sciences such as surveys dominated research and were used to 'test' structural theories – much in the same way as other scientific research was used to create laws or scientific theories. Glaser and Strauss' argument was that the blanket usage of quantitative methods resulted in the impoverishment of theory by depriving it of its social context. Grounded theory was an attempt to remedy this situation by enhancing social research with an 'agency' focus and proposing a methodology

for generating theory which was both meaningful and relevant to the individuals being researched.

The resultant methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) involved the sampling and analysis of qualitative data, generally derived from interviews. This allowed the researcher to generate theory ‘by the systematic collection and analysis of data [which] is a very powerful way to bring concepts of reality to a substantive area both to others and subjects in the area itself’ (Glaser, 1992:14). The theory emerges from the reality experienced by the subjects of the research project. In other words, the research is used to systematically and inductively derive theory from the analysis of data obtained from a number of sources simultaneously rather than the research being used to test existing theory. Grounded theory should explain and also describe the phenomena being studied. However, pure descriptive methods are situation-specific, whereas grounded theory may be applied to areas outside the case study in question and is thus somewhat generalisable (Glaser, 1992).

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) the process of grounded theory allows theoretical concepts and hypotheses to emerge from the empirical data as it is gathered in the research process itself. This is a departure from those who rely on a positivist vision of the social analysis in which the categories into which data will be slotted, is already pre-determined according to the dictates of ‘general theory’ (see Merton, 1967). Those methods of theory development have been said to be ‘forced’ (Layder, 1998).

Grounded theory has been used in a number of organisational contexts. Reiple and Vyakarnam (1986) used it for their exploration of management behaviour. Similarly, Wolfram-Cox (1997) used grounded theory to examine employee feelings towards organisational change, and Konecki (1997) employed the technique for an investigation into the nature of human resource management. Thus, a broad body of organisational research has been developed using grounded theory data collection and analysis.

Where grounded theory has been found to be weak is in its inability to incorporate broader social structural factors into the agency-level emergent theory (Layder, 1998). Adaptive theory was developed to rectify this shortcoming. This is achieved by enabling researchers to explicitly incorporate extant theory into their research and give their ideas extra weight by grounding them more solidly in empirical evidence. According to Layder:

Specifically, adaptive theory attempts to combine an emphasis on prior theoretical ideas and models which feed into and guide research while at the same time attending to the generation of theory from the ongoing analysis of data (1998:19).

Adaptive theory aims to eliminate three weaknesses identified in grounded theory. First, grounded theory rejects the contribution of general theory to the extent that the latter's explanatory potential as a theory generator is limited and inflexible. Second, grounded theory's appreciation of social-structural or systemic aspects of society are constrained due its epistemological and ontological commitment to denying the existence of events which are not simply behavioural. Thirdly, grounded theory is not strong in terms of theory testing as it maintains that theory is continually emerging and cannot be constrained by pre-conceived hypotheses or extant theory (Field, 2000). In contrast, adaptive theory deals not only with the behavioural aspects of social research (activities, meanings and lived experiences) as well as systemic phenomena by tracing the reciprocal influences between individual social activities and their wider environment. Further, by referring the data to extant theory, emerging theory may be tested and methodologically triangulated. In other words, adaptive theory uses hypotheses or predictions from all lines of enquiry including prior theory, current survey data and case studies. The intellectual foundations of adaptive theory hold that ontological questions (the nature of social reality) and epistemological questions (validity of

knowledge) are bound together and amount to an exploration of 'the nature of reality and how we come to know it' (Layder, 1998:23).

Thus, adaptive theory is a theory generating methodology in which theory emerges from the ongoing research:

...by utilising elements of prior theory (both general and substantive) in conjunction with theory that emerges from data collection and analysis. It is the interchange and dialogue between prior theory (models, concepts and conceptual clusterings) and emergent theory that forms the dynamic of adaptive theory (Layder, 1998:27).

In practical terms, this allows for an interconnection between the actor's meanings, activities and intentions, or their 'lifeworld' and the broader 'system elements' of society, culture, institutions and power. Layder's (1998) work in this sense builds on the work of Bhaskar's (1979) critical reality. Using the example of workplace dispute resolution, this is important if we are to address the concern raised earlier regarding the construction of reality and meaning within the workplace and the ability of interviewees to critically analyse ADR techniques.

Extant theories need to be selected by the researcher according to the context being investigated. In the example of workplace dispute resolution, the extant theories identified were first, the theories of power in society and within the employment relationship. These are associated with approaches such as Foucault's (1980) discourse-power analysis, Habermas' (1984, 1987b) 'theory of communicative action' and Giddens' (1984) 'theory of structuration'. The exploration of 'lifeworld' and 'system' (Habermas, 1984) as part of an interconnected but stratified social reality enables issues of power and control as well as their underpinning ideologies to be unveiled: 'the pervasive influence of power domains of social life cannot be understood properly if its systemic (or structural) aspects are not recognised or

registered in the first place' (Layder, 1998:48). The second extant theory selected for the ADR work was workplace justice, examined through the work of Tyler (1988, 1991); Rawls (1971); and Bies and Moag (1988). These theories encompass a modern understanding of workplace justice (procedural, distributive and interactional justice respectively). The third broad set of theories applicable to dispute resolution research were those of pertaining to ADR. These theories encompass the various models and techniques of modern dispute resolution. Together, these extant theories were chosen as the framework to examine workplace ADR. They were specifically selected because the author had argued that industrial relations changes over the past two decades in Australia have, arguably, individualised the employment relationship and shifted the balance of power towards employers. As ADR is often negotiation based, there is a risk that outcomes will be dictated more by relative bargaining power than notions of justice. Thus the theories of power, justice and ADR became the salient parameters for the workplace dispute resolution study.

It is important in adaptive theory not to rigidly apply the broad theories as the essence of the methodology is to remain open to novel theory generation.

RECORDING THE PROCESS OF REFLECTION

Like many other qualitative methodologies, adaptive theory requires the maintenance of a written record of the reflective process which is used to formulate theory (Layder, 1998). This involves the contribution of broader structural theories, researcher experience, research aims and questions and the process of data collection and analysis. The reflective process consists of creating codes, text notes and memos. These are developed during the process of interviewing, typing transcript and writing the case studies. The reflective process must draw these elements together to produce new theoretical insights and this is described below.

Coding

Adaptive theory requires creating themes from the interview responses. It is the presence of recurrent themes which forms the emerging theory (Layder, 1998). This is done by tagging particular responses in the interview transcript to a descriptive code. Codes are tags or labels given to pieces of information gained from the interviews and are common in case study design (Yin, 1994). Each piece of information is coded according to a concept of which it is an indicator. New indicators of each concept are sought until they begin to repeat themselves. At that point, the concept is said to be saturated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Whilst caution should be observed in declaring a concept saturated, practical limits of saturation are generally readily observable. For instance, in the ADR study, the responses of all interviewees converged on a series of issues such as: fairness; the role of the ADR practitioner; and training. No further matters were raised regardless of questioning and so the author considered the saturation point to have been reached in the interview. These concepts were then linked with each other in a theory or explanation of the phenomenon being studied. The comparative nature of grounded and adaptive theories requires this new theory to be constantly exposed to negative data, borderline data and key examples in order to show the limits of the explanation and thus the limits of the generality of the theory. For instance, the acceptance of the ADR mediated outcome by the employees in the 'Metals' and 'EnergyCo' case studies contrasted with the employees' rejection of the outcome in the 'Infotainment' case. This contrast occurred despite similar stated experiences of having been afforded a fair process described by the interviewees. The resulting theory needed to consider the limitations of theory generality or whether other factors were at play in the Infotainment case.

Maintenance of a Written Record

To increase the reliability of qualitative research data, a chain of evidence should be maintained and available for scrutiny by future examiners or researchers wishing to repeat the study. In the workplace dispute research, the codification of interview material, journal and reflections constituted a written record to clarify the author's thoughts, to identify emerging

theory and to serve as a record available for scrutiny of the research conducted towards this thesis. The documentation demonstrates the derivation of any evidence from the initial research questions to the conclusions of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to such a record as providing ‘confirmability’ to the study, meaning that theoretical insights are traceable to their sources.

ANALYSING THE RESULTS

Reporting on an adaptive theory study requires balancing the reporting of other lines of enquiry used and then drawing them together along with the appropriate theories to generate specific theory relating to case study experiences. The following section demonstrates the reporting of adaptive theory for the workplace dispute resolution study:

Adaptive theory and ADR

This study explored the growth and nature of ADR in Australian workplaces utilising adaptive theory (Layder, 1998) to analyse the case studies. As adaptive theory allows for emerging theories (from the experiences of the actors) to inform the extant, or pre-existing theories which form the context in which the study takes place, the study situated itself explicitly within a particular economic and political framework. The predictions from these economic and political factors in the case of workplace dispute resolution included: the individualisation and contractualisation of employment relations, removal of the influence of third parties such as unions and tribunals and a shift in power relations away from employees towards employers. At the same time, the denial that a power imbalance existing between employers and employees was acknowledged in both neoliberal, and HRM theory. These influences have allowed a number of policies and practices to emerge in workplaces under the rubric of participative management, which present themselves to workplace actors as mutually beneficial but likely utilise managerial power as the basis for decision making.

These over-arching factors, which form the context within which the case studies were examined, predicted that ADR will be advantageous to employers and disadvantageous to employees.

The case studies illustrated that individuals (both employers and employees) are enmeshed in power structures into which they are socialised and do not see beyond the reality in front of them. For this reason, managers espouse the importance of ADR practitioners who are neutral and independent, but then fail to notice that the practitioner is biased. Similarly, employees espouse the fairness of the ADR process when, in fact, they have been subjected to a series of biased and unfair intrusions leading to an adverse decision. The study concluded that in many cases ADR provides organisations with a mechanism by which employers are able to bolster their power both covertly and overtly, to prevent employee resistance to decision making and engage their cooperation, while allowing power imbalances to prevail in the negotiation process.

The study demonstrated that ADR in the Australian workplace is being conducted within the values and ideals of HRM: working in harmony towards shared interests and goals. By so doing, the operation of power structures have acted to create unbalanced decisions, favouring the more powerful workplace parties. The role of emerging theory arising from this study informed ADR theory through considering the pervasive role of power in the workplace. The emerging theories include the tendency for managers to hoard power; the effect of lack of dispute resolution skills amongst ADR providers (in making them unable to better deal with disputants of unequal power); communication deficiencies in the ADR process; and the effect of unitarist values in ADR creating passive unions (due to their uncritical acceptance of the process). ADR theory has also been informed by the findings from the case studies concerning workplace justice. Importantly, this study found that disputants utilise procedural justice (particularly participation in the process and trust in the third party) as a heuristic for their acceptance of the dispute outcome. This finding has implications for research reporting

on the satisfaction rates of disputants. The study argued that the high rates of satisfaction amongst disputants undergoing mediation reported by a number of researchers (which have served to justify the expansion of ADR services across many jurisdictions) measure only the operation of this heuristic and not the integrity or fairness of the process.

CONCLUSIONS

Adaptive theory is a methodology which sits well alongside more traditional quantitative studies. It allows for triangulation between the findings reported at agency or case level with broader structural factors. It is particularly well suited when it is likely that agency actors are so enmeshed in their own reality that they cannot or will not see that their actions would not be considered normal from the outside. As such it allows the researcher to comment on the potential of an actor's context to shape his or her reality and the potential for others to exploit that weakness. Its application has been described here in workplace dispute resolution research and it would be useful in studies dealing with corruption, HR processes (training, performance development, organisational change) and other areas in which an individual's perception is required relating to workplace practices.

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