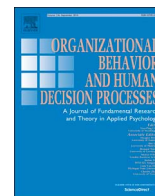




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Editorial

Seeing and studying China: Leveraging phenomenon-based research in China for theory advancement[☆]

A B S T R A C T

China plays a central role in the world economy, and it is important for management scholars to focus attention on the issues and challenges it faces. For this purpose, we argue, a *phenomenon-based* approach is required. We review the central tenets of *phenomenon-based research* (PBR), arguing that a clear focus on important phenomenon (rather than just testing *a priori* theories) enhances our understanding of the world, encourages different research methods, and – in the end – actually produces better theory as well. PBR on China helps us see, and study, the critical phenomena of generational value shifts, pollution, aging of the population, corruption, and mistrust of strangers. It also forces us to grapple with Chinese paradoxes, like the odd combination of hard work despite high belief in fate, and the ways in which our mainstream theories can and should be updated to address key Chinese phenomenon, like Guanxi. This special issue documents key phenomena in China that management scholars need to know about, and provides stimulus for advancing theory that not only is germane to China, but also informs and reshapes general management theory.

1. Introduction

What would be novel or forward-thinking about a leading management journal (e.g., AMJ, JAP, JM, ASQ, OBHDP) dedicating an issue exclusively to empirical research conducted in the United States, with a focus on topics that have currency in the United States, and that serve the purpose of theory development? Not much. The truth is, very few of the regular readership of these journals would notice anything unique because this is what they are used to and have come to expect. Of course, these leading journals do publish research that has been conducted in countries other than the United States, but the clear Western emphasis in the literature remains.

Publication of this special issue of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (OBHDP) on Leveraging Phenomenon-Based Research in China for Theory Advancement points to the fact that our field has come a long way. This is one of the first special issues in which all of the reported empirical research was conducted in China. The cutting-edge research reported here contributes substantively to theory and practice in the fields of management and organizational behavior, and readers from the US and around the world (not just China), stand to benefit from reading these studies. Just as important, there is no sacrifice in the level of scholarship that might be associated with bringing researchers ‘up to speed’ on China and Chinese society.

The impetus for this special issue was rooted in an appreciation of the strategic significance of China as a nation. China, as explained in the call for papers, is now the second largest economy in the world, and it is poised to become the largest within two decades. Many interesting, relatively unique social and behavioral phenomena exist in China. Studying these phenomena should not only deepen our understanding of the Chinese culture, but also provide new insights into how humans are shaped by, adapt to and transform social and cultural forces. The different cultural and institutional context of China vis-à-vis the West provides immense opportunities for evaluating, extending, and creating organizational behavior theories.

Since late 2013, when we published this call for papers, the need for phenomenon-based research has only become more stark. A crisis in the world of management research has grown to a point where many people question the relevance and accuracy of our research. Whereas much of the response to this crisis has been to boost the rigor of social science (by focusing more on things like replicability, reproducibility, and a willingness to publish null findings), there has also been a call for greater relevance. At a session of the Academy of Management meetings in Atlanta this last summer on “Responsible Research in China,” Anne Tsui, Gerry George, Bill Glick, and Neng Liang all talked about the importance of research to solve real problems that are critical to the world. And, in that same panel they talked about the real, big issues that need attention in China – such as

[☆] We would like to thank Xiao-Ping Chen and Kwok Leung for being both originators and champions of this project. We lost Kwok due to a sudden illness, as he was serving as a co-editor for this issue. We sorely miss the wisdom and joy that Kwok brought to all of us.

pollution, the rapidly aging workforce, and mass migration. While we have strived to maintain rigor in the papers for this special issue, we have tried especially to make sure that the papers address important, real issues in China. In the final set of papers, the issues covered include pollution, corruption, generational shifts in values, trust in strangers, and the aging population. In addition, some papers look at the well-known issues of Guanxi and fatalism in China, and how they affect important employee outcomes like voice, creativity, and innovation.

The part where we varied, as editors, is how much we thought papers had to be focused on theory, and how broad the theory had to be. If there were theory-informing lessons to be learned, did they have to be lessons relevant to managers in Canada, Columbia, and Kenya, or was it enough to have learned lessons relevant to China? Was it enough for the papers to help us know China better? On this dimension, there is some variety in the papers. What we did not include were studies that were done in China, but were not “about” China. In the next sections, we review ideas about phenomenon-based research and the reasons why we believe phenomenon-based research is especially important for OB scholarship in China.

2. Phenomenon-Based Research

Phenomenon-Based Research (PBR) has been central to the field of management and organizational behavior from its early beginnings. Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) pioneering studies of worker productivity at Midvale Steel Company, revealed the potential for scientific principles to be applied to practical issues of workforce management and productivity. Subsequent work by Elton Mayo and Fritz Roethlisberger in the 1920s at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company helped researchers better understand the critical role of workplace social relations (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). The essentially social quality of the phenomena they were studying was revealed quite dramatically in their finding that workers performed at even higher levels when lights were turned down, not just turned up. Alvin Gouldner's study of the norm of reciprocity within patterns of industrial bureaucracy revealed how negative spirals of reciprocity could be created when management decided not to allow employees to take dynamite home on the weekend for fishing (Gouldner, 1954).

Later work by Milgram (1974) and Zimbardo, Haney, Banks, and Jaffe (1971) had its roots in fundamental concerns about the potential for very normal humans to be agents of harm through following tyrannical leaders. In all of these cases, the researchers observed phenomena that was occurring or had occurred, that was important, and that was unexplained. Schwarz and Stensaker (2014: 480) characterize this work as being “problem-centered” and built upon “capturing, documenting, and conceptualizing organizational and managerial phenomena of interest” Doh (2015: 609) describes phenomenon-based research as trying to “accurately and insightfully inform a real-world phenomenon or phenomena”. More recent examples of this type of work include Edmondson's (1996) research on the role of psychological safety and greater reported errors in the effectiveness in healthcare and other organizational settings and Bartlett and Ghoshal's (2002) study of global managers. Cheng (Cheng, 2007, p. 28) notes that Bartlett and Ghoshal, “started their inquiry process by observing an interesting phenomenon, followed by identifying and describing the salient aspects of the phenomenon for investigation.” These comments are no less true of Edmondson's research.

These studies, however, stand in contrast to the dominant paradigm of contemporary management research, which critics view as overly theory driven and focused. Management research and its major scholarly journals are described as suffering from excessive focus on theory and methodology, called theory fetishism (Hambrick, 2007) and methodological fetishism (Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby, & Weber, 2014). Sophistication in theory and methods, critics say, is consistently privileged over the importance and relevance of issues being studied (Cheng, 2007; Doh, 2015; Hambrick, 2007; Miller, 2007; Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014). Our review of the advocacy for phenomenon-based research reveals a range of criticisms of theory and methodological fetishism.

First, the field of management research has become increasingly self-referential in that constructs, frameworks, and models are internally generated within the scholarly community, with less interest in and relevance to the real world of organizations and management. The impetus for studies often begins with identifying a “gap” in the literature (e.g., Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997), not a problem to be addressed. Scholarly contribution is evaluated, more often than not, based on what new constructs and theories are introduced (Colquitt & Zapata-Phelan, 2007). Both in terms of what motivates research, and what justifies it; theory is “viewed with...religious fervor” (Hambrick, 2007: 1346). Theory is often created, not as a means to understand phenomena, but “in order to build ‘new’ theory”, even if it entails becoming more narrow and minutely incremental (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014, p. 481; Helfat, 2007). Second, the process of theorizing and argumentation (when unconcerned with phenomenon) is shifting towards ‘setting the hook’ (Grant & Pollock, 2011) and stylized, formulaic, rhetorical crafting (Birkinshaw et al., 2014). As a function of developments like these, research publications may still be serving effectively as stepping stones for the career advancement of individual researchers but they are failing as springboards for organizational and social change through improvements to management practice, public policy, and management profession itself (Schwarz & Stensaker, 2016). It appears that our field's penchant for fetishism in theory and method is a syndrome of multiple conditions that brings into question the legitimacy, identity, and mission of our management research community (Cheng, 2007; Pfeffer, 2007).

In light of these legitimate criticisms of our field, scholars are calling for researchers to refocus their attention on significant problems, challenges and phenomena as the starting point for their scholarly work. These conditions suggest to us the importance of phenomenon-based research in general, and the benefits of conducting such research in China. One set of arguments is about the value of the phenomena themselves, and another is about how theory can be advanced when phenomenon is taken seriously in research processes.

3. Seeing the world: intrinsic value of phenomena

The most basic argument for management research to be based on phenomena lies in the value of “simply document[ing] and dissect[ing] fascinating, important” things in the world (Hambrick, 2007). As social scientists in an applied field of management and organization behavior, we want to know how people are behaving, what problems are being faced, and how organizations are being managed. In areas such as finance, Hambrick points out, top journals publish careful studies about what is happening in the financial world. Hambrick adds that epidemiologists do valuable work documenting patterns, even before biologists know the reasons for those patterns. Similarly, Miller (2007) says that “our major journals should welcome research even if it does not test old or develop new theory, so long as it (1) addresses a question or detects a pattern that should be of concern to at least some organizational shareholders; (2) discovers something original (usually after considerable search and effort); and (3) adheres to standards of rigor such that findings can be replicated by third parties or are so fine-grained as to impress most skeptics” (p. 197). Simply seeing, and documenting, patterns in the world can be a contribution. Doh (2015) calls for international business researchers to focus on big, macro social issues that need to be understood such as “specific events, trends, transformations, and evolutions, often at the country or regional level” (p. 610). Just knowing of these trends is important. In a now classic political science study, James Scott (1985) went to rural villages trying to understand how peasants resist agricultural reforms, and discovered a kind of calculated foot-dragging instead of revolution. This finding has re-

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