

Stewart Clegg e Tecla Rura-Polley organizzarono nel 1998 - in occasione del convegno annuale dell' *Academy of Management*, che si tenne quell'anno a San Diego CA - una sessione speciale dedicata alla riflessione sulle ragioni della 'potenza' delle teorie. Furono invitati, come relatori, Peter Frost, Pasquale Gagliardi e Karl Weick, parteciparono al dibattito Nicole Biggart, Kathleen Eisenhardt, John Jermier. Le tre relazioni furono pubblicate insieme - come *editors' choice* (Paul Hirsch e Kimberly Boal) - dal *Journal of Management Inquiry* (vol. 8 n. 2 June 1999), con il seguente commento generale di Ralph Stablein. La relazione di Gagliardi, intitolata *Theories Empowering for Action*, può essere letta in inglese nella sezione 'pubblicazioni' o tradotta in italiano come capitolo 10 de *Il gusto dell'organizzazione. Estetica, conoscenza, management*.

## RALPH STABLEIN

### *Moving (A)head*

"Over the years of near-annual attendance at the Academy of Management meetings, a number of sessions have caused a stir and a buzz. Two sessions come to mind as examples: the Jazz session at the 1995 Vancouver meeting and the Emotions session at the 1985 San Diego meeting. Each of us will have our own memories. Sometimes we experience the session. Often we hear second hand reports from people talking about the session for the rest of the meeting. These sessions can act as markers of a shift in our thinking. These special sessions can motivate the direction of Ph.D. student research and provide the occasion for redirection and reflection by more experienced colleagues (Frost & Stablein, 1992, pp. 258-259).

We can thank Thekla Rura-Polley and Stewart Clegg for organizing a very special session for the 1998 San Diego meeting and Paul Hirsch for publishing this subset of papers that will extend its audience.

In San Diego, as audience members, we see, in sequence, three White, mature men: Gagliardi—tall and athletic; Weick—bearded and dapper; Frost—wiry and intense. We hear three different accents (Italian, Middle American, and Western Canadian overlaid on South African English) but three voices that share a calmness and an assurance that avoids arrogance. Gagliardi's presentation is a delight as an aesthetic experience. His presentation literally embodies his message. Weick speaks with his familiar rhythm, careful choice of words, and well-timed pauses. Frost speaks more extemporaneously than the other two men do. He ends with calm music, a poem, and color slides.

In this journal, each article stands on its own as the respective author's individual response to Rura-Polley and Clegg's invitation to write on "what matters most: powerful theories." However, there is synergy as a set when read in the order of presentation: Gagliardi, Weick, and Frost. Gagliardi defines the criteria for empowering theory. Weick takes us through an exercise in theorizing. Frost takes up the challenge by theorizing a substantive empowering theory—a theory of compassion for management inquiry and action.

Gagliardi challenges us to abandon our striving for analytically clean middle-range theories. These theories are motivationally sterile. They do not empower. Instead, Gagliardi argues that "a theory empowers organizational actors when it spurs their imagination, points out new opportunities and ends, unveils new paths and new means to ends, and increases their freedom of action and their will to act" (p. 144). Empowering theories are persuasive.

Persuasive theories acknowledge their audience and the local context that necessarily shapes meaning. Meaning is a tangled intellectual, emotional, and moral experience. Management theorists should accept the status of their theories as cultural artifacts that have the potential to mean more than the sum of their logical coherence and empirical validity (Gagliardi, 1996).

Weick picks up where Gagliardi ends with a concrete example: theorizing the fatal phenomenon of firefighters who fail to drop their tools to facilitate escape from deadly fires. Weick proposes that the firefighters cannot drop their tools because they do not have any. The firefighters are one with their equipment. It is our analytic habits of mind that separate the person from his or her tools. The theory is empowering. It suggests a solution. Potentially deadly situations must be refrained in firefighters' lives as a professional's race against the fire, not a victim's flight. Such a theory may have the aesthetic appeal to move firefighters out of danger.

Weick's article concentrates on a series of suggestions for how to theorize theories that move us. Empowering theories will develop a discourse of "absorbed coping" to replace our traditional ideal of detached representation. Empowering theorists will "listen to engaged worlds" of organizational participants.

Frost does not choose to enter the "engaged world" that provides the locale for his theorizing. But finding himself recuperating on a cancer ward, he listens. He hears the importance of compassion in professional work.

Frost presents an empowering theory of compassion. He makes explicit attempts to persuade at the level of aesthetic experience: He uses personal accounts, music, poetry, and visual images in the development of his theoretical account. Just as explicitly, Frost aims to persuade on the basis of the intellectual attributes of his theory development. He offers definitions of compassion, relies on the research literature, and deploys analytic strategies.

Taken together, these articles send the message that organizational research is not merely a cognitive science. Both in the content of our inquiry and the process of inquiring, we must make a place for affect and the aesthetic. Some authors have suggested that we look to those disciplines that have continued to acknowledge the nonrational such as the humanities (O'Connor, Hatch, White, & Zald, 1995; Zald, 1992) and psychoanalysis (Zizek, 1989). It would be wise to accept their counsel.

These articles move my thinking, feeling, and acting as a person and, especially, as an organizational theorist. It is my hope that this testimonial and framing commentary may aid your own response."

## REFERENCES

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