Title
Organizational behavior unchained: commentary on giving peace a chance

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8m6170j9

Journal
Journal of Organizational Behavior, 28(6)

ISSN
0894-3796

Author
Pearce, Jone L

Publication Date
2007-08-01

DOI
10.1002/job.453

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

Commentary

Organizational behavior unchained: Commentary on giving peace a chance

JONE L. PEARCE*

The Paul Merage School of Management, University of California, Irvine, California, U.S.A.

Rethinking Organizational Behavior: Commentary on Giving Peace a Chance

Wow! Gretchen Spreitzer is revolutionary. She proposes that corporate employee empowerment can lead to greater peace and less war. She takes us far beyond organizational behavior's well-studied dependent variables of employee performance, affect, and cognitions, and develops a well-argued case for how employees' organizational empowerment provides the training and confidence needed to peaceably settle disputes. Further, she introduces organizational behavior scholars to some valuable publicly available data resources. This paper, like all the best social science, raises interesting questions that provoke us to ponder and explore new questions. I will address just two of the questions this essay raises: questions of our assumptions about causality in organizational behavior, and our choices of problems to study.

Organizational Behavior's Unexamined Causal Assumptions

One of the most important questions Professor Spreitzer raises is the one about causality. Organizational behavior, like much of the social sciences, tends to assume causality from the larger aggregation to the smaller. So, for example, we assume that national culture causes leadership behavior and management practices, not the other way around (e.g., House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). My own work argues that government quality causes management practices and employee attitudes and action, the larger social aggregate causing individual behavior (e.g., Pearce, 2001; Pearce, Xin, Xu, & Rao, 2005; Rao, Pearce, & Xin, 2005). In the field of organizational behavior it has just seemed more logical that the larger aggregate is more stable, more durable, and so provides the (causal) context in which individuals take action.

* Correspondence to: Jone L. Pearce, The Paul Merage School of Management, University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-3125, U.S.A. E-mail: jlpearce@uci.edu

Yet Professor Spreitzer dares to turn this assumption on its head. What if a highly controllable individual action, like the extent to which executives empower, delegate or consult with their subordinates, in fact leads nations to a peaceable avoidance of war? Professor Spreitzer makes our implicit causal assumptions explicit. Why can't individuals change their social contexts? Shouldn't individual assumptions and habits developed at workplaces generalize to what we expect from our countries' foreign policies? Why not? After all, the claim that that social context causes individual action has not been tested in organizational behavior. Rather, it has been used as an unexamined framework for interpreting correlational data taken at the same point in time, and we all know that correlational data tell us nothing about causal direction.

What Professor Spreitzer proposes is actually a radical critique of the implicit, unexamined causal assumptions in much of our work—international management assumes culture is causal, social identity theory assumes identity groups are causal, and so on. Only in the area of small group behavior do we find research that proposes and tests theories of mutual causality between individuals and characteristics of larger aggregates (e.g., Homans, 1975; and for recent examples of both causal directions see Lüken & Simon, 2005, and Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004). Yet, we know that social contexts like cultures do change, that individuals do make differing choices about which social group is more important to their identity. That is, individuals can make a difference. Her work calls on us all to stop assuming causality runs from the larger social aggregate alone, and to follow her in creatively testing how and when individuals affect their social context.

Of course, such an unconventional approach to our deep-seated causal assumptions is jarring. As Davis (1971) has argued, when too much of our fundamental assumption ground is questioned, we are less likely to see the work as interesting, and more likely to think it is absurd. Certainly, a threat to our fundamental causal schema invites attack. And like all pioneering social science research, there is something here to attack. Professor Spreitzer notes many of these limitations herself. However, I do have two additional concerns about some of the logical argument for the claim that workplace empowerment will reduce wars.

First, we are still missing too many logical connections. Most importantly, how and why do possibly empowerment-changed employee or citizen attitudes and skills affect national policies of war and peace. How exactly does a better understanding of how the give and take of collaborative decision making affect the bellicosity of a nation's foreign policy? What do these employees or citizens do differently and how does that operate through the political process to affect national policies? Without specifying how the individual affects the aggregate, the correlations reported in this paper are subject to too many alternative causal explanations. I hope these logical linkages can be developed in future work.

Second, remaining within the workplace, do we know that non-empowering supervision leads to less violent employee behavior? Does not evidence indicate that workplace violence is better predicted by the level of violence just outside the office door, than it is by any management actions (LeBlanc & Kelloway, E. K., 2002)? If we are not confident that managers' actions have much effect on violence, employee affect (Staw & Clausen, 1986), and much else of employees' organizational behavior, how can we be confident that employee empowerment will lead to the complex string of employee/citizen actions outside the workplace that can foster peace? There are just too many other variables that could spuriously account for the relationship between national unrest and workplace empowerment to conclude that any one causes the other. We simply know too little about how the ways employees are treated at work might affect their actions as citizens (or family members or friends). Yet, Professor Spreitzer makes a provocative and important argument, suggesting any number of lines of research to test her claims. For example, there have been many documented examples of executives undertaking empowerment efforts; it should be a straightforward matter to see if unrest or violent crime declined in those jurisdictions. Professor Spreitzer spurs us all to examine the logical gaps in her unconventional causal approach as well as our own unexamined causal assumptions.

Organizational Behavior's Limited Dependent Variables

Two decades ago Staw (1984) suggested that organizational behavior had become overly limited and so the field was at risk of becoming moribund. He suggested that an ever finer parsing of moderators and mediators to explain the same few dependent variables reflected a field that no longer held interest. Professor Spreitzer tackles this charge by leaping away from organizational behavior's narrow focus on its well-understood dependent variables to seek to explain peace, that is certainly different, and nothing more important! I know the troubles such a leap invites. My own recent focus is on the effects of organizations on national wealth. It has provoked concerns about how to define and measure national wealth. Certainly, the construct and measurement issues in this paper also need attention.

As Professor Spreitzer notes herself, mere absence of war is not peace, since autocrats can suppress discontent. So, while I am enthusiastic about adding more important dependent variables to our field's domain, this first pass at conceptualizing and measuring peace is not yet satisfactory. For example, this measure of peace used here has two parts—one what anyone would think of as absence of peace, the European Intelligence Unit's 'unrest'. However, Professor Spreitzer adds Transparency International's 'corruption' as another indicator of peace. There might be many reasons for believing that corruption might cause war (or that war may foster corruption), but war and corruption are different things. This is not the typical quibble with the use of surrogate measures when studying questions at the national level, but a straightforward concern with construct validity. Here we see that both war and corruption have equally strong direct relationships with the empowerment variables, and so the confounding of peace and corruption simply undermines the case. Corruption is certainly a bad thing, but it is itself a complex construct subject to much dispute (e.g., Deflem, 1995); the study of how management practices might lead to war or peace is challenging enough without confounding it with other broad and controversial constructs.

If the field of organizational behavior is to become less moribund it needs to bring its considerable strengths to bear on messy, hard-to-measure problems. Professor Spreitzer's paper is an example of how difficult it is to build new measures of innovative dependent variables. Yet, someone must begin, so that others have a something to criticize and improve. Some of this work might involve putting together measures from large public data bases designed for other questions, producing heterogeneous collections of measures. And heterogeneous measures of complex constructs will always invite scrutiny. Professor Spreitzer is to be commended for taking the risks that are necessary to keeping the field vital, and making it less likely that we will see our field called too narrow in future reviews.

Changing the World

No one would undertake a paper this daring without some hope of making the world a better place. We all hope that the ideas Professor Spreitzer introduces will lead to a better understanding of war and peace, and so policies and actions that can make a difference. As much as I would hope this to be the case, already I can see that her work may change the world of organizational behavior. Gretchen Spreitzer's paper is so daring that it gives birth to any number of interesting substantive questions about managerial effects on war and peace. Yet, equally important to us is that by taking on a new and difficult question, she has helped to draw attention to some implicit assumptions in organizational behavior, and helped to re-energize the field more generally. Organizations are important in our societies and those of us who know a great deal about how they work, know a great deal about something of wider importance

than trying to squeeze a smidgen more efficiency out of them. This paper is exactly what we need to get us excited about our field's possibilities again.

Author biography

Professor Jone L. Pearce, is Professor of Organization and Management, The Paul Merage School of Business of the University of California, Irvine, is the author of three books and over 80 scholarly articles on such topics as volunteer motivation and leadership, merit pay, trust, and management in formerly communist countries. She has served as President of the (American) Academy of Management, and currently on the Scientific Committee for Tilburg University (Netherlands)'s CentER, a Fellow of the Sunningdale Institute (U.K.) and on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals.

References

Davis, M. S. (1971). That's interesting! *Philosophy of the Social Sciences, 1*, 309–344.

Deflem, M. (1995). Corruption, law, and justice: A conceptual clarification. *Journal of Criminal Justice, 23*, 243–258.

Homans, G. C. (1975). *The human group*. London: Routledge.

House, R. J., Hanges, P. J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. W., & Gupta, V. (Eds.). (2004). *Culture, leadership, and organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

LeBlanc, M. M., & Kelloway, E. K. (2002). Predictors and outcomes of workplace violence and aggression. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 87*, 444–453.

Lüken, M., & Simon, B. (2005). Cognitive and affective experience of minority and majority members. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 41*, 396–413.

Pearce, J. L. (2001). *Organization and Management in the Embrace of Government*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pearce, J. L., Xin, K., Xu, J., & Rao, A. (2005). Why the rich get richer: The role of organizations in the wealth of nations. Academy of Management Annual Conference, Honolulu, HI.

Rao, A. N., Pearce, J. L., & Xin, K. (2005). Governments, reciprocal exchange and trust among business associates. *Journal of International Business Studies, 36*, 104–118.

Staw, B. M. (1984). Organizational behavior: A review and reformulation of the field's outcome variables. *Annual Review of Psychology, 35*, 627–666.

Staw, B., Bell, N., & Clausen, J. (1986). The dispositional approach to job attitudes: A lifetime longitudinal test. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 31*, 56–77.

Thomas-Hunt, M. C., & Phillips, K. W. (2004). When what you know is not enough. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 30*, 1585–1598.