Where has everyone gone? Re-integrating people into accounts of organisational practice

Mark Thompson
Judge Business School
University of Cambridge

This essay seeks to draw attention to the near invisibility of forms of subjective epistemology that include motivation, emotion, and intentionality within organizational research, particularly within accounts of practice. Although organisational researchers within the 'practice tradition' have achieved much to date in revealing apparently fixed, immutable organisational forms to be processes that are emergent and thus contestable, such accounts often stop at discussing the way in which such conflicts are played out at the level of the individual.

This is an arguably important omission, that can result in an incomplete, depersonalised analysis that engages well with physical and social dimensions of organizational life, but which remains mute about the human impact, or morality, of such 'sociomaterial' interaction, since our descriptions of the emergent interaction between organisations and organisational artefacts - between social and physical agency - rarely comment on the significance of such interaction for human beings.

In particular, it is argued that 'sociomaterial' approaches to organisational practice (e.g. Orlikowski 2007) represent an exclusive duality between social and material agency in which individual agency is often conflated with social agency, on the basis that although in theory people 'could do otherwise', they tend to choose instead to replicate pre-existing routines. In their tendency to take social agency as 'shorthand' for personal agency, 'sociomaterial' approaches downplay the myriad opportunities available to individuals to challenge or subvert existing practices.

In response, the essay proposes that organisational researchers recognise a 'triality' of physical, social, and personal components to practice, focusing in particular on the way in which these fuse together in the reflexive intentionality of motivated people. Building on this insight, the essay calls for a much closer integration of traditional sociological accounts of social generation that involve notions of 'structure' and 'agency', with social psychological accounts of personal generation involving notions of subjective and objective, and builds an initial framework for linking the two fields of enquiry at the level of practice. Arguing for an explicit, broad recognition of the subjective within epistemology is not, of course, such a new idea: in particular, Popper (1994) outlined three 'worlds': the world of (material) things, the world of subjective (personal) perceptions, and the world of abstract objective (social) knowledge.

But how is this subjective component of practice best conceptualised? Drawing on Turner (1999), it is argued that individual agency is explainable only with reference to shared social context, and yet is not explainable solely in these terms, since practice also contains a large tacit element: social rules (context) are necessary for practice, but practice is not reducible to social rules alone. The essay argues that although tacit knowledge (e.g. Blackler 1995) forms a large component of this subjective component, so too, following Pickering (1993) does human intentionality. In this way, it is possible to talk of 'nonhuman agency' comprising both social and technical artefacts, as well as the intentionality of 'human agency' directing itself at various interests in relation to this, all three – social, technical, and personal – finding expression only through practice, all three emerging independently from the encounter.

If practice is the 'engine' of social constitution, and subjective intentionality is a key input and output of this generative process, then it is arguable that discussions of practice need to start to direct the same sort of attention to the personal as to the social and physical – to all three of Popper's worlds. However, to do so arguably requires a 'rebalancing' of traditional macro-level sociological accounts of structure and agency involving popular theoretical frameworks that focus on sociality, such as Giddens' structuration (1984) or actor-network theory (e.g. Callon 1986), with a greater acknowledgement of (social) psychological accounts of the interrelationship between subjective and objective, focusing on person-ality. The essay uses the example of Giddens' structuration theory to illustrate the potential danger of sociological predominance in accounts of practice, drawing on Willmott (1986) to argue that Giddens' neat *duality* of structure and agency, whose agency is primarily peoples' enactment of social routines, offers an inadequate account of subjectivity, since it rests in turn upon a *dualism* of self-other in which insecure selves, wholly disconnected from the other, strive to stave off ontological anxiety; and thus is the role of individual agency underplayed.

In contrast, Barnes (2001) argues that system persistence – the enactment of social rules – is much better explained because people are 'mutually susceptible'; their actions are always framed and considered in terms of how they will be socially perceived. In this view, there is an indistinct line between Self and Other, where people are motivated to do the ongoing work required to continually update their understandings of rules in order to enhance others' perceptions of them. In this way the dualities of subjective/objective and structure/agency come together in practice, as physical, social, and personal 'structures' combine together in the agency of reflexive, intentional people.

Having argued that people are socially motivated, thus establishing the underpinnings of the interrelationship between the personal and the social in reflexive intentionality, the paper then attempts to sketch an explanation for its mechanics: how actual intentions may be formed and modified within our reflexive, mutually susceptible condition – and thus how the nature of our practice is shaped. In particular, Margaret Archer's (2000)'s extensive discussion of practice outlines the workings of peoples' reflexive 'internal conversations' – a continual self-monitoring in relation to our goals, our emotional reactions to this self-perception, and the often complex compromises that we may make as a result. It is suggested that Archer's writings in this regard may offer a potentially fruitful framework for further research.

Finally, the essay acknowledges that if studies of organisational practice need arguably to engage more fully with aspects of *being*, then dealing with the invisible is likely to present considerable empirical challenges. In particular, a described by Goffman (1959), it appears that the emergent Self may deploy various identities in relation to different social and material constraints – but also that, in contrast to Goffman, recent ethnographers of personhood do not distinguish so easily between 'selves' and their various deployed identities, which co-evolve over time. There is therefore significant further work required if researchers of organising are to reintegrate personality into accounts of practice, and to move a concern with the role of the subjective in social generation out of the wings and into centre stage.