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Author

Poropat, Arthur

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Comparing apples with oranges: Teaching and the issue of incommensurability in organisational studies

Arthur Poropat^a

^a*School of Management, Griffith University, Australia*

Abstract

Paradigm incommensurability has been an issue in organisation studies research for at least the last twenty years, however it also has implications for academic teaching. A range of methods for dealing with incommensurability are critiqued along with some promising suggestions based on praxis as opposed to theory. Suggestions for academic teaching emphasise the role of mutual exploration and development of ideas.

Keywords

Paradigm Incommensurability; Teaching; Theory; Praxis

Introduction

It is over two decades since the publication of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) pioneering analysis of approaches to organisational research. In their study they observed that organisational research can be conceptualised as falling into several 'paradigms' which reflect researchers' assumptions about issues of ontology and epistemology. Although there are reasons to question the nature of the dimensions defined by Burrell and Morgan (Connell & Nord, 1996) their framework has formed the basis for a broader critique of organisational theory (Cooper & Burrell, 1988), new approaches to organisational research (e.g. Hassard, 1991) and systems design (Goles & Hirscheim, 2000), and a general appreciation of the multiplicity of perspectives adopted in the field highlighted particularly by the development of metaphorical approaches to organisation (Morgan, 1997).

One of the basic tenets of Burrell and Morgan's analysis is the idea that different approaches to organisational analysis may not be merely different - they are often incommensurable. For Burrell and Morgan the paradigms are mutually exclusive in that the approaches which fall within each paradigm are based on meta-theoretical assumptions which contradict those of alternative paradigms. One may be able to adopt different paradigms sequentially but cannot use more than one at any particular instance because in doing so 'we defy the assumptions of all

the others' (p.25). No synthesis is possible - different paradigms are always left talking at cross-purposes.

Much of recent meta-theoretical discussion in behavioural science generally and organisational science specifically has been focussed around this problem of the multi-paradigmatic state of current research (Eastman & Bailey, 1996; Held, 1995; Parker, 1995; Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). For many the thought that different approaches to organisation can not be integrated is a difficult pill to swallow. Such has been the level of debate about this idea that Jackson and Carter (1993) labelled it a 'paradigm war'.

In teaching within the field of organisational studies paradigm incommensurability raises the issue of how best to communicate an understanding to students of the nature of organisations when it is almost inevitable that many students will be coming from positions which are mutually incompatible with those held by their teachers. This is only made worse when the diversity of positions held among academics or within organisations themselves is considered. As an example it is possible using Burrell and Morgan's dimensions to similarly analyse organisational teacher, student and manager paradigms. Table 1 presents a preliminary comparison based on differences cited elsewhere between academics and practitioners (Tsang, 1997), as well as personal experience of teaching.

The point of this analysis is not to establish once and for all the paradigm positions of these groups, particularly considering the relative diversity of each. Instead a general assessment of commonly held positions within each group has been developed by way of illustration. Although the details of this analysis are open to argument, it still supports the following conclusion: the dilemma of paradigm incommensurability is not one just for the researchers - academics wearing their teaching hats also need to pay heed. Therefore in the rest of this article I will outline the nature of incommensurability and some of its implications for academic teaching, before going on to highlight possible approaches for dealing with the issue.

Table 1 Teaching and Practice Paradigms

	Academic	Student	Practitioner
	Nominalist or Realist	Realist	Realist
Subjective-Objective Dimension	Positivist	Anti-Positivist	Anti-Positivist
	Voluntarist or Determinist	Voluntarist	Determinist
	Nomothetic	Idiographic	Idiographic
	Stability	Change	Change
Theory of Society Dimension	Conflict or Integration	Integration	Integration
	Coordination	Coordination	Coordination
	Consensus or Coercion	Coercion	Consensus

The Nature of Incommensurability

Just as metaphor has proven useful as a tool for understanding the nature of paradigms (Morgan, 1997), analogy may help to appreciate the nature of incommensurability itself. The term incommensurable itself refers to lack of a common measure, a problem of comparing apples with oranges. Apples and oranges show some types of incommensurability but not others. Apple growers and orange growers can compare weights and prices per tonne. Biologists can compare fruiting strategies while nutritionists discuss vitamins, carbohydrates and fibre. Each of these are forms of commensurability allowing comparison between apples and oranges. However when eating or cooking, preferences for, and qualities of, each fruit are not interchangeable in any simple manner - apples and oranges are just different and bring different experiences to different people.

These leads to the observation that there are different forms of (in)commensurability. Taste and preference are at best fuzzy concepts whilst being very tangible experiences which people are able to discuss adequately but without precision. But one person's tastes and preferences are not necessarily the same as anyone else's. Simply because two people are comparing the same dimension, taste, doesn't mean they will assess it in the same way: one may prefer apples while another prefers oranges. This amounts to experiential incommensurability - one person's felt experience can not be directly compared with another's.

A common way of negotiating experiential incommensurability is through developing shared frames of reference by identifying common qualities, leading to common ways of talking along the lines of Wittgenstein's language games (Monk, 1991). Typically this form of commensurability is

developed by abstracting from experience. These abstractions produce dimensions of measurement which allow comparison (e.g. colour, weight and caloric content) but give rise to incommensurability between dimensions - e.g. colour and weight are not directly comparable and hence illustrate dimensional or conceptual incommensurability. This usually causes no problem because the different dimensions whilst incommensurable are not necessarily incompatible and may be complementary - differences in dimension and experience do not have to preclude the existence of other dimensions and experiences.

Logical incommensurability however involves one measure or discourse rendering another meaningless (Jackson & Carter, 1991). Without disparaging (or praising) either tradition it would be safe to suggest that mysticism and economics are examples of such discourses. Mystics and economists can look at the same fruit, but their appreciation of it is profoundly different - within one tradition an apple has financial value, within the other its essence is intimately connected with its experience. Although one could alternate between a mystic and an economic appreciation these perspectives are sufficiently different to suggest that it is impossible to use both at the same time. It is not merely a case of using complementary concepts or dimensions because the assumptions which underlie the dimensions incompatible. To reduce an apple to a unit of value, although coherent from an economic point of view, does a severe violence to mystical appreciation of an apple's essence. Even when using similar words they invoke disparate meanings e.g. value, transformation, representation. Thus these are logically incommensurable paradigms.

To close the analogy, similar types of incommensurability exist when discussing organisations. Different individual experiences of organisation are unique and non-substitutable. Participation in the same discourse or language game allows coordination of behaviour and discussion (Maturana & Varela, 1980) within and about organisations but in doing so loses the uniqueness of felt experience. And as Burrell and Morgan (1979) point out the assumptions upon which discourses or paradigms are based are often logically incompatible. As a result the problem of teaching in any meaningful manner when paradigms are incommensurable remains profound.

Incomplete Responses to Incommensurability

The analysis of the nature of incommensurability given above suggests a number of things for dealing with the problem. Firstly it highlights several important negative conclusions. To begin with, the solution to the problem of incommensurability is not simply a case of doing better science, or getting

better measures, contrary to what writers such as Hogan & Sinclair (1996) would suggest. There already exist remarkably powerful measures of concepts as nebulous as personality and value. Money for example as a measure of value has proven its power through its successful use as a means of exchange and relative valuation for things as varied as guns, food, sex and medicine. Yet the revulsion people feel at putting a price on what they find most sacred is more than the horror at being faced with a choice of the relative value they wish to place on things - it is the recognition that the most personal of choices do not fit neatly into a one-dimensional concept of value. People do make choices between career, love, spirit, pleasure, health etc everyday, but treating them as one set of values denies the substance of experience. There is something about life which resists abstraction to dimensions, as useful as we find these to be, a problem which is given voice each time a student complains about 'being boxed' by a personality or cognitive assessment.

A second negative conclusion is that simply crossing boundaries of incommensurability will not make the problem go away. Hassard's (1991) attempt to conduct multi-paradigm research on the same organisation is a case in point. In effect his approach involved four parallel analyses using each of Burrell and Morgan's paradigms, followed by a discussion of comparisons and contrasts provided by each methodology. At the very least it must be said that this offers a more comprehensive approach to research or teaching. However rather than resolving the issue of incommensurability Hassard's approach appears to either revivify the distinctions between paradigms or imply some form of meta-paradigmatic decision-making process which incorporates paradigmatic assumptions leading to circular reasoning (Parker & McHugh, 1991). Rather than transcending the problem Hassard's strategy recreates and potentially obscures it. The teaching profession echoes this problem in calls for 'flexible delivery' wherein the fundamental differences in approaches used are ignored and instead treated as equivalents.

Other approaches which have been suggested but are incapable of solving the problem are based upon appeals to higher authority, be it reason or power. Scherer and Steinmann (1999) give a brief discussion on the problems with either form of strategy. Reason, although it appears to provide a sure footing for deciding between paradigms is nonetheless reliant on paradigmatic assumptions. Paraphrasing the argument they present, every logical syllogism starts with propositions which are assumed to be given. However if the assumptions about the beginning propositions are questioned further syllogisms are required for their support, and

so on and on in an infinite regress (Albert, cited in Scherer & Steinmann, 1999). Each iteration merely rediscovers the assumptions on which the previous one was based. Therefore if two positions are incompatible appeals to reason will only produce an infinite regress or circular arguments. Teachers who rely on their argumentative ability can not assume that students will, or should be, swayed by their logic because of this.

Pfeffer (1993) on the other hand proposed that scientific gatekeepers insist on certain standards of acceptable scientific practice within the discipline, an autocratic proposal which is clearly dogmatic and antiscientific (Canella & Paetzold, 1994). Likewise academic teachers are prone to resting upon their own claims to higher authority. The implicit power structure in universities has teachers both providing 'knowledge' and assessing / rewarding / punishing students according to their compliance with the explicit and implicit demands of the system. Academics may make their claims to authority on the basis of reason or knowledge, but as noted above this is ultimately as arbitrary as Pfeffer's call for standards of practice. This seems to be a poor basis for learning anything apart from mimicry.

Theory and Praxis

Scherer and Steinmann (1999), drawing inspiration from Lueken (1992) suggest a way out of the dilemma of paradigm incommensurability for researchers, but their recommendation has application to teaching as will be seen. Their model emphasises the lived nature of knowledge by making praxis (actions or systems of actions) the basis of their model. For Scherer & Steinmann theories and theoretical praxis arise from a pre-theoretical praxis rather than the reverse. The purpose of theoretical praxis is to develop alternatives when practical know-how needs reconsideration. Theory-supported praxis which follows this review then forms the basis for further development of pre-theoretical praxis as presented in Figure 1.

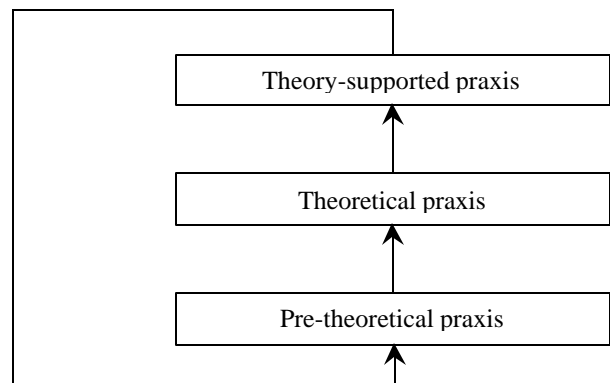


Figure 1 The Theory-Praxis Relationship (Scherer & Steinmann, 1999)

In summary Scherer's and Steinmann's claim is that incommensurability only arises in discussions of theoretical praxis, and only then when a process of reasoned argumentation has highlighted fundamental inconsistencies between positions. Where orthodox scientific reasoning would attempt to resolve this by questioning assumptions leading to an infinite regress or circular argument, the solution that follows from this alternative model is that the proponents instead explore each other's pre-theoretical praxis. In other words they should try walking in each other's shoes to come to an understanding of their felt experience. On the basis of this they are then able to begin collaboratively developing a new theoretical praxis based on their newly-shared appreciation of their joined actions and forms of life.

This approach has already received some inadvertent confirmation in the form of a special issue of *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Writers from disparate and, in Burrell's and Morgan's terms, incommensurable positions were invited to provide accounts of their paradigmatic positions. Gergen and Thatchenkery's (1996) postmodern philosophical critique would fit into Burrell's and Morgan's radical humanist paradigm while Hogan and Sinclair's (1996) defence of empirical research is clearly a functionalist position. Although not as easily categorised, Chris Argyris's (1996) action science shares aspects of a radical structuralist paradigm but Connell and Nord's (1996) "agnostic, value-oriented framework" is somewhere between the others. Despite this degree of paradigmatic discord between the various contributors, Eastman and Bailey in their review of the special issue stated that "we see in all of them taken together a charter for organisational scholarship that is more normatively candid and action-oriented than has been characteristic in the discipline" (Eastman & Bailey, 1996; p.455).

Eastman's and Bailey's point of agreement is entirely in sympathy with the proposal put forward by Scherer and Steinmann. This is not to down-play the differences between the paradigms, nor to suggest they have been resolved - they are still clearly incommensurable positions. However it does highlight that the point at which agreement is possible, and the potential for traversing the boundaries between these paradigms presents itself, is the point of praxis.

There are clear implications for the teaching relationship from this discussion. Academics, students and managers may occupy different incommensurable positions but there is always the possibility of transcending those positions through collaboratively exploring each other's worlds. The

suggestion that researchers and practitioners need to have an ongoing dialogue is relatively common - Tsang (1997) is just one recent example. Academic teachers are often exhorted in similar manner. The problem has often been however that the dialogue has been between alternative forms of theoretical praxis without a common pre-theoretical basis. As a consequence participants are likely to do little more than rediscover how different they are.

Instead academic teachers need to more strongly emphasise approaches which encourage mutual experience and allow for development of new frameworks. The growing popularity of action learning is a case in point (Marsick, V. J. , 1999; Wade, S., & Hammick, M. 1999), but so are 'newer' teaching approaches such as active dialogue. In any case the approach used needs to be continually refreshed by revisiting each other's world-space. Any fallback to a formulaic style has the potential to subtly re-impose a dominant paradigm, something all too easy given the power differentials which exist in universities where marks are the coin of the realm and academics are the only dispensers thereof. A genuine engagement with the experience of others will instead allow for more honest learning for not only students but for academics as well.

Conclusion

Incommensurability is not a curse. As has been pointed out elsewhere acceptance of incommensurability empowers alternative approaches to knowledge and its creation (Jackson & Carter, 1991). Those alternative approaches include the approaches which students bring to their studies. However failure to honestly confront paradigm incommensurability when it arises is both intellectually suspect and a denial of an opportunity for growth in knowledge. This is just as true for the teaching relationship as it is for research. Honest teaching requires a mutuality of exploration commonly absent from university settings. The role of the academic teacher therefore should more strongly emphasise the creative development of settings for dialogue.

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Address for correspondence

Arthur Poropat
 School of Management
 Nathan Campus
 Griffith University
 Nathan Q 4111
 Australia
 (617) 3875 7757
 arthur.poropat@mailbox.gu.edu.au