

On agency and action

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Abstract

To date writers in the field of organizational knowledge appear to have been reluctant to engage directly with discourse theory, perhaps through a concern that introducing discourse means that knowledge and knowing will disappear from view. However, our aim in this paper is to suggest that engaging with notions of discourse can usefully enable us to shed light on aspects of organizational knowledge that have hitherto been hidden in the shadows. We illustrate this through considering two oft-debated issues within the field of organizational discourse - agency and action.

We do not suggest that this will produce quick or easy answers nor that discourse theory provides the 'best' way for thinking about organizational knowledge. Rather, in common with recent calls (e.g. Contu and Willmott, 2003, Hull, 1999, Alvesson, 2004), we believe that it will enable us to engage in debates that are important for the development of both theory and research strategies in the field. We offer this paper then, as an initial foray into these debates, with the hope that it will prompt others to join us in the discussion.

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1. Introduction and Background

In this paper we aim to show how engaging with thinking and research on organizational discourse can usefully enable us to shed light on aspects of organizational knowledge that have hitherto been hidden in the shadows. We illustrate this through considering two oft-debated issues within the field of organizational discourse - agency and action.

We have selected agency and action as our focus since assumptions about these concepts are inherent but implicit within most perspectives on organizational knowledge, while their ramifications tend to be glossed over within the literature. It is our contention that these assumptions lie at the heart of the web of relationships between individuals, organizations, practice and knowledge; which are themselves the subject of most theoretical and empirical work within the field. We also suggest that since issues of agency and action are central themes within organization theory, those interested in organizational knowledge should actively participate in, rather than sit on the sidelines or avoid, this broader academic debate.

Debates around agency draw our attention to the assumptions we make about who and/or what within organizations are assumed to have a capacity or capability to “‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs” (Rossi, 2004, p5). The relationship between structure and agency is a central part of this debate and, while generic answers may have a limited usefulness (Caldwell, 2005), this does encourage us to consider how and under what circumstances agency may be restricted. Action is generally positioned as some observable outcome or effect of agency; the ‘making a difference’. Debates here concern the characteristics of action itself including its origin and nature (whether it is intentional, spontaneous, individual or collective for example). This is often associated with, what Chia refers to as, “the art of doing” (2003, p955) but there is generally a recognition that ‘doing’ can and does take a variety of different forms with a particular challenge from discourse theorists to the conceptual separation of ‘talk’ and ‘action’, ‘saying’ and ‘doing’ (Oswick and Keenoy, 1997).

We begin our discussion with a brief review of the main perspectives on organizational knowledge (Section 2). Here, we distinguish between conceptions of knowledge that emphasise ‘it’ as a disembodied entity and those which stress the embodiment or ‘situatedness’ of knowledge and the importance of knowing. These perspectives are referred to as ‘knowledge as object’ and ‘situated knowledge’ respectively in the remainder of the paper. We acknowledge

that this division may carry the risk of obscuring the differences that lie within each of these broad categorisations but feel this approach is justified in the interests of pursuing the aims of our paper. In particular, making this distinction allows us to apply a discussion of agency and action to both the notion of knowledge as an object (e.g. capable of agency, as a target of action) and to the range of actors and processes that are entwined within situated views.

Before moving on to this more detailed consideration, however, we first (Section 3) explore agency and action in more depth; setting this within the broader context of ‘organizational discourse’. As with our overview of organizational knowledge, we have not attempted to present a complete review of these areas. Rather we outline key aspects of the debate which appear to us to have relevance to the two approaches to organizational knowledge outlined above. These are then explored further in the main body of the paper as we consider how first agency and then action are conceptualised within each of the ‘knowledge as object’ and ‘situated knowledge’ perspectives. We focus specifically on the way in which assumptions about agency and action shape our understanding of knowledge and knowledge processes and highlight the potential for different understandings to emerge when these assumptions are challenged.

We do not suggest that this will produce quick or easy answers nor that discourse theory provides the ‘best’ way for thinking about organizational knowledge. Rather, in common with recent calls (e.g. Contu and Willmott, 2003, Hull, 1999, Alvesson, 2004), we believe that it will enable us to engage in debates that are important for the development of both theory and research strategies in the field. We offer this paper then, as an initial foray into these debates, with the hope that it will prompt others to join us in the discussion.

2. Organizational knowledge

It has become standard practice for the majority of articles that position themselves within the field of organizational knowledge to include a discussion of (at least) three topics: the importance of knowledge within organizations; the problematic nature of knowledge itself; the different conceptualisations of organizational knowledge that are found within the academic literature. Such discussions are key aspects of the academic discourse about knowledge itself and are all worthy of further investigation in and of their own right (Schultze and Stabell, 2004).

Many commentators (e.g. Davenport and Hall, 2002) have however suggested that the key debate here is that concerning the different conceptualisations of knowledge. Drawing on this, we therefore suggest that it is useful within the context of exploring agency and action to distinguish between conceptions of knowledge that emphasise 'it' as a disembodied entity and those which stress the embodiment or 'situatedness' of knowledge and the importance of knowing.

In the first conception, which we label 'knowledge as object' in the remainder of the paper, there is an emphasis on identifying, moving and managing knowledge itself; which is conceptualised as an identifiable object albeit one which may take a variety of forms (tacit, explicit, individual or collective for example). While there has been considerable criticism of this approach for its treatment of knowledge (Marshall and Brady, 2001) and for emphasising an "epistemology of possession" (Cook and Brown, 1999, p381) this conception of knowledge continues to be utilised in both academic and practitioner literature, particularly that which falls under the banner of 'knowledge management' (Schultze and Stabell, 2004).

The second conception aims to "seek richer explanations by looking at the context and looking at knowledge via practice" (Brown and Duguid, 2001, p200). Building particularly on the work of Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998), this attempts to move away from both context-free and static notions of knowledge and presents a more complex relationship between notions of knowledge, knowing and individuals; a relationship which is constructed through and by the practices (actions) in which people engage and which we therefore term 'situated knowledge'.

Making this distinction allows us to apply a discussion of agency and action to both the notion of knowledge as an object (e.g. capable of agency, as a target of action) and to the range of actors and processes that are entwined within situated views. Before developing this discussion however, it is necessary to reflect on the debates regarding agency and action within writings on organizational discourse itself.

3. Agency and Action as concepts within Organizational Discourse

As with our overview of organizational knowledge, we have not attempted to present a complete review of agency and action as such a discussion would be far too ambitious a project for a

conference paper. Rather we focus on aspects which we subsequently expand and relate to the two categorisations of organizational knowledge we have outlined above.

3.1 What is ‘within Organizational Discourse’?

There is of course a longstanding discussion regarding the relationship between knowledge and discourse, most particularly in relation to the writings of Foucault (1974, 1980) and Lyotard (1984) who position knowledge as embedded within power relations. Within organizational studies there is a particular focus on how discourse “brings into being objects of knowledge” (Hardy, 2004, p1).

It is important to acknowledge, however, the huge variety of writing and research that the term ‘organizational discourse’ encompasses (Grant et al., 1998, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000, Fairclough, 1992, Grant et al., 2001, Potter, 2003, Heracleous and Hendry, 2000). The term discourse itself is ill defined, being used to refer to many forms of language and language-use but also to denote “a group of statements that provides a language for talking about a topic and a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge about that topic” (Du Gay et al., 1996, p265) together with the associated processes of production, dissemination and consumption (Hardy, 2004).

However, some common threads can be established and many of these threads build on notions of social constructionism. Most notably, adopting a discursive perspective entails the rejection of viewing discourse “as a direct access route to the real psychological business” (Wetherell et al., 2001, p10). Discourses are not seen as a straight forward “representations of some really real reality” (Stenner and Eccleston, 1994, p87) from which meaning can be unproblematically deduced (Tsoukas, 2005). Rather attention is given to what versions of reality are constructed and how such constructions are maintained through discourse (Hardy et al., 2000).

Discourses are generally seen therefore to have structuring properties that have an impact on organizational life. But this impact is not straightforward as we are exposed to a multitude of overlapping and often contradictory discourses. Writers therefore also pay considerable attention to ‘situatedness’ (to adapt oft-used term from the organizational knowledge literature e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991), considering different aspects of local, social and historical context as important in analysing and understanding discourse.

Those examining discourse adopt a wide range of techniques and vary enormously in what they do in their analysis. Phillips et al (2004) suggest that the primary focus is on examining “bodies of texts” which may include “written documents, verbal reports, artwork, spoken words, pictures, symbols, buildings and other artefacts” (p636). Analysts may focus on detailed linguistic structure or particular genres or features of these texts (such as rhetoric e.g. Symon (2005) and narrative e.g. Rhodes and Brown (2005)). There are also many approaches that draw on Foucault’s notions of dominant discourses and these tend to focus on the dynamics of power relations through language (Fairclough, 1998). There is increasing attention to the extent to which levels of analysis are inextricably related; as Fairclough suggests “one cannot choose between big ‘D’ and small ‘d’ approaches” (2005, p5); although there are dangers that research attempting such an inclusive approach can become unwieldy. This is further complicated by efforts to examine relationships between discourse and other aspects of organizational life which have been adopted in response to concerns about the reductionist and determinist tendency of discursive approaches (Reed, 2000).

From the above description it can be seen that there are clear contrasts between the conceptualisation of discourse, discursive practices and texts and how notions of communication and language tend to be regarded within perspectives on organizational knowledge. For example, many theories of organizational knowledge draw distinctions between explicit and tacit knowledge based on attributes of codification or articulation (e.g. Nonaka and Toyama, 2005) Here the ‘problem’ with language is often seen as relating only to the tacit dimension as explicit knowledge is largely construed as transparent once codification has been achieved.

Social interaction and communication processes are clearly central to the ideas encapsulated in writing on the social and situated nature of knowledge and knowing (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993, Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001, Wenger, 1998). However the notion of discursive practice is rarely unpacked. While aspects such as story-telling do receive attention (e.g. Orr, 1996) there is considerable scope for further drawing on ideas from organizational discourse research to further expand our understanding of the complex interaction between discourse and organizational knowledge at a number of different levels of analysis.

When reflecting on this, it also seems appropriate to suggest that discursive approaches are typically more accepting of fragility, uncertainty and conflict in organizational life (Rhodes and

Brown, 2005). While there are notable exceptions (such as Lanzara and Patriotta, 2001 for example) there does appear to be more emphasis within the organizational knowledge literature on coherence and community (Contu and Willmott, 2003).

However, it is not out intention here to suggest that discourse theory has an answer or solution to issues of agency and action. Rather that there is here at least a debate about such matters which appears to be neglected in the field of organizational knowledge. This debate is examined further in the next two sections of our paper.

3.2 On agency

A central debate in discourse theory relates to the degree of agency ascribed to individual actors. While Foucault-inspired analysts are often criticised as reducing individual actors to “puppets” (Newton, 1996, p718), many others (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987) suggest that there are frequently an array of positions available and that individual actors exert a degree of agency in selecting from and combining discourses at any moment in time and indeed the agency to shift between positions, for example, in turns in talk or paragraphs of text. Debates on agency are thus further interwoven with notions of acceptance and resistance (Iedema and Wodak, 1999). There is therefore the potential to consider both “how people use language” and “how language uses people” (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000, p1126).

Furthermore since not all agency is equal, attention is drawn to the issue of power, an issue which has to date been under explored in the literature on organizational knowledge (Contu and Willmott, 2003). A consideration of the debate regarding agency within discourse theory can therefore prompt us to ask questions such as: What views on agency emerge in theories of organizational knowledge? Is agency considered problematic? What unwritten assumptions about agency are there? Who or what is assumed to have agency (and who is not)? When is agency claimed or rejected by organizational actors? When (and why) are some forms of agency more influential or legitimate than others?

3.4 On action

Discourse theory rejects the idea that talk and action are conceptually independent and contests the primacy frequently given within organization studies to the latter. A discursive perspective considers how different aspects of organizational life are “enacted, given meaning and

constituted through discursive activity” (Oswick and Keenoy, 1997, p5). This is addressed at different levels of analysis such that both “how texts scale up and how Discourse bears down” are considered (Hardy, 2004, p421). A key point here for the field of organizational knowledge is to consider how, from both this bottom up and top down perspective, discursive activity can act to construct both objects of knowledge and processes of knowing.

This perspective invites us to move away from questions of what is knowledge to consider question such as: When, why and how do notions of knowledge and knowing emerge within discursive activity? Are some constructions more stable than others? How are notions of knowledge positioned in relationship to action? What are the effects of this positioning?

4. Agency and Organizational Knowledge

Having broadly mapped out the terrain of our debate in the preceding sections, we now move to consider the notion of agency in more detail, specifically as it relates to our broad categorisation of approaches to organizational knowledge introduced in Section 2. As already stated, our purpose here is to consider how aspects of the debate surrounding agency within (a range of) organizational discourse theory might usefully enable us to shed light on aspects of organizational knowledge that have hitherto been hidden in the shadows.

4.1 Knowledge as object

Under this heading we consider the issues that arise when knowledge is objectivised. We wish to make a clear distinction here from approaches such as Actor Network Theory (Law and Hassard, 1999) and practice-based theories (as discussed in Chaiklin and Lave, 1996 for example) that encourage us to examine objects, their construction and impact within a broader relationship of human actors, processes etc. Rather our focus here is on writing within the field of organizational knowledge which *unproblematically* treats knowledge as an object, particularly those which do not consider the processes through which this status is achieved. Frequently when this approach is adopted agency is ascribed either to knowledge itself or to the entity (usually an individual) which holds (often internally) that object.

Agency is then associated with the form of the object of knowledge, such as when it is conceived as being ‘sticky’ or ‘leaky’ (Brown and Duguid, 2001), or alternatively with the capability of the entity that holds it. In both cases agency is positioned as an attribute related to

inherent, internal characteristics and suggestions for changing (and particularly improving) agency in some way are derived from achieving changes to these characteristics or, more typically in the case of knowledge itself, through transforming the object into a different state. Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) book "The Knowledge Creating Company" could be said to typify this approach. Within this, individuals appear to be positioned as active agents though with differing capacities for action dependent in their access to both internal and external knowledge. Knowledge, and particularly tacit knowledge, also appears to have agency as in Nonaka and Takeuchi's depiction of the potential of the different types of knowledge that emerge from their model of four 'modes of transformation' (p62). The ascription of agency to knowledge is also apparent in the literature which is based on knowledge being a special entity of some sort, with a different (better) potential to say data or information (Shin et al., 2001, Hunter et al., 2002).

The resulting focus on internal characteristics downplays the potential impact on agency from other factors. Some approaches do attempt to address this so, for example, network analytic approaches suggest that ability (specifically to share particular types of knowledge objects) is impacted (enabled or constrained) by of the characteristics of relationships (such as strong vs weak ties) between individuals (Hansen, 1999, Hansen, 2002, Weenig, 1999). However, often in this conception individuals are assumed to have the necessary agency to change the nature of these relationships and hence 'solve' the problems of knowledge exchange.

Drawing on the debate regarding agency within discourse theory as outlined (in Section 3) above, we would suggest that these conceptions oversimplify the notion of agency. Indeed, the assumptions made about agency are rarely made explicit or opened up for examination. The particular problem here is the emphasis on internal characteristics rather than considering the broader contextual frame within which the objects and/or entities are situated and most crucially, the relationship between these. Furthermore the presentation of these inherent characteristics as associated with various 'natural' states (of both knowledge and individuals) that simply exist prevents discussion of how these might come to be.

4.2 Situated Knowledge

Increased emphasis within the literature is now given to situated views of knowledge (Bechky, 2003). A central concept within this perspective is that of ‘communities of practice’ (CoP hereafter) (Lave and Wenger, 1991) in which individuals working and socialising together determine a “locally negotiated regime of competence” (Wenger, 1998, p137). Newcomers to a community move towards full membership through a process of “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p29). This process rejects the image of an individual as a receiver of knowledge (as often portrayed in the literature covered in the previous section) rather it emphasizes the many ways in which someone learns to become a fully participating member of the community. It is not just about learning what to do, or even learning to do but about learning to be.

It is interesting to note that in the receiver of knowledge image, it is the teacher or expert that is given agency, while here agency appears to be freely available to all community members (Caldwell, 2005). We would suggest that the conception of agency here is still very much that it is an individual (or individual within group) characteristic; something that people have inherently. Where constraints on agency are recognised, these are generally positioned as being internal to a community itself. Contu and Willmott (2003) have recently suggested that while Lave and Wenger’s original work hinted at the need to consider issues such as power relations (both within communities themselves and between communities and broader organizational contexts) this has been somewhat overlooked in subsequent research in this area.

Furthermore while many studies have provided further descriptions of CoPs (e.g. Orr, 1996, Cook and Yanow, 1993, Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001, Wenger, 1998) there has recently been a shift away from attempts to understand informal communities towards providing suggestions for how they can be initiated and managed. Increasingly in this literature the notion of community itself is being ascribed agency, though perhaps it is more interesting to consider the agency ascribed to the management within the organization who are assumed to be able to establish and run CoPs.

While the CoP perspective has resulted in a more situated view of knowledge, with more emphasis on its social construction than in the ‘knowledge as object’ perspective, we suggest there is further scope to extend the constructionist perspective to include the notion of agency.

While we do not suggest drawing on the agency debate that rages within discourse theory solves any problems, we do suggest that such a debate is necessary. So how would taking a discursive perspective make a difference?

Here we adopt, for the sake of argument, a mid-range position that suggests that individuals are constrained somewhat by the discursive context. This suggests an initial focus examining the discourses surrounding knowledge in a particular context. We do not suggest that there would necessarily be a single view of knowledge that would emerge from such an examination. Rather it would be akin to identifying a web of connections, a web that would extend across time as well as space. The challenge would then to be to understand how, drawing from this web, notions of knowledge are held as valid in a particular context, i.e. what gives them a degree of 'discursive muscle' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Alongside this it is necessary to explore the range of possible subject positions that are embedded within this web, and more particularly the associations between these and notions of knowledge. From this not inconsiderable analytic base it becomes possible to examine the way the connections between knowledge and agency operate within a specific context and, rather than considering these as natural or pre-given, examine how particular constructions emerge and are utilised (Pritchard and Symon, 2005).

5. Action and Organizational Knowledge

While links between agency and knowledge have been largely implicit within writing on organizational knowledge, those between knowledge and action have been made more explicit, particularly when through action, knowledge is linked to some notion of organizational success or competitive advantage. However, as with agency, there are here issues related to the conceptualisation of the notion of action and in the way these links have been envisaged. As with the previous section we consider these issues in relation to our broad categorisation of organizational knowledge and examine this from the alternative perspectives offered by discourse theory.

5.1 Knowledge as object

In our discussion of agency (Section 4.1) we suggested that this was often ascribed either to the entity ‘possessing’ knowledge or to knowledge itself. Action is then positioned as a process; the effect or outcome of this agency. Knowledge is conceptualised as an input (and sometimes an output) of this process. At a very general level then, this position draws on and reinforces a distinction between thinking and talking (which are often directly related to tacit and explicit knowledge) on the one hand and action or ‘doing something’ on the other.

The relationship between knowledge and action presented is nearly always positive (knowledge improves action) and built on the assumption that adding more knowledge has a direct relationship with “better” action. More significantly perhaps, a special relationship is often presumed to exist between a particular ‘brand’ of knowledge – tacit - and action (Robertson et al., 2003).

There are a number of issues that it is worthwhile to explore here. Firstly the direct and positive cause and effect association between knowledge and action is not itself unproblematic. We would suggest that the ‘strength’ of this link is in part due to its own discursive construction and appeal to common sense, rather than its theoretical or empirical base. Furthermore linking the notions of knowledge and action, when both seem ambiguous (Alvesson, 2001), while broadly appealing is not in itself particularly useful. There is also the danger that a focus on knowledge here draws attention away from other factors. Emotion, for example, is left out of the cognitive equation, and as already highlighted above (see section 4) contextual factors are often downplayed.

The reliance on the notion of tacit knowledge is particularly problematic. Tacit knowledge is frequently presented as a special and mysterious form of knowledge (Donald, 2001). Ideas relating to tacit knowledge draw on the works of Polanyi (1962, 1966) in which its importance is emphasised for particular types of action, especially those emphasising complex physical coordination (as in the oft quoted riding a bicycle example). However, its applicability is all too often generalised to all types of activity and action, a move which once again focuses attention inward on to the individual rather than a broader contextual frame.

The overall effect here is to squeeze language, never mind a broader conception of discourse, out of the picture. Discourse theory would suggest that this is an important omission for two reasons. Firstly, the very notion of action itself could be said to be the subject of discursive construction i.e. what counts as action within the particular discursive context. Secondly, as Oswick and Keenoy suggest many actions are “operationalised through discourse” (1997, p6) so that it does not make sense to investigate action without paying attention to discourse.

5.2 Situated Knowledge

As already explored in earlier sections, a more complex view of knowledge is presented here, and through invoking the notion of practice, a more complex perspective on action also. In fact there is a shift in emphasis here away from knowledge as a separate entity and towards the concept of knowing. This is “defined only by the context of specific practices” (Wenger, 1998, p141); furthermore it is suggested that “knowing is not separate from doing” (Gheradi, 2000, p215).

Perhaps in part due to the ethnographic tradition in this area and also since many of the oft quoted studies from this perspective focused on highly skilled manual labour or craft workers (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993), there has however been an emphasis on the observable, physical aspects of practice (and of action) while discursive practice has been relatively neglected (Bechky, 2003). Yet social interaction and communication processes are clearly central to the ideas encapsulated in writing on the social and situated nature of knowledge and knowing. However, while Wenger drew attention to the “negotiated character of both explicit and tacit knowledge” (Wenger, 1998, p47), and we are also advised of the need to examine the construction of practice, the role of discourse in this process has been somewhat overlooked; it is conceptualised as passive.

One exception is Orr’s (1996) study of photocopier technicians. He pays particular attention to the communicative processes that are integral to their practice and concludes that “talk shows their understanding of the world of service; in another sense talk creates that world” (p161). This suggests an acknowledgement of talk as action. However in line with much work that falls under the CoP banner, there is an emphasis here on analysing the talk within the community of technicians. As Contu and Willmott (2003) have suggested there is further scope here to expand this analysis to consider the relationship between local and broader organizational discourses.

This extension involves a more complex, nuanced approach to talk as action and in particular an examination of knowledge as embedded in power relations.

Emerging from concerns about the centrality given to knowledge (and its relation to action) in these perspectives there has been increasing interest in approaches that are “sceptical that knowledge is an important entity of some sort” (Hull, 1999, p417). This has resulted in a renewed critical interest, reflected in Alvesson’s (2004, p14) call to “look clearly at the claims of KIF’s and professionals about knowledge, its use and its outcomes”. Whilst discursive approaches would allow a critical interrogation of such claims the application of discourse analysis to this area is still in its infancy (Pritchard and Symon, 2005).

6. Discussion

Our aim in this paper has been to open up for discussion the issues of agency and action and their relation to different perspectives on organizational knowledge. We have suggested that ideas from debates surrounding these issues in organizational discourse theory can be applied in the organizational knowledge arena.

In the preceding sections we have drawn attention to the assumptions about agency and action which underpin different perspectives on and ways of thinking about knowledge in organizations. We suggest that, partly due to the fact that arguments about the nature and definition of knowledge and knowledge processes tend to dominate much writing (Lam, 2000, Davenport and Hall, 2002), the implication of such assumptions about agency and action have received little attention. We also believe that since many perspectives remain anchored in a cognitive view of knowledge, the range of positions considered has been restricted. Our view here is that drawing on the debates regarding agency and action from discourse theory perspectives provides a broader set of assumptions to explore and offers the potential to open up alternative perspectives on organizational knowledge.

We do not suggest that this will provide quick or easy answers nor that discourse theory provides the ‘best’ way for thinking about organizational knowledge. Rather, in common with recent calls (e.g. Contu and Willmott, 2003, Hull, 1999, Alvesson, 2004), we believe that it will enable us to engage in debates that are important for the development of both theory and research strategies in the field. We feel this discussion is particularly timely given the

increasing dominance of, what Contu and Willmott term, “conventional interpretations” (2003, p292) of knowledge and knowledge processes within organizations.

We believe it is important to consider the potential impact of such interpretations, which themselves may be conceptualised as part of a discourse on knowledge. The way in which such discourses are deployed within an organizational context is an area that demands our attention. For example, Townley’s (1993, 1999) examination of performance appraisals highlights how these draws on particular conceptions of knowledge, most notably that the performance appraisal is a neutral tool that enables certain ‘truths’ about an individual to be accessed. Drawing on ideas within discourse theory, she challenges these assumptions suggesting rather that such knowledge is constructed and produced through the surrounding discourses rather than lying dormant awaiting discovery. Others have suggested that the specific discourses surrounding knowledge management (Schultze and Stabell, 2004) and communities of practice (Brohm and Huysman, 2003) warrant further investigation. Such investigation could include consideration of how such discourses are deployed, by whom and with what effects.

Finally then, we would like to consider our own role as ‘academic authors’ in respect to these discourses. Such reflexivity is seen as an essential element of many discursive approaches, with the aim of encouraging an “awareness of the situatedness of scientific knowledge and an understanding of the research and research community from which the knowledge has appeared” (Hardy et al., 2001, p554) and can therefore be seen to have a particular relevance to research on organizational knowledge. While Pels (2000) comment that “it is better for your epistemological health to be reflexive” (p3) provides a reassuring rationale for reflexivity, it is not a problem free enterprise. It can become a self-indulgent exercise which displaces other subjects and objects of the research (Weick, 2002), an exercise which is difficult to place limits on (Finlay, 2002) and which can itself be used as a rhetorical device in presenting research so as to “invite trust” in the findings (Hardy et al., 2001, p534). However, we would suggest that adopting a more reflexive approach towards our research is a necessary part of research which concerns itself with knowledge in any sense of the word.

Reflecting on the account presented in the preceding sections we are conscious of how we have positioned ourselves in relation to writings on both organizational knowledge and organizational discourse; particularly our tendency to ‘side’ with the latter over the former. We have also used existing published research to illustrate our concerns regarding the treatment of agency and

action within the organizational knowledge literature rather than exposing our own research to similar criticism. Both these may have had the effect of disguising our own struggle with these issues in relation to our ongoing research efforts. Therefore, while we have attempted to emphasise the importance of engaging in a debate about these issues, a limitation of our paper is the way in which we have perhaps hidden ourselves from such debate through adopting instead a more traditional writing style for the majority of the paper. Our final call is therefore for a more reflexive approach to both research and writing about organizational knowledge in line with Watson (1995) who suggests we need to be aware that “it is almost as if one is choosing a reality when one writes” (p 813). We suggest we need to be aware of our own sensemaking in this respect and pay attention to the implications of these processes, perhaps as much as we pay attention to those who are the subjects or participants of our research endeavours.

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