

Comment

'Japanology' in Organizational Sciences: The Myth and its Dangers

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The growing interest in Japanese management has not always been translated into a coherent, rigorous body of knowledge. One reason for this situation has been the attempt to claim a disciplinary status for the field despite the absence of the prerequisites for such a status. The negative consequences of this attempt are highlighted.

Keywords: Japanese management, Scientific discipline, Multidisciplinary Research



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1. Introduction

Japanese management continues to fascinate many of us. The interest might have faded somewhat if not for the emergence of Japanese subsidiaries in the United States and other countries, which serve as a constant reminder of Japanese successes and confront us with the need to reconcile Japanese management methods with our own.

Looking back at a decade of Japanese management research, some progress has certainly been made. However, that progress seems to lag behind the time and resources devoted to the subject, and will probably remain limited until some major impediments are removed. One such impediment, namely the attempt to establish Japanese management as an independent scientific discipline, is the focus of the present paper.

2. Is 'Organizational Japanology' a Discipline?

A scientific discipline can be defined as a branch of learning with an established body of theoretical and empirical knowledge. It has to be distinguished from other disciplines so as to make a unique contribution to the understanding of the phenomena at hand. The field of Japanese management does not stand as a discipline on any of those criteria. It has not developed its own coherent theoretical framework, nor has it applied new methods of scientific investigation. Japanese management is merely an area of study which has attracted, as of late, significant attention. In that sense, it is not different from Chinese management, Korean management, or any other subject. Unfortunately, this simple point has gone unnoticed by some people who have devel-

oped a claim for a disciplinary identity in the hope of creating a legitimate 'niche' for themselves in the scientific community.

One example of such a claim appears in a brief comment by Pucik in a recent issue of *Human Systems Management* [6]. The inaccuracies and inconsistencies in Pucik's account are too numerous to mention. But this is not the important point. What is more important is that in the name of claiming a disciplinary status for Japanese management, the author closes his eyes to the existence of other disciplines and theories while at the same time paying lip service to the need for a 'multidisciplinary approach'. Pucik thus criticizes as a-theoretical a paper which is written within the system theory paradigm [1]. This paradigm holds that an understanding of a system operation cannot be achieved without an examination of all components parts and their interrelationships. Failing to understand that in a journal called *Human Systems Management* is nothing less than miraculous.

Within the systems frame of reference, the 'a-theoretical' paper [7] explicitly relies on Parsons' structural-functional theory of human action, one of the most pervasive paradigms in sociology, which has been used extensively to analyse comparative modernization processes. The Parsonian approach emphasizes that organizations are subsystems of the broader environment and cannot be understood without an analysis of their various environmental sectors and their interrelationships [5]. To do that, it is necessary to look simultaneously at a multitude of environmental and organizational layers. This is precisely what the paper has done, deviating from the Parsonian paradigm only in its attempt to avoid 'cultural determinism', a major criticism of the paradigm.

Thus, in the name of defending the so-called discipline to which he claims allegiance, other 'competing' frames of analysis are not criticized – but rather disregarded altogether. As we shall illustrate, such disregard symbolizes an approach with potentially serious consequences.

3. The Danger of the Disciplinary Illusion

The proposition that 'Japanology in organizational sciences' is a full-fledged scientific discipline is not only a shaky proposition but also a dangerous

one. It has extremely negative implications for research in the field, and is likely to decrease, rather than increase, the knowledge of Japanese management methods and their transferability to other countries. This illusion is likely to direct research and analysis in the wrong direction, and lead us to reach erroneous conclusions. Some of the damaging implications of the disciplinary illusions are listed below.

3.1. Implication No. 1: Study only Japan

Zeleny [10] complains in his Editorial that we study Japan but refuse to study the Moravians, where the Bat'a system has developed. Under the Japanese disciplinary umbrella, there will be no need to study it, nor to study any other country or management system, since those are clearly outside the domain of the new 'discipline.' The danger is therefore that we shall limit our scope of investigation and exclude other valuable examples of management systems, thereby decreasing rather than increasing our understanding of management processes.

3.2. Implication No. 2: Study Japan alone (rather than vis-à-vis other countries)

If Japanese management is perceived as 'unique,' there is not much need for comparative management research. At most, we could contrast Japan with the U.S. With this strategy, we will never be able to even propose what environmental factors account for management processes, and will never approach an understanding of causality.

3.3. Implication No. 3: Only we will study Japan

This implication can best be summarized as follows: 'This is our domain, so no one else can study it effectively. To claim that domain, we will have to show that others do not know, do not understand, or are not qualified to study the phenomena at hand.' Thus, another unfortunate consequence of the disciplinary myth is the tendency to disregard work which has been done in other disciplines, including East-Asian studies, sociology and anthropology. In its extreme form, this tendency translates into an attempt to discredit any 'outsiders',

including those who come from the East-Asian studies field, and anyone who offers an alternative paradigm, e.g., a serious consideration of cultural variables rather than baseless 'objective' consideration of economic variables alone.

4. Conclusion

Disciplinary ambitions can be productive when they lead to greater knowledge, deeper theoretical anchoring, and better insights. The case of 'organizational Japanology' shows, however, that such ambitions can also be counter-productive. Our understanding of Japanese management would be much better served by the use of existing theoretical paradigms, including those already applied to the study of Japanese management, e.g., ecological theory [4], organizational learning theory [9], strategic system analysis [2], contingency theory [3] and information processing [8]. There are many more theoretical paradigms out there which can be applied to the study of Japanese management. Comparative and longitudinal approaches are also vital but scarcely used.

What we certainly do not need are approaches which attempt to discredit others while failing to see their own shortcomings; those which assume that current knowledge and research directions are already impeccable, and those which suggest that we should not try to look at the whole but only at the component parts. With such attitudes, it is not sur-

prising that the jungle is still there. Those who can see only a few trees will never know that there ever was a forest.

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