

Overcoming magical thinking in organization theory

Magical thinking can be defined as the attribution of causal relationships between actions and events which cannot be justified by reason and observation. In religion, folk religion, and superstitious beliefs, the correlation posited is often between religious ritual, prayer, sacrifice, or the observance of a taboo, and an expected benefit or recompense (wikipedia).



Also in organization theory we run the risk of developing magical thinking, or better, since we cannot observe other people's thinking, magical writing. Magical organizational theories can arise if the verbal behavior of the organizational theorist is mainly based on the reinforcements of editors of the respective journal, by absence of the experiment as research method. Often we want to advance organization theory by solving theoretical gaps. So when we solve gaps in the existing literature this does not guarantee that this new

verbal repertoire ('body of knowledge') is free from superstition. We could be lost in a magical trap.

The best way to investigate the world around us is by using laboratory and field experiments. With these research methods we investigate causal relationships more reliably than by the survey method, which is dominant in developing organization theory, by combining existing theories creatively and by merely observation. With survey methods, combining existing theories and observation we can derive only correlations between constructs, no causations.

At VU-ADRI BA we have contributed to the development of a measurement instrument that stimulates causal conclusions from organizational research by carrying out field experiments. We call this the OBM Optimizer. OBM stands for Organizational Behavior Management, a subfield of applied behavior analysis. With this instrument students, practitioners and researchers apply the science of behavior analysis in an organization. Behavior analysis started with Nobel prize winner Ivan Pavlov and his dogs and behaviorist B.F. Skinner. Their laboratory research culminated in a protocol for field experiments (Rietdijk, 2009) and the OBM Optimizer as a companion for field researchers.

So far about 200 field experiments have been implemented. Pinpointed Organizational behavior is the dependent variable. The independent variables are combinations of feedback, goal setting and positive reinforcement. With this approach we have managed to increase behaviors like: more easy to understand texts of civil servants, improving administrative behaviors, improving safety at the workplace (higher percentage of employees wearing safety outfit, doing more report of unsafe situations and cleaning the shop floor) and, of course, many more.

By using applied behavior analysis in organizations we both solve practical organizational issues and contribute to organizational theory, based on the experiment as best way for helping science and overcoming magical thinking and superstitious verbal behavior in organization theory.

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