

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication

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CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES OF ORGANIZATIONAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Alina Ţenescu

Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova

Abstract: In this paper, we aim to identify and review the main challenges that organizational anthropology is faced with in several areas: European, American, Canadian and so on. We also discern the perspectives it develops as academic discipline taught within Anthropology or Information and Communication Sciences domains, its points of intersection with other disciplines such as business anthropology, as well as its uncertainties.

Keywords: anthropology, anthropology of organizations, challenges, communication, organizations, perspectives, uncertainties.

1. Introduction

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the field of study of organizational anthropology has known a tremendous development. The context in which this new scientific domain emerged is defined by the expansion in the 1980s of management and administrative sciences. The extension of management and administrative sciences is paralleled by the appearance of disciplines whose subject matter is human behaviour within organizations or organizational behaviour.

The focus of the new field entitled anthropology of organizations is on the study and detailed examination of the aspects and instances that human life takes within organizations, such as communication in a work group, motivation, demotivation, isolation, decision making, coping with stress or mobbing and leadership strategies.

Having initially emerged in the Anglo-American area, the new scientific domain extended first in universities, within psychology departments, according to Lorsch (1987: 15), and afterwards in colleges and universities with management and administrative faculties and specialties, whereas in Europe it was circumscribed to Anthropology or Information and Communication Sciences study programmes.

In the past few years, in American colleges, organizational anthropology has been taught and studied at master and PhD levels together with business anthropology. The anthropology department of several American universities (such as WayneStateUniversity) included amongst its offers master's and PhD degrees with a double specialization in organizational and business anthropology. The objective of the new study programme is to teach students how to apply theories and methods of the new fields of study to solving problems inside organizations from private, but also from public sectors. Research in this new domain is most often than not focused on three areas: 1) organizational

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theory and organizational culture, 2) the relationship between marketing and knowledge of consumer behaviour, 3) global business in relationship with intercultural and cross-cultural communication, intercultural and cross-cultural management and international marketing.

2. Vision and perspectives

Influenced by social and economic sciences, the new scientific field applied to the study of organization and human life in an organization attempts to render a critical vision of a wise individual, employee in an organization, an employee who is supposedly able to constantly react and adapt to stimuli and provocations from his environment.

Canadian researcher and professor Jean-François Chanlat (2007:1013; 1990: 33) asserts that the essential starting premise is that organizations can be conceived as human universes and that their study constitutes the object of study of the anthropology of organizations. The same researcher (Chanlat, 2012) drew attention to the fact that one of the weak points of some researchers in anthropology of organizations was that, at first, they used to circumscribe their research interests to the analysis of the way in which efficiency, effectiveness, performance, profit or productivity were reached in and by a company, without paying attention to the particular dimensions and traits of an individual working and spending a great deal of his time in a specific organization. Hence, the limitations brought about by the weak points of their approach were reflected by researchers' ignoring or clouding or not paying enough attention to the importance and role of the real experiences of each and every employee, employer and manager. Growing aware of these limitations and struggling to better understand the complexity of human experience in an organizational environment, the organizational anthropologists laid the foundations for improvement, starting from the assumption that the anthropology of organizations aims to develop a unitary conception on the study of human life experience inside an organization and to discriminate the fundamental variables and dimensions, as well as the basic postulates and possible levels of analysis.

On the one hand, Dufour and Chanlat (1985) emphasize the researchers' wish to confer unity, coherence and cohesion to a heterogenous field of study and on the other hand, they observe the researchers' struggle and attempt to develop and propose a transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary conception of human life and of human dynamics inside an organization. The organizational anthropologists' specialization and training impose a constant synthesis, as well as the contextualized study of direct testimonies, life stories and stories of experiences of those who work in an organization.

If we have mentioned the importance of context and contextualized analysis, it is worth mentioning that asking himself what(ever) happened to organizational anthropology, Bate (1997: 1148) ascertains the lack of historicity, contextuality and processuality in the theoretical approach of organizations and notes that anthropology is able to answer to these demands and requisites, proposing real alternatives for a future development of the research field. In "Whatever Happened to Organizational Anthropology ? A Review of the Field of Organizational Ethnography and Anthropological Studies", the author identifies distinctive qualities of ethnographic and anthropological research and concentrates on what these two approaches could bring to research focused on the study of organizations, if the two perspectives (ethnographic and anthropologic) were more widely adopted. From a diachronic point of view, in order to emphasize the relationship between theory of organizations and anthropology, he reminds readers that the field of study of organizational

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behaviour was originally created and approached by anthropologists, in the Hawthorne study and in the works of W.F. Whyte, both of whom were amongst the first social and cultural anthropologists to have written works on organizational behaviour.

Neither the Hawthorne effect (Adair, 1984: 336) nor Whyte's study reveal the weaknesses of earlier researchers who directed their research interests mainly towards the examination of the modes in which efficiency, effectiveness or productivity were enhanced by workers' rate of productivity in a company, for example, but on the contrary, center on the traits and skills of an individual at the work place, not on his rate of productivity, and discern workers' strong points and competencies, as well as they discover smarter ways to develop, measure and manage employees' capabilities in an organization (Baack, 2012: 24).

Since in time, the two domains grew apart and organizational studies lost all kind of contact with anthropology, Bate's article proposes a new perspective on the nature of ethnographic research and identifies the benefits following the reconciliation of anthropology and organizational studies (or studies on organizational behaviour). Not only does he review researches in the domain, but he also underlines the fundamental elements (ethnographic and anthropologic methods, paradigms, rhetoric) which the organizational studies field could take into consideration if it were to take the anthropologic turn and swerve towards organizational anthropology.

If anthropology's literal meaning is "the science or study of humans", then organizational anthropology would literally mean the study of customer humans or of humans inside an organization. Nowadays, companies and organizations hire anthropologists to help them understand organizational cultures in their countries or abroad (in case of delocalization) and use their guidance and advice so that different work departments or corporate cultures get to better understand and communicate with each other. In fact, the use and resort of corporations in the Anglo-American and Western Europe areas to organizational anthropologists is ever more growing.

Applying anthropological research methods, organizational anthropologists can provide accurate organizational behaviour analyses in an appropriate length of time. The role of their work is to contribute to an effective optimization and improvement of an organization's potential. Organizational anthropologists' research relies on the assertion that individuals would behave differently depending on specific organizational environments and cultural contexts. Since organizations are characterized by specific cultural variables, anthropologists will detail and analyze the behavioural patterns recognized with the employees. This is possible through field research and thorough critical analysis by way of interviews and additional observations which allow them to get a genuine image and a commonsense picture of an organization in a relatively short or appropriate period of time (Alvesson, 2000: 25). Their precise analysis of a situation that a company is faced with helps managers in carrying out the outcome recommendations following the finalization of anthropologists' study and gives CEOs the opportunity of bringing a healthy change of perspective in their organizations.

The challenges and uncertainties that organizational anthropology is confronted with are linked to its overlapping with other academic disciplines such as business anthropology or ethnography of organizations, yet, this superposing brings students and graduates in these study programmes complex training and multiple specialization in anthropological, ethnographic theories and research methods, enabling them to later work as analysts and researchers with rich analytical

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skills, as well as to better evaluate, manage and interpret the huge amount of data on human behaviour inside organizations.

3. Conclusions

We conclude that modern organizational anthropology study programmes give students and graduates the opportunity of a better training for careers in business, government, corporate and public sectors with a constant focus on the peculiar cultural dimensions of organizations in a globalized world. They also prepare them to efficiently tackle common problems in the traditional or multinational work environment, in consumer behaviour and in a worldwide business context and familiarize them with the methodological and theoretical frameworks and foundations so that they can analyze and explain the individual's behaviour in an organization from a dynamic, structural and cohesive perspective.

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