

Comments and Observations from an Outsider: Organizational Behaviour and Ecological Integrity

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Introduction

It was a great pleasure to be invited to be a respondent at the 2001 Parks Research Forum. Being from the York University Business School I was not sure what to expect and I started the day very excited about the changes being described in the early papers. Ecological Integrity was presented as what I understood to be a new paradigm with the potential to transform the way parks are managed. I have been a student of organization change and profound social transformation and in my own research I have been looking at ways of facilitating and enabling such paradigm breaking change. As the day went on, however, I became more concerned and disconcerted about what I was hearing. In the following paragraphs I will attempt to share some of what I observed as an outsider and to describe why I found it potentially worrisome.

My comments are based on an interpretive world view (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) from which I assume that the world is a socially constructed reality. From this view we can continually assess and reassess the meaning systems that we use to make sense of what is going on around us. A metaphor for this perspective is the cultural metaphor (Morgan, 1997). When looking at parks from a cultural perspective we look at the way meanings are embedded in the values, ways of working, rituals and language of a group. Culture is largely unconscious and taken-for-granted by those who are part of that culture. Like the fish in water that does not know it is in water we often do not know we are constrained by culturally created meaning systems. Often when we travel to another culture, for example, we are better able to define the characteristics of our own culture. Being from the business school I felt like a traveler in such a foreign land being at this conference. Being from outside I was struck by the ways in which Ecological Integrity represents a different culture for engaging with parks. The dominant, existing culture was represented by speakers who talked about restoration, safeguards, management, protection, control, regulation, and monitoring from the top down. In contrast some of the language being used to describe Ecological Integrity was representative of a different set of values, approaches and beliefs. Some of the language that I was intrigued by was reflected in very different concepts such as: ecology, integrity, partnership, living legacy, systems, holistic, connections, sacred trust, learning, global framework and adaptation. I make these comments based on my observation of the cultural differences implicit in the various papers and the belief that the move from the existing dominant culture to the culture represented by Ecological Integrity proponents is in fact a profound cultural shift. The two are not, in my mind, subcultures of one over-riding culture but are inherently contradictory and

imply different constructions of meaning and ways of working and are informed by different values and assumptions.

One thing I have learned from organizational behavior is that cultural change is extremely difficult. Because so much of culture is unconscious and taken-for-granted attempts to change the culture can become a reflection of the culture and can reinforce the current cultural assumptions. An example of this might be the temptation to implement Ecological Integrity through a top down approach of government controls and legislative frameworks. Using an approach characterized by management and control to implement this new approach will undermine the uniqueness of it. I have seen organizations, for example, that want to move away from a culture that is driven and controlling to one that is more reflective and learning oriented and they have attempted to drive through the changes and force reflection. The change process re-manifested the old culture and nothing changed.

Another dynamic of cultural change is the frequent attempt by the beneficiaries of the current culture to undermine the change process. This often happens without participants even knowing what they are doing. For example, one way this happens is through the appropriation of the language of the new culture. The mainstream starts to use the concepts of the new approach and they become subsumed in the meaning systems of the current culture. There is no one definition of reality or sense of the meaning of the terms being used and the desire for consensus is potentially problematic. There may be no "reasonable consensus" possible about what Ecological Integrity means but the danger of too much fragmentation in its meaning is that all the potential for a new approach will be lost and the current, dominant meaning system/culture will reassert itself. I wondered how many people understand the meanings of terms like "ecology", "integrity" or "holistic". These are potentially very rich concepts but from a different cultural perspective they may have different meaning and implications from those who are in power based on the current culture.

There may be a third set of cultural assumptions battling for supremacy in the field. I started to hear the language and values of business during the day. I wonder to what extent the corporatization and commercialization of the parks is taking place with the creep of business like language and processes into the meaning system and languages of the field. Is the rationalization of revenue generation schemes one that will undermine the existing culture and the potential of other discourses such as Ecological ones? Language of accountability, efficiency and revenue is moving, often unconsciously, into many sectors and may need to be assessed in parks management.

Cultural systems are intimately tied to power systems (Bradshaw, 1998). Within each social construction of reality certain groups benefit from the way meaning systems are sustained. Those who can control the definition of reality will gain power. A charismatic leader, for example, gets others to consent to his or her view

of the world and follow his or her lead and this gives the leader power. I was forced to ask myself: who benefits from the current cultural assumptions about how to manage parks in Canada? A related question was raised and it is a great metaphor for this dynamic: how do you allow a natural change process to take place in a park when a fire could destroy million dollar homes of privileged people who live next to the park? Like these homes, certain vested interests constrain most efforts to alter cultures. Recognition of the complexity of cultural change and the power relations entrenched in such changes will allow a deeper debate about allocations of meaning and power.

Finally, in my work I have learned that questions of what we know are informed by questions of how we know. Ontological and epistemological assumptions interact and reinforce each other. If Ecological Integrity is a new cultural perspective for parks management and a profoundly different way of structuring questions of meaning, then the science that is engaged in to create that knowledge and meaning systems also needs to be reflected on. Traditional scientific approaches, based on a positivistic paradigm, create meanings that are largely rational, linear and objective. In my opinion these are not necessarily consistent with an ecological approach. Alternative ways of knowing such as feminist epistemology, complexity science, action science and/or qualitative methods were not discussed during the day and without an openness to new or alternative sciences cultural change may be impossible.

In conclusion, I want to repeat that I think the changes being suggested by those articulating a new culture for parks management, called "Ecological Integrity", are profoundly new and extremely important to understand, nurture, explore and support. Like any culture change the process will be very challenging and difficult to sustain. The dominant culture may appear to embrace the new culture and in the process subvert its uniqueness, appropriate its language and as a result wipe out its transformative potential. The realities of the power relations embedded in the dominant culture and its supporting scientific methods must be named, revealed, deconstructed and questioned. Culture change can be seductive or disruptive but the inherent difference between the old culture and the new should be understood and acknowledged. It can be seen as threatening or exciting. It is in the subtle and often taken-for-granted complexities of the cultural meaning systems that everyone can learn. Given the environmental crisis we all face I encourage you to explore these dynamics in a spirit of learning, fun and play. Having a compelling vision of the possibilities of Ecological Integrity is a great start but without acknowledgment of the challenges ahead the potential of the vision may never be realized.

References

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