Discourse, practice, policy and organizing: some opening comments

Cliff Oswick
Queen Mary, University of London, London, UK
Tom Keenoy, Armin Beverungen and Nick Ellis
University of Leicester School of Management, Leicester, UK, and
Ida Sabelis and Sierk Ybema
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the interplay between discourse, policy and practice in relation to aspects of organization and processes of organizing.
Design/methodology/approach – Provides an introduction to the six contributions contained in this special issue and discusses how they relate to the core theme.
Findings – Highlights the need for an approach which treats discourses, policies and practices as connected and mutually implicated, rather than discrete, phenomena.
Originality/value – Presents an approach to discourse analysis which promotes an engagement with wider aspects of social activity.

Keywords Organizational processes, Organizational analysis

Paper type General review

Organizational discourse analysis has emerged in recent years as a prominent and enduring approach in organizational analyses (Grant et al., 1998, 2004; Oswick et al., 2000). However, it has been argued that its contribution to forms of organizational inquiry has been constrained by “the adoption of postmodernist and extreme social constructivist positions” (Fairclough, 2005, p. 916). In particular, Fairclough asserts that postmodernism and social constructivism represent a “prominent tendency within current research on organizational discourse” (p. 915) which focuses on talk and texts, but neglect “relations between linguistic/semiotic elements of the social and other (including material) elements” (p. 916). As the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate, whether this tendency is quite as “prominent” as Fairclough would have us believe is questionable. Moreover, this alleged failure of postmodernist/constructivist approaches to engage with social structure and the material context of discursive action could equally be levelled at alternative micro-positivist approaches to discourse analysis, such as conversation analysis. That said, we concur with Fairclough’s general intent to promote a contextualised and more ambitious agenda for discourse analysis: to aid the development and extension of our insights into organizational phenomena it needs to go beyond a focus on just text or talk.

This seemingly narrow framing of discourse analysis is perhaps an historical manifestation. The linguistic “turn” in social science gave rise to the “discursive turn” in organization studies in the 1990s (Grant et al., 1998; Keenoy et al., 1997). More recently, we have also witnessed the advent of the “action turn” (Reason and Torbert, 2001), the “practice turn” (Neumann, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001; Whittington, 2006), and the “policy turn” (Imrie, 2004; Frodeman, 2006). Arguably, the problem with these successive turns is that they implicitly promote a diachronic framing of the various perspectives (i.e. the linguistic turn is superseded by the discursive turn which is then...
replaced by the practice turn and so on). As an alternative we could think of these perspectives as synchronic. In doing so, we can consider these various turns as points of contrasting emphasis which can be construed of as being mutually implicated and having concurrent resonance rather than relatively discrete domains of inquiry with either consecutive or cumulative explanatory power.

It would seem that this proliferation of "turns" has lead to a somewhat compartmentalised approach to social inquiry. For example, rather than attempt to redress the dominance of a discursive focus by foregrounding a focus on practice (e.g. Newell and Galliers, 2006), we might consider the ways in which these two areas are intertwined, overlapping or interpenetrating. After all, as Austin's (1962) speech act theory reminds us, words do things. Indeed, many so-called practices – such as legal practice, teaching practice, and social work – are, to a greater extent, discursively constituted. On closer interrogation it would appear the boundaries between talk and action and between discourses and practices are, at the very least, somewhat blurred. Hence, we advocate an approach which seeks to integrate, rather than delineate, discourses, policies and practices.

Connecting discourse to policy and practice
The common feature of the six contributions presented in this special issue is that they all seek to employ discourse to explore processes of organizing in a way which meaningfully engages with aspects of policy and/or practice. Beyond this, there is also a rich international flavour to the work presented in terms of both the range of contributors and the contributions themselves which cover topics from US policy on Iraq, outsourcing to India and social work in the Netherlands to community organizations in Australia.

Knights and Jones consider the practice of off-shoring. In particular, they focus upon business process outsourcing to India and highlight the existence of two divergent discourses which underpin off-shoring policy and inform these outsourcing practices. They argue that neither the utopian discourse (which constructs outsourcing as a global solution to third world poverty) nor the dystopian discourse (which constructs outsourcing as displacing labour in developed countries and relocating labour exploitation) adequately captures the complexity of off-shoring practices. At a broader level, this contribution demonstrates the difficulties of the "black and white" positioning of practices and policies through to an alignment with either end of diametrically opposed discourses and the need for a more nuanced discursive account of the intervening and mediating effects of a web of cultural, ethical, economic and political factors.

Gastelaars and van der Haar examine social work practice in the Netherlands. Their research centres on the interaction between social workers and clients with migrant origins. They identify three different embedded discourses which impact upon practice. The first, arising from government policy, produces a generalised sense of otherness in social workers' interventions which results in "cultural indifference" and a perceived need for migrants to "adapt" to the host culture. Second, lifestyle interventions are discursively shaped by a Dutch tradition of "institutionalised diversity". Finally, social workers' attempts to be sensitive to clients' specific backgrounds create scope for a constructivist engagement with cultural diversity. The paper reveals the inherent tensions between these discourses (i.e. the local, situated negotiation of diversity vs the evocation of an institutionalised version of diversity) and how this is manifested in the everyday practices of social work.
The third paper, by Zoe Wool, interrogates US government discourse on the war in Iraq through an analysis of a series of documents produced by the Department of Defense. Drawing upon the concepts of governmentality, neo-liberalism and new public management, she argues that reports of the war in Iraq couch it in a depoliticised, decontextualised, apolitical and amoral way. Moreover, she concludes the war on terror is far more than an evanescent discourse insofar as it is part of a program of practices that have real material effects.

The scope for institutional transformation through discursive intervention is addressed in the fourth paper by Zandee and Bilimoria. This conceptually driven contribution develops a discursive account of institutionalisation in which social actors can instigate acts of “textual deviance” that interrupt and rewrite the prevailing discourse(s) that inform prevailing institutionalized practices. In doing so, these discursive acts, which are presented as affirmative in nature, can be seen as promoting entrepreneurial behaviour that reconstitutes texts and effects material outcomes.

A discursive take on institutionalisation is also adopted by Peri O'Shea in an analysis of community organizations. Through the use of focus groups, O'Shea explores changes in the way that the relationship between the government and community organizations is articulated and regulated in Australia. In particular, the impact of a discursive shift in policy away from “funding” community service organizations to “purchasing” the delivery of community services is examined. The change of discourse is analysed terms of “imposed institutionalisation” and “internal institutionalisation”. The paper considers the processes through which community discourse is “colonised”, forms of resistance and the implications for practice (including how practices were reframed to fit the new discourse).

The final paper, by Lightfoot and Lilley, critiques the “practice of policy” as a problematic discursive formation. Their focus is on the ideology of markets as exemplified by the US Defense Department's formulation of the short lived “Policy Analysis Market” (PAM) which sought to predict terrorist attacks through trading activity. In effect, the US government, by trading futures contracts that dealt with issues pertinent to the Middle East on PAM, created a betting market on terrorist attacks. This paper raises interesting wider issues regarding the interplay between discourse, policy and practice. It highlights the precariousness of a policy which attempts to predict future events (i.e. terrorist acts) through discursive practices (i.e. futures trading).

In conclusion, this special issue brings together a variety of papers concerning organizations and organizing that are primarily discursive in emphasis, but which nevertheless attempt to address the intersection and interpenetration of discourse with aspects of policy and practice. In doing so, we feel they make a collective contribution to understanding the nature and complexity of the relationship between these intertwined and mutually implicated domains of social activity.

References

Austin, J. (1962), How to Do Things with Words, Oxford University Press, Oxford.


Corresponding author
Cliff Oswick can be contacted at: c.oswick@qmul.ac.uk

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints