

## Preface

### Managerial and Organizational Cognition

If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.

(Thomas and Thomas 1928)

This issue of *International Studies of Management & Organization* draws from presentations at a March 2005 European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EISAM) European Workshop held in Munich and from a related call for papers. The workshop was the eleventh on the theme of Managerial and Organizational Cognition (MOC). Since 1993, each has brought together scholars from around the world. Given their location, however, the workshops have helped develop a European perspective on MOC, a subject that became a distinct area of study in the 1970s as a reflection and extension of a new field converging from related research in psychology, information systems, computer science, and other fields.

In the United States, MOC was supported by the formation of the Managerial and Organizational Cognition Interest Group in 1990, which later became a division of the Academy of Management. Many European researchers were part of this group from the beginning, and a significant number are particularly interested in how practicing managers make sense of their worlds, as can be seen in this issue.

Around the world, the MOC field has always been split, and often confused, by interest in *individual cognition*, on the one hand, and attention to *organizational cognition*, on the other. “Thought,” often taken as the central subject of cognitive research, is clearly the product of individual minds, but there is a continuing debate about whether it is helpful to see organizations as cognitizing, and this debate

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is implicit in the papers that follow. Theoretical progress, recently reviewed by Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002), has been advanced by visual representations of managerial and organizational cognition, and this too is a uniting theme in the papers that follow. Many efforts to map cognition focused on causality. Researchers have been interested in providing a strong theoretical basis for the effort in cognitive psychology (e.g., Eden 1988) as well as in other fields (Huff 1990, 2005), and both of us have been part of the pragmatic effort to record and analyze interview or written material from individuals and groups in organizations (e.g., Eden and Ackerman 2000; Huff and Jenkins 2001).

The papers in this issue add recent insight to enduring questions about what we can know about cognition and how that can be effectively represented. We selected four papers written by authors from Belgium, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and South Africa, which provide very different views of current research on managerial and organizational cognition—each with implications for both theory and practice. These contributions draw from different theoretical frameworks, and each provides insights into organizational context that might be used by a wide range of researchers interested in using a cognitive perspective.

Perhaps the most adventurous paper comes from work in Belgium conducted by Anne Wallemacq and Jean-Marie Jacques. As just noted, there have been many attempts to use maps as a representative surrogate for cognition. This paper goes beyond the words-and-arrows that characterize most previous maps to visually represent language as a semantic landscape. The work is based on a theoretic approach that provides a distinctly different way of understanding communication and meanings. The key idea is that “words define each other reciprocally, apart from their relations with some[thing] signified.” The excellent example the authors provide in the text is that “the management department” may signify a group of individuals in a given university, but the words can only be understood by noting how speakers use them with other signifiers, like “the economics department.”

Wallemacq and Jacques developed Evoq<sup>®</sup> software to capture these complexities. They propose that it is a “powerful tool for organizational analysis and diagnostic work in organizations and for the analysis of ideological processes.” Semantic fields are described as “a landscape, the ‘surrounding’ environment within which speakers move.” The emphasis is on differences or contrasts that inevitably convey similarities as well. There is a link to the large body of MOC research influenced by George Kelly, a psychologist, who also pointed to oppositions that help people understand the world around them (Kelly 1955).<sup>1</sup> However, Wallemacq and Jacques make the distinctive point that “language is [not] a means of communication which the speaker masters completely. Speakers are constrained by language. They sculpt with words as sculptors work with resistant stone.” A very interesting aspect of Evoq<sup>®</sup> is that it allows researchers to deliberately explore alternative interpretations of language use, an agenda that is compatible with this fluid view of both cognition and communication.

We appreciate Wallemacq and Jacques’s concern for understanding and repre-

senting meanings in context. This is a strength of most work in the cognitive field (see, for example, Eden, Jones, and Sims 1983), but most MOC research has a theoretical base in cognitive psychology. Wallemaacq and Jacques are influenced by the writings of Derrida (1978, 1981, 1982) and other (post)structuralists. Their ideas are, therefore, more closely related to the sociology of defining the situation (McHugh 1968), with its implications for behavior, than to work rooted in psychology.

We are very positive about the breakthrough this paper suggests for work on managerial and organizational cognition, but there remains a puzzle about the certainty expressed by the authors in distinction to the epistemological arguments made within the paper. The puzzle revolves around the firmness of views expressed by postmodernists, given the intrinsically ambiguous and relative world they describe. Nonetheless, this first paper is a powerful reminder of a continuing need to understand more about how speaking, language, and cognition are linked to behavior and acting. This is a serious hole in the cognition literature, which is addressed in this issue by Phyl Johnson.

The MOC literature has often raised the concern that what people say may not be what they “think” (see Eden 1992). Further, what is thought and perhaps said is often not a good predictor of behavior. Johnson suggests two reasons why researchers are often frustrated by weak links between their attempts to represent cognition and their ability to understand and predict surrounding behavior. The first is a curious inattention to emotion which, until recently, has not been researched in the general management literature or in more specific work on managerial cognition (an exception can be found in research reported by Daniels 1998).

Interestingly, in the first few decades, much of the research in our base discipline of cognitive psychology also ignored emotion, swayed by a computational model of how brains function. Johnson points out that emotion is now being given serious attention in psychology, where it “is considered not just in terms of a cognitive phenomenon but in terms of bodily sensations (feelings), [and] physiological reactions (tears).” Her helpful overview of research from a psychotherapeutic point of view also reminds us that some psychologists have always been interested in the link between emotion, action, and thought. Drawing especially on two recent books by Damasio (1994, 2000), Johnson suggests that “emotion must be seen as part of cognition,” and their “symbiosis” is needed to “account for the behavior of a collective.”

Discourse is the proposed focus for further study, as it both reveals and creates collectivity. An observation from Weick (2005) is often cited in the literature on managerial and organizational cognition: “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say.” Johnson’s paper questions this insight with references to psychology research that suggests conscious thought is not the driver that many cognitive researchers assume it is. Intriguing citations show that biological reactions often precede cognitive responses. By extension, Johnson contends that “information has been processed and choices made in our unconscious mind before our conscious

mind becomes aware of it.” She ends up agreeing with Freud (1900) and more recent psychologists who suggested that “intent is a post-rationalized fabrication that we have come to rely on as though it were real.”

We concur that the managerial literature has been curiously silent about both intent and emotion, and this is a plausible reason why the connection between representations of cognition and behavior is often so tenuous. Further, we accept the critique presented in this paper that almost all work on managerial cognition (including much of our own) has tended to accept verbal statements at face value. Johnson suggests a more sophisticated view, but we wish she had gone even farther to suggest methodologies for MOC researchers who want to move from assumptions about collective cognition to research on collectivity.

The final two papers in this issue study collectives while exemplifying two directions for further research based on practical concerns. The first, by Annemette Kjærgaard, reports on a longitudinal study of an organization that was forced to change strategy due to declining revenues. The research explores the relative stability of cognition through the lens of organizational identity, which turns out to be a surprisingly stable concept.

Kjærgaard considers how organizational identity can dominate the cognition of organizational participants, even though they experience a continuing mismatch between their expectations and the actions of management. Her data suggest four ways that different staff make sense of this dissonance. The evidence is that organizational identity is not a stable set of constructs linked to a set of fixed behaviors, which early work on organizational identity tended to assume. Nevertheless, a pervasive organizational identity creates significant strategic inertia as it continues to guide the behavior of the staff even though management behavior relates to a new vision.

We are drawn to her metaphorical account of organization members describing themselves as moving from “thinking spaghetti” to “living lasagna,” but this paper, too, leaves room for further work. Figures from a single case study lead to a theoretical explanation that is temporally sequenced, but more evidence is needed. It is easy to criticize all case studies along these lines, yet surely the cycle can be entered at any point. What then can cognitive researchers say to those who want to shape intention in Johnson’s sense of the word?

The second empirical article, by Elaine Harris and Robin Woolley, reports on experiments with cognitive mapping as a means of negotiating consensus around what an innovating team does *not* know. The emphasis on uncertainty is a neat reversal of most cognitive literature to date, which tends to analyze what is known or what is assumed (often mistakenly from the researcher’s point of view). The Harris and Woolley paper takes action research seriously, with explicit tests of its adequacy using guidelines proposed by Reason and Bradbury (2000).

We wonder whether the tools used to generate consensus, along with the time pressures of the work being facilitated, might lead to false consensus. This kind of situation leads to Phyl Johnson’s suggestion that researchers and facilitators might

emphasize the deeper idea of “collectivity” over “group cognition.” Harris and Woolley reasonably might respond that pragmatic considerations preclude deeper alignment in many cases, and this response is worth considering by all those who are interested in managerial and organizational cognition.

In fact, all four papers presented in this issue provide timely food for thought on managerial and organizational cognition. Research is maturing, and there is a growing interest in application as well as moving theory forward. This issue shows interesting work being done in each domain and points toward a further agenda.

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## Note

1. For a useful overview of Kelly’s work, see Hodgkinson and Sparrow (2002).

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