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Reconsidering the exploration of power distance: an active case study approach

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Abstract

In this paper, we present what we call an “active case study” and we theorize specifically on the relevance hereof for an exploration of power distance (as conceptualized by Hofstede (Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Sage, Beverley Hills, CA, 1980)). As Hofstede conceives it, the notion of “power distance” enables an understanding of the predominant ideas about inequality prevalent in a (national) culture, which in turn infuse work relationships. An active case study approach—as we elucidate in the paper—implies an acknowledgement on the part of those organizing the research of the manner in which their intervention might affect the way “respondents” experience their work relationships. We suggest that our proposed active case study approach offers novel possibilities for exploring power distance and should be added to the repertoire of approaches used to examine this in organizational life. We develop our argument in this regard by offering a detailed account of the application of this approach to a Taiwanese organization (the Kaohsiung Harbor Bureau in Taiwan). © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Active case study; Power distance; Researcher involvement

1. Introduction

In this paper, we propose that what we call an active case study approach extends the repertoire of approaches to be used in the exploration of power distance in organizational life. Approaches utilized to date have followed largely from Hofstede’s pioneering work [1] using a survey style of research. Some attempts have been made by researchers to refine the way that surveys are utilized to examine power distance by focusing on the way the (relevant) questions are constructed in questionnaires (cf. the discussion provided by Spector et al. [2]). And suggestions have been made concerning the need to complement questionnaires (in whatever way they are constructed) with fieldwork entailing detailed involvement of researchers in specific cases [3]. The

suggestion then is that “the complexities of real-life situations”, as Galang puts it [3, p. 713], can be understood better via the enrichment provided by case study work.

Our argument extends (and reframes) these considerations. We argue that an *active case study* approach has the potential to *draw out as well as facilitate* an understanding on the part of “respondents” (now participants) that acceptable power distances in their work relationships do not necessarily admit of clear (and static) expression. What are considered to be “acceptable” work relationships between “bosses” and “subordinates” may not admit of expression in a fixed judgment with a singular meaning. The crux of our argument is that how people are approached by researchers when asked to deliver their judgments may indeed make a difference to the way in which they come to experience their relationships.

We develop our argument by referring in detail to a specific case involving the exploration of experiences and expectations connected with planning for the future of the

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Kaohsiung Harbor Bureau (KHB) in Taiwan. We concentrate in this paper on the way in which the encounters between the researcher (a co-author of this paper) and participants could be seen to evoke *multiple experiences*, so that participants could come to appreciate better the rigidity of fixed perceptions of “acceptable” power distances in their work relationships.

2. The context of the research

The researcher organizing the study had been working in the Harbor as a manager (in charge of stevedoring operations) for 10 years prior to his embarkation on the research. For 3 years he was given the opportunity within the Harbor to operate officially as a researcher, exploring people’s experiences in relation to plans for privatizing certain aspects of the Harbor. He indicated to all concerned parties that he hoped that the research would be of benefit to people within the Harbor. He acknowledged (and made overt to others) that he did not presume to be just an observer, or even a participant observer, but recognized that as a researcher he could make a difference to the way people think about their situation. He tried to create discussions around the various people’s ideas, although he did not attempt to do this by bringing together all the players in the Harbor (or their representatives) into one group situation. Nor did he try to bring together people when he thought trying this would make them break their trust in him to follow a suitable way of handling the work relationships. He followed a different approach by posing questions—at the point of holding interviews with people—to encourage them to look at issues in a way they may not have done if he had not been present nor had conducted the interviews. And, as a “second cycle”, so to speak, he played back to people some questions arising from the first set of interviews—in individual re-interviewing and in some group discussion. He held group discussions appropriately with junior managers and with workers—first as separate groups and later as a combined group. Following these discussions he fed some of the information gleaned from the discussions back to the Director and Vice-Director of the Harbor.

The decision as to what “information” to feed back and forth, and how to proceed in this process, of course involved the researcher in some difficult choices. For instance, he could have seen his obligations to the Director as implying that he should feed *all* information to him that he may find relevant to the managing of the Harbor. As a middle manager, the researcher could well have considered that he was obligated in this regard. But he also had certain (felt) obligations to others—especially as he was adopting simultaneously the position of “researcher”, a position that offered him access to certain (private) information. In this position (as he interpreted it, and which he saw as primary in this case), he felt that he had gained also the trust of workers to act responsibly in the way in which he addressed the

“information” developed in encounters with them. Meanwhile, he also needed to earn (and try to maintain) the trust of the Director, so that he could play a mediating role between the various parties (a role which he had chosen to adopt as part of his “activity”). The details of the processes through which these choices were made are not the subject of this paper. Suffice it to say that in managing the tension between what he took to be his role of middle manager and also researcher, the latter becoming overriding in the choices that he was making while organizing the case study.

The approach that he adopted, like most case studies, clearly differs from a quantitative style of approach.¹ Instead of proceeding via structured instruments of observation, such as structured questionnaires, he chose to become involved in exploring in depth people’s experience of their work relationships. And, as will be examined further below, he chose to do so in what can be called an “active” manner. But as a starting point for the research, some guiding questions were used to map out the area of exploration:

- The first question related to the way in which world trends toward privatization had become experienced in the Harbor (in the past in relation to previous privatization of the dockworker system and in relation to ideas for the future).
- A second question was whether we can think of different ways of relating to these trends than just to follow them as if they are inevitable; and how we can adapt ideas about privatization to the situations experienced by people in the Harbor.

As the researcher spoke to participants about their possible input in relation to the development of plans for privatization of aspects of the Harbor (and explored their concerns around issues at stake for them) he was able at the same time to consider issues connected with their experiences of (what Hofstede would call) power distance. That is, as he proceeded to address the above two questions to participants, the researcher learned more about what might be involved in working with an acknowledgement that he could, through the research, possibly make a difference to the way they experience (among other things) “acceptable” power distances in their relationships.

¹ There is not full agreement about the extent to which quantitative or qualitative methods may be used in any case study. Sometimes, survey research or structured observation or field experiments are conducted in a study, as De Vaus notes [42, p. 6]. However, according to Bryman, if this is what is done there is very little to distinguish the case study from quantitative investigations [4, p. 170]. The problem with using only quantitative methods (such as questionnaires), as Schein comments, is that much of the substance of organizational life becomes invisible to the method of inquiry [5, p. 235]. Moreover, it disallows possibilities for dialogue about the results, as itself a source of data and insight.

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