

The Solution to Aviation Safety: Thick descriptions from the annals of organizational bullshit.

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A dictionary of bullshit (Law, 2008) defines “feedback” as: “harsh criticism, usually unsought, and unwanted. And unhelpful.” One does not need to be a rocket scientist to notice that systems theoretical language in organizations does not always perform its imagined function. Presumably neutral concepts can be mobilised as normative devices in common, everyday power struggles (Hardy & Clegg, 1996), which can be both funny and tragic. This paper, about aviation safety and the science incorporated in it, is a case in point.

After decades of popularizing ‘safety culture’, systems theories appear to be on the rise in the high-tech domain of safety management – a switch fitting the ideological dichotomy proposed by Barley & Kunda (1992). They proposed that management rhetorical surges serve to disseminate ideas and alternate in periods of twenty to thirty years between normative and rational extremes. Normative ideologies emphasize worker commitment; rational ideologies emphasize organizational design. The pattern appears to be correlated with economic expansion waves, suggesting that organizational scientists are not really visionary innovators at the forefront of brave new worlds, but simply turn a cog in the global capitalist machine.

Organizational scientists’ image of their role in developing and disseminating knowledge is further challenged by recent developments. Fitting the latest surge of market rationalities (Kunda & Ailon-Souday, 2005), where research funding is sought increasingly with private parties, organizational scientists are urged to take a collaborative approach and thoroughly involve practitioners in the definition of research problems (Van de Ven, 2007). Not only theorizing modestly adjust to global economic trends; scientific practices do too.

The consequent prospect for organizational ethnographers ready to embark on a scientific career is ambiguous. On the one hand, the participative attitude required by the marketisation of academia should come quite naturally to them; this could work in their advantage. On the other hand, they lose the autonomy that allows for independent research, and engagement with powerful private parties may not necessarily imply engagement with socially relevant questions. The time seems right to assess the potential roles of organizational ethnography in new, uncharted terrains.

This paper offers a reflection on how organizational ethnography can meaningfully participate in a high-tech organizational arena, presenting an example from the field of aviation Human Factors. Human Factors researchers and practitioners study and try to exert influence on human factors that affect performance. Reliability and safety are constructed as a precondition for economic performance. Any small failure can lead to a devastating crash that may not only

be the end of hundreds of people, but also to the organization, and ultimately the industry (La Porte, 1996). Though authorities and organizations emphatically embrace safety's latest management models and practices, there is a notorious call to investigate the actual, negative managerial power influences on safety (Perrow, 1984). Ethnographers could clearly contribute by studying such influences (Atak & Kingma, 2010), but they also have to collaborate with the primary 'suspect': the managerial staff.

Thick descriptions from multi-sited ethnography in the aviation Human Factors field show how meaningful ethnographic participation is possible. Ethnography could usefully recover the logic of practice in order to study the power mechanisms that could undermine supposedly safe technologies. The practice-logic, however, once available, seems to be ignored or silenced by more powerful, polarized ideologies. Knowledge about the nature of safe and reliable organizational practice is excluded from authoritative texts by framing human action as either compliant or deviant. Deviations from organizational rule-systems are framed as fundamentally circumspect, thus ignoring that rule systems require constant adaptations and deviations once they are applied in complex realities.

Alternative analytical frames have been developed. Instead of condemning human error as signs of a bad work ethic, organizations should design their systems such that they use errors, as they fundamentally represent useful feedback and shape human performance. Though this rationalistic alternative appears to be ignored in favour of the normative approach, it is thinkable that it could be equally selective in adopting knowledge by presenting 'the' solution to complex safety problems.

An organization ethnographer's role could ultimately be limited to pointing out some of the ways irrationalities are reproduced through mechanisms of social and institutional power. The upside is that ethnographers can deconstruct some of the hollow nonsense that manage to fool societies. Influential actors uphold images of organized control over mankind's risky enterprises where really, we simply do not know what will happen.

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