

The Validity of Idiographic Research Explanations

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This paper attempts to address the question of whether organizational explanations produced through idiographic studies can be regarded as externally valid. It is argued that explanatory idiographic studies that are informed by a realist epistemology are, indeed, in a position to make general claims about the world. For realists, generality is distinguished from recurrent regularities; instead, it is ascribed to the operation of causal tendencies (or powers). The latter act in their normal way even when expected regularities do not occur. This is possible because the realization of causal tendencies is contingent upon specific circumstances, which may or may not favor the generation of certain patterns of events. Idiographic research conceptualizes the causal capability of structures, while at the same time it sheds light on the contingent manner through which a set of postulated causal powers interact and gives rise to the flux of the phenomena under study.

This article assesses the epistemological status of idiographic research from a realist perspective, focusing especially on the case study research design to study organizations. (The terms *idiographic studies*, *intensive research* and *concrete research* are interchangeable. Case studies and historical and archival research are considered to be the most representative of these research designs. The term *qualitative research* is avoided because this is not a type of research design, but rather it is a type of evidence [Yin, 1984].) The main question addressed here is: "To what extent can organizational knowledge, acquired through explanatory idiographic studies, be regarded as valid?" An answer begins with an outline of the basic principles of the realist paradigm, which is followed by a review of the main parameters of comparative organizational studies, emphasizing the core principles of the idiographic and

nomothetic types of research design. In the central part of the article the epistemological status of the idiographic approach within the realist paradigm is discussed. Finally, a realist perspective of idiographic studies is shown to shed light on organizational phenomena.

Idiographic studies, from a realist perspective, are very useful in producing valid explanatory knowledge, and idiographically generated knowledge is valid because generality is a property of the necessary relations in real structures and not a feature of the empirical domain. Furthermore, to a realist, social science is made sound by paying attention to ontological, epistemological, and conceptual issues.

The Realist Paradigm

For realists, what is missing from the positivists' evaluation of knowledge claims is an ex-

PLICIT backward link with ontological assumptions of what the world must be like if our knowledge claims are true and a forward link with the sociological arrangements of the social relationships in which the scientific adequacy of knowledge claims is ascertained (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979; Morgan & Smircich, 1980).

If positivistic claims about the natural and social sciences were true, scientific activity would not have been possible because most events in the natural and the social world take place in open systems, in which events do not invariably follow a determined and recurrent pattern (Bhaskar, 1978; Harré, 1989; Harré & Madden, 1975); instead, they are subject to diverse causal variations. Precisely because of the open character of the world, scientists need to engage in experiments in which the conditions for constant conjunctions of events (i.e., closed systems) need to be constructed so that causal laws can be identified.

In experimental activity the scientists are not the producers of the causal laws they identify, but only the causal agents of patterns of events, generated under conditions of closure, through which they gain access to causal laws. Furthermore, for causal laws to be externally valid, they must be ontologically distinct from patterns of events. This, in turn, implies that the laws or mechanisms that are identified by experimental activity continue to operate in their normal way in open systems, where no constant conjunction of events is possible. As a consequence, identification of a causal law with a constant conjunction of events is inadequate and ought to be rejected: Event regularities are insufficient and unnecessary conditions for the identification of a causal law. Finally, the impossibility of constructing the conditions of closure in the social sciences means that the latter are primarily explanatory and not predictive. Explanation and prediction are symmetrical only under conditions of closure (Cummins, 1983; Manicas, 1987; Manicas & Secord, 1983; Secord, 1986). A number of implications follow from this realist line of reasoning.

1. Identifying a causal law and its independence from patterns of events can be sustained only if there are *generative mechanisms* or *causal powers* at work independent of the events they generate. This raises the ontological question about what the world must be like in order for such a statement to be true. The only answer can be that the world does not consist of atomistic events, but real, complex, intransitive things. In other words, structures exist independently of our knowledge of them. Such generative mechanisms reside in the objects of study and constitute their necessary ways of acting. The generative mechanisms endure, even when they are not acting, and they act in their normal way, even when the consequents of the law-like statements they establish are not realized, due to countervailing forces or the operation of other intervening mechanisms. A one-to-one relationship between a causal law and the pattern of events it prescribes obtains only under conditions of closure (i.e., in experiments).

The above may be illustrated by the following example. The indeterminacy of labor potential compels management to control, and at the same time extract, the cooperation of their subordinates in order that the translation of labor power to actual labor can be achieved (Burawoy, 1979; Thompson, 1983). Thus, control and cooperation are two opposite generative mechanisms whose respective realization is dependent on contingent circumstances facing organizations. Certain conditions may favor cooperation at the expense of control, or vice versa, and this will be reflected in the design of organizational systems (cf. Friedman, 1977). Whatever the outcome may be, either a more cooperative or a more coercive organization design, respectively, this does not mean that the opposite generative mechanism (control or cooperation, respectively) has been absent. It means, rather, that there is a dominance of one mechanism over the other under that particular set of contingencies.

2. Causal laws usually are out of phase with

patterns of events and experiences. It is up to the social scientist to construct the conditions of closure so that the *real* and *actual* domains can be merged. Similarly, when events have not yet been detected, and thus the transition from the actual to the empirical domain has not yet been made, scientific investigation is required to identify and transform events into experiences (Bhaskar, 1978). Schematically, the domains of the real, the actual, and the empirical are distinct (Table 1), and the move from the real to the actual and then to the empirical is a contingent accomplishment (Outhwaite, 1983, 1987).

Causal mechanisms may either be dormant for a while or they may be counteracted by opposing mechanisms and lead to no events. For instance, efficiency gains that may be expected through the introduction of new technology may, instead, be neutralized through managers' excessive concern with control (Buchanan & Boddy, 1983). In turn, generated events may not be identified. For example, when researchers analyze industrial accidents, they almost al-

ways prove that certain signals of a forthcoming industrial accident did exist; however, managers did not take proper notice of them (Mitroff, 1988; Shrivastava, Mitroff, Miller, & Miglani, 1988). It is precisely because of the contingent nature of the link among the three domains of reality that science, as a particular form of social activity, is both necessary and possible.

From the realist viewpoint, causal explanation is not about the deterministic or stochastic association of patterns of events, nor about experiences, but the ascription of causal powers to objects. To ascribe a power or potentiality to an object is to specify its necessary ways of acting or, to put it differently, what it is capable of doing in the appropriate set of circumstances (Harre & Madden, 1975; Harre & Secord, 1972). As an example, dynamite has the power to explode, birds have the power to fly, or people have the power to work, to learn, to speak, and so on. Whether a particular causal power is exercised, and whether it manifests itself in the actual and/or empirical domain depends on the ambient *contingent* conditions. This is why we take care to create (or not to create) appropriate conditions for the activation (or nonactivation) of a causal power, and thus for the occurrence (or avoidance) of a certain set of desirable (or undesirable) results. For instance, the right conditions must be created for a bomb to explode or, by contrast, to avoid breaking a fragile vase while one moves to another home. In other words, causal powers operate as tendencies whose activation, as well as the effect(s) of their activation, are not given but contingent.

Within the realist paradigm the world is not only differentiated between the real, actual, and empirical domains of reality, but is *stratified* as well. That is to say that natural and social structures have *emergent* powers that are irreducible to those of their constituent parts. For example, the managerial causal powers of control and cooperation cannot be explained by reducing them to the powers of specific superiors, but by the latter's incorporation into a wider structure of relations of production.

Table 1
Ontological Assumptions of the Realist View of Science

	Real Domain	Actual Domain	Empirical Domain
Mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

(adapted from Bhaskar, 1978, p. 13)

Note: The real domain is the domain in which generative mechanisms, existing independently of but capable of producing patterns of events, reside. The actual domain is the domain in which observed events or observed patterns of events occur. The empirical domain is the domain of experienced events. Checkmarks (✓) indicate the domain of reality in which mechanisms, events, and experiences, respectively reside, as well as the domains involved for such a residence to be possible. Experiences presuppose the occurrence of events in the actual domain, independently of researchers' taking notice of them. In turn, events presuppose the existence of mechanisms in the real domain, which have been responsible for the generation of events.

Emergent powers are created when some objects or individuals are *internally* related to each other to form a structure (e.g., the relationship between a superior and a subordinate). Objects or individuals are internally linked when their identity depends on their being in a relationship with the rest of the components of the structure (Sayer, 1984). A structure is a set of simultaneously constraining and enabling rules and resources that are implemented in human interaction. These rules shape interaction while at the same time being reproduced in this very process of interaction (Giddens, 1976, 1984; Manicas, 1980). A concrete example would be that the superior-subordinate relationship is part of a structure which includes capital owners, labor power, division of labor, and an industrial mode of production. Production of objects and services is made possible through that structure and at the same time it is also constrained by the same structure.

By contrast, when objects or individuals are *contingently* related (e.g., people's transactions with their banks) their powers are not modified. Consequently, an explanation of the aggregate pattern can be made by reducing it to its components (e.g., the end-of-month current account figure can be explained by referring to both the withdrawals and deposits that were transacted during the month).

Main Parameters of Comparative Studies

In comparative research, different organizational units of analysis constitute the focal points of inquiry. In addition, three other complementary factors come into consideration. The first factor is the type of *research* design adopted, namely, the extent to which either large samples or specific organizations have been the object of research. The former case is of the survey-type (i.e., extensive) research, whereas the latter case is either historical, experimental, or case-study (i.e., intensive) research.

The second factor is the temporal dimension

along which the comparison has been undertaken, that is, whether time has been treated as constant (i.e., synchronic studies), as a variable having real-time values (i.e., diachronic studies), or as a variable having past values (i.e., historical studies).

The third factor is the contextual levels that are involved, namely, the extent to which (a) the contingent characteristics (technology, market segment, dependency on other organizations, etc.), (b) the sectoral domains (areas in which the organizations have been operating and fulfilling societal needs), and (c) the national/cultural features are taken into account in the comparison (Burns, 1967; Child, 1981; Kohn, 1987). Depending on the purpose of the study, some of the contextual levels can be kept constant, while the variation in the remaining ones is examined to assess its impact on the variation between the organizational units of analysis.

Within the realist perspective the manner in which contextual levels are conceived to bear on the units of analysis is conceptualized as follows. First, contextual factors are *internally* linked with the phenomenon under study and, therefore, are expected to be generally valid in the real domain. For example, the postulated link between Japanese culture and the organization of work in Japanese firms is an internal and, thus, a generally valid link. Consequently, the work organization in Japan can be expected to be shaped by Japanese values (Dore, 1973, 1987), although this is not to prejudge the form or the extent to which this will happen. (There may be other mechanisms at work in a specific Japanese firm which run against this culture and, thus, mitigate or even neutralize, the effects of Japanese values.)

Alternatively, contextual factors are contingencies whose impact on the phenomenon under study is variable, and, thus, the impact must be empirically established. For example, Berger (1987), in his investigation of the relationships between the components constituting "the economic culture of capitalism," treats value systems as being contingently linked with the

economic processes of capitalist development. On the basis of empirical evidence from the development of the Far East, he hypothesizes that, unlike the internal links between certain components of the economic culture of capitalism, the relationship between capitalism and a certain set of values, such as individual autonomy, is a historically contingent one. The precise nature of this contingent relationship can only be established empirically in particular societies.

Traditionally, the bulk of comparative research has been nomothetic, devoted to discovering law-like relationships between organizational characteristics, or between organizational and environmental variables, through the investigation of large numbers of organizations (Hickson, McMillan, Azumi, & Horvath, 1979; Mohr, 1982). (See also Lammers, 1978, and Lammers and Hickson, 1979, for a comprehensive survey of the developments in the field.) Researchers who have used nomothetic research design have not emphasized the process of interplay between contextual and organizational characteristics, but rather they have dwelled on the discovery of correlations.

By contrast, the idiographic approach has been used to investigate the configurational patterns constituted by (a) the parts of the phenomenon under study and (b) the way in which these parts fit within the wider contexts (e.g., Crozier, 1964; Dore, 1973; Maurice, 1979; Maurice, Sorge, & Warner, 1980; Mintzberg, 1973). As Child and Tayeb (1982–1983, pp. 57–58) remarked, referring to cross-national research, “in the idiographic approach, the relationships between organizations and their contexts are assumed to form configurations that are peculiar to defined space and time—that is, while contingent economic factors may be associated with organizational variables according to a particular configuration in, say, country A at a given point in time, those factors and variables would be expected to constitute a different configuration in country B at the same or some other point in time.” Idiographic studies are either exploratory or explanatory in nature, and they usually have

utilized, though this may not be exclusively, the case-studies form. Such case studies can be synchronic, diachronic, or historical in character.

Those who conduct comparative idiographic studies and are concerned with explanation primarily are interested in mapping out the pertinent configurational patterns and trying to produce explanations for the similarities and the differences. For realists, idiographic explanatory studies shed light on the specific contingent conditions under which the postulated generative mechanisms combine and operate. Similarities between the units of analysis are explained by the generative mechanisms and the similar type of contingencies that have been responsible for the mechanisms’ activation. Differences may be due either to the operation of different generative mechanisms or to the dissimilar contingencies within which the operation of a similar set of mechanisms has taken place. A different set of contingencies either “lines up” the postulated mechanisms in a different way or brings into operation a hitherto inactive set of countervailing mechanisms, thus generating a different set of phenomena. (This point will be illustrated in a following section of this article when an example of Burawoy and Lukacs’s comparative case study is discussed.)

Status of Knowledge Claims of Idiographic Research

The epistemological status of the idiographic approach, and more particularly of case studies, has caused contention among social science researchers. Within a positivistically inclined social science, there have been two views regarding the status of case studies.

According to the first view, case study research design has low external validity (i.e., nongeneralizability of findings beyond the case(s) researched). Therefore, two related consequences follow. First, the case study method is only suitable for the investigation of local causality, and, therefore, it is not legitimate for general theoretical claims (Miles & Huberman, 1984;

Mintzberg, 1979). Second, the case study method is merely the exploratory or pilot phase of a research program, which is aimed at enhancing the researcher's understanding of the phenomenon under study. This preliminary phase must be followed by the subsequent nomothetic phases en route to the establishment of empirical law-like correlations (Lammers & Hickson, 1979).

For the second view, the analogy can be made that comparative case study research is like experimental research design, where the replication logic can be applied (Yin, 1984). Thus, if the predicted results do occur in a number of carefully selected cases (i.e., literal application), or if the contrary results are produced but for predictable reasons (i.e., theoretical replication), then the case study method can play a significant role, transcending the local boundaries of the cases researched. In this way, in opposition to statistical generalization, which is implied by the nomothetic research design, analytical generalization is achieved (Yin, 1981, 1984). (See also Burawoy, 1985; Maurice, et al., 1980; Miles & Huberman, 1984.)

For realists, the above views of the role of case studies in social empirical research are limited because they are based on the assumptions that (a) the ultimate objects of knowledge are atomistic events, which constitute facts apprehended by sense-experience, and (b) event conjunctions are the raw materials for theory building. Consequently, any empirical regularities are fused with the causal laws underlying them. Therefore, it is naturally concluded that since case studies, by their very nature, cannot point at any extensive regularities, they are, as far as explanatory knowledge is concerned, epistemologically inferior. By contrast, within the realist paradigm, explanatory idiographic studies are epistemologically valid because they are concerned with the clarification of structures and their associated generative mechanisms, which have been contingently capable of producing the observed phenomena.

If the realist assertions are accepted, it follows

that in idiographic organizational studies, concern with what has been called *detective work* (Mintzberg, 1979; Yin, 1981, 1984), as the medium of producing explanations by merely establishing the pattern of similarities and differences between the units of analysis, is inadequate. Scientific knowledge is much more demanding than "detective" knowledge; scientists are not content with establishing patterns of events between "crimes," but they want to know what has produced such events. In other words, they want to know what are the structures, the *generative mechanisms* and the *contingent factors* responsible for the observed patterns. Scientists, unlike detectives, aim at discovering more and more strata of the natural and social world; they do not merely concentrate on the contingent appearances (Benson, 1977, 1983; Clegg, 1983; Keat & Urry, 1982; Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978; Outhwaite, 1983; Whitley, 1984). In contrast, detectives stick to the surface, and having identified the constant conjunction of events which seemingly points to the perpetrator, they turn to other cases, never going beyond the domain of experiences to the domain of structures and generative mechanisms that produced the cases.

A good example of the limitations inherent in such a detective approach is found in research about the nature of managerial skills and work. Despite concern with the study of management and managers during the past 30 years, the description of what it takes to be a manager in a business organization is rather obscure (Hales, 1986, 1988). Why? The main reason is that research has been purely inductive in nature, based on lay definitions of management and managers (Whitley, 1988; Willmott, 1984).

In an attempt to get away with the prescriptive universal functions of management postulated by its founding fathers, management has been largely conceived of as what managers *do*, at the expense of what managers are *capable of doing*. Consequently, managers have been defined and studied not according to theoretically derived criteria but according to corporate titles

and company practices (e.g., Mintzberg, 1973, 1975). Such a long tradition in the study of management and managers has revealed a huge diversity of, and temporal instability in, the composition of managerial work, so that the question "who 'managers' are" (Hales, 1986, p. 107) not only remains unanswered but presses again to the forefront of management research.

Within a realist perspective, managers are conceived as being endowed with causal powers (e.g., the drive toward efficiency, the need to control and at the same time extract the cooperation of subordinates) by virtue of their being a part of a wider industrial structure. The way in which these causal powers are realized is contingent upon the managers' specific hierarchical positions, the organizations involved, the industries involved, and the environments within which these powers are exercised—hence, the immense diversity and instability of their realization (Tsoukas, 1988). Further conceptualization by researchers should attempt to redescribe management by postulating, in addition to causal powers, the rest of its constitutive strata, moving successively outwards from the core of the causal powers to the outer strata of managerial functions, managerial work, and managerial behavior, respectively.

Thus, from a realist point of view, theoretical redescriptions increasingly capture new layers of reality. Yes, detective work is needed, but after that point is finished, more demanding questions arise that cannot be dealt with adequately unless the researcher has incorporated a stratified conception of scientific knowledge.

What does realism have to offer idiographic organizational research?

The significance that the realist perspective can have regarding organizational phenomena can be better grasped through an example.

Burawoy and Lukacs (1985), on the basis of case studies of two machine shops from America and Hungary, respectively, have sought to criticize eight stereotypes, all of which point to the widely held assumption that firms in state

socialist societies are necessarily less efficient than firms in advanced capitalist societies. The authors first set up two models of capitalist and socialist logic and delineated their implications for a firm operating within each logic, respectively. On the basis of their case study findings, Burawoy and Lukacs remarked that, contrary to all the stereotypes, the Hungarian firm presented higher technical efficiency across a number of issues than did the American one. Hence, they have claimed that "technically efficient socialist firms are as possible as technically inefficient capitalist firms" (Burawoy & Lukacs, 1985, p. 725). The authors concluded their article by demonstrating the inadequacy of present models to explain the cases, due to the failure to distinguish between the enterprise and its component firms. In capitalist societies, the multidivisional corporate structure, they argued, insulates the divisions from market pressures, whereas in socialist societies the corporation seals off its divisions from the state, permitting some operation of the market rules among its internal units.

From a realist perspective the above study could be reinterpreted as follows. Because certain capitalist firms are inefficient does not mean that the drive toward efficiency is absent from these firms, as the authors seem to imply, nor does it invalidate the thesis that efficiency is internally related to the nature of capitalism (Berger, 1987; Heilbroner, 1985). However, what it does highlight is that efficiency as a generative mechanism of capitalist logic depends (for its microrealization) upon a number of contingencies that may, in turn, activate countervailing mechanisms, thus overriding or diminishing the generative capability of efficiency. In this case, the causal power of the multidivisional organizational form tended to drive the capitalist firm toward centralization and the insulation of the constituent units from the market, and thus it ran against efficiency. Such a process is not irreversible, however, because management, by exercising their own causal powers, can set certain processes in motion (i.e., changes in orga-

nizational structure) that could reduce the accumulating antiefficiency momentum. The same type of reasoning, though in reverse, applies to any sample of efficient state socialist firms.

The benefits from the above realist reinterpretation of Burawoy and Lukacs's case study findings are manifold. A realist perspective helps management researchers to couple abstract conceptual analysis of the issues at hand with concrete research, in a significant, yet non-deterministic, manner. By defining the generative mechanisms (causal powers) of, say, the capitalist logic and the kind of social structures that help sustain and reproduce these mechanisms, researchers do not postulate ironclad laws, but tendencies, which may or may not manifest themselves in the empirical domain.

According to such a realist conception, organizations are the loci in which causal powers interact and produce indeterminate outcomes. In this vein, paradoxical phenomena are not mere exceptions in stochastic conjunctions of events, or simple refutations of law-like generalizations, but rather the *contingent* link of a set of causal powers. Idiographic research sheds light on the contingent forms that the interaction of causal powers has taken in specific cases.

To summarize, an explanation of an organizational phenomenon will involve a gradual transition from actions, through reasons to rules and finally to structures and causal powers (Sayer, 1984). The starting point is, of course, a set of phenomena (i.e., actions) either distinct or part of an established pattern of recurring regularities. During the process of explanation, the first stage involves (a) resolving the actions themselves into their constitutive components and (b) theoretically redescribing these components so that their inner constitution is revealed (Bhaskar, 1978).

The second stage involves asking for the actors' accounts as to why the actions under investigation have taken place. These reasons will, in turn, invoke various rules in terms of which the given reasons can be made intelligible (e.g., "We do not have job descriptions because we

want to promote flexibility on the shop floor. Flexibility is vital in order to minimize labor costs and in order to stay competitive.")

Finally, the explanation can be completed by posing the following questions. "Why do these specific rules exist? What are the structures and the associated causal powers behind them, which are responsible for such rules? How did these causal powers come to be exercised during that particular set of circumstances?" At this stage, abstract analysis and conceptualization are required. Abstract analysis should be coupled with an account of the empirically researched contingencies, within which a specific link of causal powers has taken place. For instance, work organization can be seen as the product of the exercise of managerial causal powers (e.g., efficiency, control, cooperation) within a specific organizational-cum-environmental context (Tsoukas, 1988). These causal powers must be defined, and where they emanate from must be shown. In other words, what structure gives management its postulated causal powers? The precise manner in which these causal powers interact, and thus the shape of work organization they help to generate, will depend on the prevailing contingencies. Empirical research will reveal the patterns of interaction between the postulated causal powers and the ambient contingencies.

In conclusion, an idiographic organizational study, conducted within a realist perspective, moves concurrently on two tracks. On the first track it is "up in the clouds," dealing with abstraction and theoretical conceptualization of the issues at hand. By contrast, the second track is "down to earth," looking for the *specifico* of the cases, namely investigating the existing contingencies and their interaction with the postulated mechanisms.

Conclusions

This article has tried to assess, from a realist perspective, the epistemological status of idiographic research in the comparative study of or-

ganizations. Idiographic studies do have an epistemologically valid position, and this stems from the distinction between (a) causal laws and empirical generalizations and (b) real structures, actual events, and experienced events.

Theoretically, explanatory idiographic studies deal with necessity, namely with the workings of real social structures and their causal capabilities, irrespective of their individual manifestations in the domain of experience. Thus, causal powers are externally valid, but their activation is, and thus their effects are, contingently determined. Empirically, idiographic studies help elucidate the specific, contingent manner in which a certain mix of causal powers has been formed and activated.

From the realist view, comparative idio-

graphic research, concerned with producing explanatory knowledge, is not equivalent to detective work, namely merely establishing similarities and differences between the units of analysis; rather, it is simultaneously active at two levels. First, such researchers seek to re-describe their object of explanation in a theory-important way, postulating the existence of multiple generative mechanisms that are potentially responsible for the occurrence of the events under study. These generative mechanisms are examined via abstract research. Second, these researchers look for the contingent ways in which the postulated mechanisms are intertwined, which will generate the flow of experienced events. And such a view is achieved only by concrete empirical research.

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