Contributions of Critical Realist Ethnography in researching the Multinational Organisation.

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Stream 4: Critical Perspectives on Researching and Theorizing the Multinational Organization

Abstract

The paper examines the contribution that critical realist ethnographic research can make to the field of international business and international management (IB/IM) research. Focusing specifically on the multinational organization as a site of much theoretical and empirical interest, the paper outlines the relevance of critical realist ethnographic research approaches to an understanding of practices and processes within the multinational organization. In carrying out research on the comparative study of organizations in a cross-national context a number of methodological issues are faced. Issues raised include the relation between structures and processes, the connection between the micro level and the macro level and the treatment of ‘time’ in addressing research questions concerning changes in organizations and institutional contexts. The paper argues for a methodology for the comparative study of economic organizations that is sensitive to process. ‘Process’ is seen as being influenced by structures but not determined by them. Critical realism is seen to be helpful as a sensitizing tool and means of conceptualizing the phenomenon studied.

Whilst ethnographic studies in the hermeneutic tradition work with an ontology encouraging focus on agents’ conceptualizations, critical realist ethnographies set out from the premise that subjects’ own accounts are the starting point but not the end of the research process. Realist ontologies seek to go beyond agents’ conceptualizations of events and seek to look at social structures. Within a realist ontology social phenomenon are seen as a result of a plurality of structures. Human action is conceived as both enabled and constrained by social structures, but this action in turn reproduces or transforms those structures (Bhaskar 1979). Ethnographic investigations within this context can be used to explore the relationship between structure and agency. A realist approach to ethnography aims not only to describe events but also to explain them, by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency. Explanation also focuses on how agency maintains or transforms these structures. The paper draws on a critical realist ethnography of the transfer of management practices within a multinational.