A Pedagogy of the Repressed? Critical Management Education and the Case Study

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“On August 29, 2005, hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast of the United States precipitating a scene that could barely be believed: the complete evacuation and near-complete destruction of an entire American city. According to a 2006 evaluation report commissioned by The White House, the storm caused 1,330 deaths, resulted in about $96 billion in direct damage, destroyed or made unlivable 300,000 homes, forced the evacuation of 1.1 million people, and has created a huge pool of internally displaced people that have yet to return home (United States, 2006). It has also changed how the United States perceives itself in relation to the world with words entering the American vocabulary that had previously only been applied to developing countries: internally displaced people, refugee camps, foreign assistance” (Rostis & Helms Mills, 2009).

Introduction

The case study approach both as a research method and as a teaching tool has been neglected, even disdained, by critical management scholars and other post positivist researchers. However, there has been some recent recognition of the potential value of the case study approach for critical management studies amongst postpositivist scholars (c.f. Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009; Piekkari, Welch, & Paavilainen, 2009; Raufflet & Mills, 2009). This should not be surprising given the rich postpositivist traditions (Prasad, 2005) of narrative analysis (Czarniawska & Gagliardi, 2003), storytelling (Boje, 1995) and other approaches that focus on capturing the context (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006) in which social events occur. Building on these recent developments, it is our aim to demonstrate that the case study is a useful research strategy for critical management scholars; more specifically that case teaching is a valuable pedagogical tool for critical management education. To that end, we will discuss the longstanding domination of the field of case study by positivists and the more recent interest of the case study as an
increasingly valuable methodological and teaching strategy by postpositivists. We are conscious that not all critical management scholars are postpositivists and that there are numerous definitions of postpositivism. So, for clarity in this paper, we will work with Prasad’s (2005: 9) definition of postpositivism as an approach that “problematizes questions of social reality and knowledge production by emphasizing constructed social reality and the constitutive role of language and the value of research as a critique.” We feel that this definition complements the ontology of most critical management scholars and addresses the issues and concerns they have with traditional management education techniques. Although focused on case study teaching, the paper deals with the interrelationship between the case method and case teaching. We explore the strengths and problems of critical case teaching through analysis of our own attempt to develop a teaching case on Hurricane Katrina (Rostis & Helms Mills, 2009). We conclude with a summary of the strengths and limitations of case teaching from a critical management perspective.

**Positivism and the Case Study**

*The Context of the Case Method*

What is a case study, how should they be designed and how should they be used? The answer will depend on whom you ask as different disciplines have different notions of what constitutes a case study and what is entailed in case study research (Mills et al., 2009). Over its long pedigree dating back to the Chicago School of sociology in the 1920, and the field of medicine as early as the 1930s, the case method seems to have taken on the mantle of a positivist technique that marks both case study as a research method (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009) and as a pedagogical strategy. The latter has been long associated with the Harvard Business School, and emulated in Canada by the Ivey School of Business. Although case study as research method and teaching strategy are not the same, the dominant positivist disciplinary convention (Piekkari et al., 2009) has meant that they share an underlying focus on the construction of a scientific account. Despite this apparent association with positivism, Yin (2009) believes that case study research is still met with disdain by some within the ranks of positivist research as lacking scientific rigour. This position vis-à-vis the acceptability of the methodology seems to redouble efforts among case researchers to search for more and better ways of ensuring the scientific credibility of the case study method (Yin, 1972). For example, Yin (2003) and Eisenhardt (1982) have taken a prescriptive approach and recommended that case study design, collection and analysis follow a particular rigorous method (Piekkari et al., 2009), usually involving experiments, surveys and quantitative data that can be used to test hypotheses. Case study as a teaching approach seems to have fared better perhaps due to its association with Harvard or perhaps because of the fact that the teaching case is not considered research *per se*. Anecdotal evidence for this position comes from our experience that the Deans of Canadian business schools rarely give credit to faculty for developing teaching cases.
So it is perhaps not surprising that the limited use of the case study in postpositivist research was noted by Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen (2009) in their analysis of over a hundred articles in four journals that utilized the case method. Piekkari et al. (2009) attempted to make sense of how the case study was understood and used in the field of international business. They discovered that despite the availability of a multitude of methods, only a narrow set of approaches were used to design and develop the cases. They referred to these as disciplinary conventions that both legitimated and restricted how the case study could be constructed. They concluded that there is a need for a contextualized approach to case studies that overcomes the disciplinary conventions and, thus, allows for the field of case studies to appeal to a wider audience of researchers (i.e. postpositivists). However, despite the plea for diversity, critical management scholars appear to have avoided characterizing their work as case studies, possibly seeking to avoid the above-mentioned association with positivism (Raufflet & Mills, 2009). For example, Mills and Helms Mills (2009) have described the challenges of using postpositivist methods related to gender in the airline industry. Prasad (2005) examined the challenges of archival research in the development of the case studies. Indeed, in some disciplinary fields including international business (Piekkari et al., 2009), information systems (Serenko, Cocosila, & Turel, 2008), management education, organizational behaviour, and organization theory (Hartt, Yue, Helms Mills, & Mills, 2009) there is a total absence of critical and other postpositivist case studies; that is, studies that self consciously refer to their methodological approach as a case study. Therefore, it seems that the case study falls between the cracks that border the functionalist paradigm, with positivists doubting the rigour of the approach and postpositivists unable to see its applicability to advancing a critical perspective. Whatever its level of acceptance, the case approach has been thoroughly dissected and critiqued by numerous authors from both a critical and positivist perspective (Banning, 2003; Lundburg, Rainsford, Shay, and Young, 2001; Naumes and Naumes, 2006; Osigweh, 1989; Smith, 1987). This dissection reveals two concerns with the case study approach relevant to our intent of encouraging critical management teaching cases: the decision-making focus of the teaching case and the factual basis of case narratives.

**Criticisms of the Teaching Case**

The first of these concerns centers on whether decision-making is central to the case study pedagogy. The literature notes that teaching cases usually present a dilemma or crisis over which an executive or decision-maker must make a decision (Lundburg et al., 2006). This creates a number of problems for the management educator. For example, Dean & Fornaciari (2002) and Lundberg, Rainsford, Shay, and Young (2001) note that too much emphasis on decision-making excludes discussion of other aspects of organizational life such as politics, emotions, and group dynamics. They further note that it was never the original intention of case study ‘inventors’ to have decision as the focal point of cases and remind management educators of the roots of the case method to highlight other possibilities for utilizing cases including the illustration of paradoxes, dilemmas and seemingly intractable problems. A second concern flows from the perceived decision-making focus of most teaching cases. Cases ostensibly serve to relay the facts of an actual event thus providing a lens through which the decision-making
process can be analyzed (Naumes and Naumes, 2006; Osigweh, 1989). While we acknowledge the positivist perspective of critical management that registers discomfort with the idea of facts, we would argue that the point is not to come up with an agreed-upon accounting of history, but rather to utilize the narrative to create what Naumes and Naumes (2006) call a feeling of ambiguity among students using the case method. In other words, there is no right answer in the case method. This undoubtedly can be used to advantage in critical management pedagogy to register the contextual nature of management decision-making. As Lundburg et al. (2006) note, the complexity of a case confronts students with reality that some problems are not solvable. We argue that this facet of case study emphasizes the limitations of a top-down, hierarchical approach to decision-making. Further, the proponents of the case method in business education stress that the point of delivering ambiguity is to not only simulate complexity, but also to problematize the notions of acceptability, values, and judgment (Naumes and Naumes, 2006).

Despite the few drawbacks to the case method and its association with what we can call traditional management education, we notice that there are aspects of the case method that from a post-positivist perspective make it ideal for critical management education. Specifically, the inherently contextual nature of management decision-making in a case, the ambiguity imbued within case narratives, and the historical roots of the teaching case that ground the method in seeking explanations through appeals to politics, emotion, and relationships. What the literature reveals is that hidden within what purports to be a positivist methodology are elements of a critical approach to management learning. With this in mind, we now turn to examine the current state of critical management education and how a postpositivist approach to case study could advance its pedagogy.

A Postpositivist Approach to the Case Study: Critical Management Education

CMS Concerns with the Critical Management Education Literature

Much has been written about critical management and the issues surrounding it (c.f. Alvesson and Wilmott, 1992; Alvesson, Bridgman and Wilmott, 2009). In this paper, we define critical management studies as the examination and problematization of management knowledge that has come to be taken for granted. As such, we contend that a case study, which encompasses a range of methods and designs to look at organizational behaviour, has appeal for a critical management studies audience. This approach agrees with the literature: Piekkari et al. (2009) has called for the use of multiple approaches to the case study and Mills, Durepos and Weibe (2009) and Mills and Helms Mills (2009) have stressed the need to offer a range of approaches to the case study in order to appeal to a wide audience of researchers, including critical management educators.

We also offer the postpositivist case study as a way to overcome some of the concerns that critical management scholars have raised about traditional rational views of
Two other common themes concern the naturalization of management theory and the lack of reflexivity and reflection (Caproni and Arias, 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Zald, 2002) in traditional management education. Whereas management education ostensibly works to create students skilled in applying technical solutions to problems, critical management literature argues that this prevailing view assumes that these solutions are common sense, neutral, and value-free (Reynolds, 1999). The assumption is that organizations and individuals should behave in a predictable, rational manner, and contextual factors including issues of gender and power have no impact on outcomes. Since organizations are collections of individuals that create a complex and unpredictable web of values, interests, and power and not reified entities, this form of education often leaves management educators unable to grasp the complexity of the organization and to relate this complexity to management students. Critical management proponents argue that it is through reflection and reflexivity (Reynolds, 1999) that managers can consider how values, interests, and power contribute to problems and solutions faced by organizations, and often it is these simple solutions that are revealed to be masking a more complex network requiring attention.

Introducing complexity can be technically challenging and ethically troubling for management educators (Reynolds, 1999) and thus another theme emerges: implementing critical management education. Educators seeking to invoke a ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ approach must be reminded that for the most part business students are not marginalized, oppressed, or poor. Therefore, Freirian-like notions of empowering students to seek societal change, or indeed of challenging their fundamental beliefs in how the world functions, are likely to be met with failure or to cause some form of traumatic break in the worldview of the typical business student (Fenwick, 2005). Dehler, Welsh, and Lewis (2001), on the other hand, sees critical pedagogy in a more positive light, arguing that the goal should be a slow introduction to complexity resulting through a refusal to accept the naturalness of any idea or theory. This should develop an environment where criticism and challenge are the only natural aspects of education. However, the question again returns to pedagogy and how to impart critical skills, in a critical management environment without developing a sense of ennui and confusion (Dehler et al., 2001). The literature seems somewhat silent on this issue, and in a curious

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but perhaps understandable intersection with other aspects of critical management studies, there is plenty of diagnosis, but few suggestions for a cure.

Our proposal makes one tentative step towards this cure. It flows from experience in developing a critical management case study in organizational behaviour. While it was not our original intention to examine broader problems of critical management education, it began to emerge that there is plenty of scope for a postpositivist case study as a pedagogical tool that would negotiate the thematic issues of critical management pedagogy and support the need for a methodological pluralism in case studies.

**Research Strategy or Teaching Tool: Developing the Case of Hurricane Katrina**

Mills, Durepos and Weiße (2009) refer to the use of the case study as a research strategy rather than a method or methodology. While recognizing the divide between case teaching and case research, we adopt the view of Piekkar et al. (2009) that the case study is “a research strategy that examines, through the use of a variety of data sources, a phenomenon in its naturalistic context, with the purpose of ‘confronting’ theory with the empirical world.” Thus, for the purposes of this paper we conceptualize the teaching case as a pedagogy that can employ different methodologies, including archival materials and media reports. Like Mills and Helms Mills (2009), we have tried to use a sensemaking approach to create a plausible account of reality and knowledge. To that end, our paper presents a *postpositivist case study* that looks at the Hurricane Katrina crisis both from the perspective of an emergency responder and a resident of the city of New Orleans. We are mindful of the reasons examined earlier in this paper as to why a case study may potentially be seen as problematic for critical management studies scholars. However, we hope to show through the development of our own case why we believe the opposite is true: that the teaching case is an ideal critical management teaching tool.

Our initial intention with the project was to craft a teaching case to help explain key concepts in organization theory that could form part of an undergraduate organizational behaviour textbook. We believed that crisis could provide a framing event for a case study of organizational behaviours because of the extreme stress placed on people in organizations during a disaster. However, while developing the case we noted a curious and unexpected intersection between crisis, case study pedagogy, and critical management education. We found that crises like Katrina are particularly adept at calling the conventional wisdom and traditional approaches to management into question, especially if there is a perception that the response to the disaster has been a failure. As a result, many of the convenient assumptions about human behaviour, together with the flaws and hidden power structures inherent in the design of organizations, are revealed. Thus crises can act as a lens to magnify the inner workings of an organization that would normally be hidden from view. So instead of a traditional teaching case, we began to see that the Katrina disaster was leading us towards the development of a teaching tool more aligned with a critical management perspective. This insight was reinforced when we recalled that case studies should encourage students to identify practices that exist at
organizational levels that in turn reveal the connection of organization to the assumptions and power structures that exist in broader society: the case study takes multiple perspectives into consideration, including those of the powerless (Tellis, 1997). Thus, it also encourages thinking beyond the concepts to try and discern how they were created and how they are sustained. This compares closely with the critical approach to organizations, by which is meant the adoption of a skeptical view of tradition and authority, That is, management knowledge is problematized, and questions are raised about how theory may privilege a singular, functionalist view of the world (Mingers, 2000). Therefore, an interesting consequence of the case study pedagogy adopted in our teaching case is that it intersects with and is consistent with the critical approach to management education outlined by Mingers (2000) and Grey (2007). The question then became one of how to operationalize this learning for critical management education while being mindful of the limitations identified by the literature earlier in this paper. Unexpectedly, we found that following traditional teaching case approaches gave the critical result for which we were looking.

Organization of the Case

We decided to follow Yin (1993) and Stake (1995) by adopting an explanatory, instrumental method: the narrative, reference materials, and discussion questions were used to explain the causes of the so-called failures of the Katrina response and to encourage students to understand more than what is obvious. This approach enables the identification and application of theory through the use of evidence but it also enables students to see the limitations of theory. By being immersed in a problem for which students may not have the tools to solve, they are motivated to seek out theory that can solve the problem (Volpe, 2007). In addition, by incorporating a critical approach, the intention is to demonstrate that theory does not neatly tie up the problem: there are always unintended consequences and differing contexts that alter the results of applying the same theoretical approach. In other words, the case problematized management knowledge (Mingers, 2000) at the same time that it introduces students to that knowledge. Furthermore, Mingers (2000) suggests that students’ own experience should form the starting point for critical management education. It may be surprising to instructors to learn that many students have lived through some form of disaster; the use of video and simulation attempts to recount the experience of a disaster for those students who are not disaster survivors. Therefore, in the introductory component of the case, students were encouraged to share their experiences of real disasters, or at least of their experiences in viewing disaster stories and partaking in the simulation. This should serve as further motivation to learn theory.

To avoid having students see examples as merely instances of theory application, the case emphasized seeing beyond theory identification so that the issues raised by applying the theory are included for consideration (Volpe, 2007). In other words, the goal of management education in a critical approach should be to foster the identification of theory, but also to see the implications of their choices. The material in a standard undergraduate organizational behaviour textbook should provide students using the case with sufficient theoretical background to answer the discussion questions. However,
unlike lecture-based teaching using the textbook as a reference, the case study requires students to use ambiguous evidence to solve problems (Volpe, 2007). Again, the critical component of the case will challenge students to identify the limitations of theory, as well as the consequences of applying theory to those outside of the organizations empowered to make decisions. In our case study, the use of raw evidence simulates for students the ambiguity and chaos that normally confront decision makers, policy analysts, or managers.

Volpe (2007) provides further evidence of the useful intersection between case studies and critical management education when he suggests that the social and political context of events serve as a useful dividing line between theory and practice. The case study confronts students with the context of a problem and in so doing incorporates a key element of the critical approach to management. The case can be used to show the messy, ambiguous and uncertain choices faced by decision makers, but also by those affected by decision makers’ choices. The organization of the discussion questions for the various modules in the case were intended to move students through Bloom’s (1956) educational taxonomy: from knowledge, comprehension and application to analysis, synthesis and evaluation. In general, this involved reading or viewing information about Katrina and seeking out appropriate organizational behaviour concepts in the areas of disaster management, decision-making, leadership, and organizational design. The case facilitates looking beyond these concepts to include context, to re-evaluate accepted explanations, and to suggest alternative forms. We now turn to see how the case encouraged students to take ambiguous situations and present solutions.

**Disaster Management**

Key to the success of the case study method is student preparation (Volpe, 2007). Therefore, the introductory module of the case provided background information on Katrina and disaster management so that they can arrive in class or tutorial well-grounded in the “facts” of the case. Katrina is one example of a major disaster that exposed the underlying logic of the approach taken by governmental organizations in the management of disasters. The first section of the case introduced students to disaster management, and gave students enough background to be able to use Katrina to examine organizational behaviour concepts in other parts of the case.

**Decision-making**

What students should recognize from even a cursory look at the introduction to disaster management section of the case is that the response to Katrina provided ample opportunity for an in-depth exploration of decision-making in organizations. The popular media has presented the decisions made by government leaders during the Katrina response as being confused and irrational. However, using models of decision-making that would be presented in a typical undergraduate organizational behaviour course or textbook, students can use this case to look beyond these popular representations. Students should be able to gain confidence in their analytical and synthesis abilities by applying these models to unpack the decision-making processes of leaders. The
escalation of commitment to decisions, factors that challenge a decision-maker’s ability to choose the best alternative, and difficulties in identifying problems and opportunities are all readily apparent in the Katrina case. The case also challenged students to understand how context, politics, and power influence decision-making. In other words, the case started to unravel the tidy model of rational decision-making.

Leadership

As the focal decision-makers in the disaster, government leaders have been blamed for the many failures of the preparation for and response to Katrina. We designed a section of the case to explore the so-called leadership failure through a closer examination of how leaders in the state emergency response organization approached the event. It facilitated students’ use of theories of leadership to explain the different approaches taken by the leaders in the story: the Mayor of New Orleans, the President, and the Director of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). However, students should also look beyond explanations to include the context of those decisions. Most importantly, the case attempted to illustrate that government officials were all operating under laws and policy that limited their ability to take decisive action. Further, the individual decision-makers all worked within government response organizations such as FEMA. FEMA is one instance of a bureaucracy, and thus provides a ready example of the key elements of bureaucratic organizations; namely, that they require clearly defined objectives, have formal structures, and a high division of labour (Takeda and Helms, 2006). When approaching the management of a disaster, these organizations take a highly rational, positivistic approach in that they attempt to understand and diagnose the problem, rely upon pre-defined rules and policies, adopt formal roles for individuals involved in the response, and utilize a centralized decision-making system.

Organizational Design

Understanding that these organizations are structured this way, it then seems reasonable to suggest that the disaster management system did exactly what it was expected to do. In this light, the much talked about failure of the response to Katrina can therefore be recast as a success. It is the logical outcome of a bureaucratic, rational approach to the management of a chaotic and ambiguous environment (Takeda and Helms, 2006). FEMA is an example of a machine bureaucracy. It has a hierarchy of authority, a high division of labour, and centralized decision-making. It is best suited to an unchanging environment; however, in a disaster the environment is unstable and chaotic. Students should be able to show that most of the time FEMA operates in an environment that is stable and predictable. In other words, disasters are rare occurrences but organizations must persist even in the absence of crisis. Therefore, its mechanistic structure is suited to the government activities that characterize most of its time. In the Katrina disaster, therefore, the organization behaved as it was designed: to be intolerant of rapid change, to seek approval of authority before making decisions and to apply rules rigidly when making decisions.
Students may argue that the failure was not of the organization or even of the leaders, but rather that the organizational structure was incorrect given the unstable and chaotic environment in which it was asked to operate. The case built on this insight and highlighted articles and video that challenged students to see beyond the portrayal of Katrina as a failure. Students should be able to use existing approaches to organizational design and structure to explain the outcome of the Katrina response, but also have the opportunity to suggest other organizational structures that may have resulted in a different outcome for Katrina. The loosely integrated regional structure of the United States Coast Guard was offered as an alternative model. Using that model, students should identify that the organic structure of the Coast Guard is ideal for chaotic environments as it exhibited elements of an adhocracy and a divisional structure. Decentralization allowed for greater decision making ability in those closer to the problems. The Coast Guard empowered individual employees to make decisions based on the environment in which they were operating. Thus, taking a contingency approach to organizational design, such as with the Coast Guard model, would enable an organization to make decisions in an uncertain environment.

Conclusion

It should be surprising to find that the magnitude of the Katrina disaster has not caused more disruption to American politics, organizations and society. This puzzling outcome may be more clearly understood when the disaster is placed in context: the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Iraq war, and the south Asian tsunami. These events are examples of massive natural and human made disasters that have sensitized individuals to accept events such as Katrina as normal accidents (Perrow, 1999) or the “new normal” to borrow a phrase from the SARS emergency in Toronto, Canada. They are also instances of a larger positivist discourse that sees that world as knowable and controllable. With the writing of our case on this event, we somewhat unintentionally accomplished four tasks relevant to critical management education. First, the case facilitated a critical understanding of relevant theory and concepts in organizational behaviour including leadership, organizational structure, decision-making, power and politics, and organizational learning. Second, it illustrated the power and potential of organizational theory to explain and understand organizational failures. Third, it encouraged students to understand the limitations of the managerial and positivistic perspectives on organizational and social problems respectively. Fourth, it demonstrated the connections between people, organizations and the broader context of society by contrasting the experiences of two groups: those involved in organizations responsible for public safety, and citizens who survive a disaster. The key pedagogical elements of this case study were formed by combining the essential elements of the case study method as detailed by Velenchik (1995), Volpe (2007), and Tellis (1997) together with an approach to teaching critical management espoused by Mingers (2000). These include motivation to learn theory, application of theory, use of evidence, and limitation of theory.
References


