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Keywords

Appraising, Performance, Public, Sector, Organisations, Critical, Discourse, Perspectives

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APPRAISING PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS: CRITICAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper examines the performance appraisal system that has been implemented in some public service organisations in line with the changes to a more commercialized structure. In an effort to change the behaviours and attitudes of public servants, performance appraisal systems have incorporated the new values and desired behaviours. Although a myriad of studies exist in regards to the new public management and on the topic of performance appraisal systems, there are few critical management studies of the implementation and operation of performance appraisal in the public sector. To date, most critical studies of performance appraisal have concentrated on the private sector. This paper seeks to rectify the neglect of the public sector in the literature. It does so by proposing a critical discourse analysis as a methodology to establish if performance appraisal systems are used as a tool through which management can influence, control and manage the organisation, change values, norms, behaviours and thus create and/or sustain a particular version of organisational and social reality.

Keywords: Public Service, Performance Appraisal, Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this paper is to establish a theoretical and methodological basis for further research into performance appraisal within public sector organisations in Australia. This article is divided into three distinct parts. The first part deals with the public service and the drivers that influenced organisational change as well as the perceived need for a shift in culture and values. The second part looks at the performance appraisal system that is currently in use in parts of the public service as well as contemporary studies on performance appraisal systems both from a managerial perspective and from a critical viewpoint. The managerial perspective outlines the common critiques within this school of thought whereas the critical perspective looks deeper at the underlying issues such as control, power and politics. The last part discusses critical discourse analysis, especially the views of Michel Foucault, Ruth Wodak and Norman Fairclough. The paper concludes with a methodological framework that could be used for further research to establish whether performance appraisal within the public service can be (and/or is) used as a tool through which management can influence, control and manage the organisation, change values, norms and behaviours and thus create and/or sustain an organisational and social reality.

THE NEW PUBLIC SERVICE

In order to undertake a comprehensive study of any kind it is imperative to understand the context of the proposed research. Thus the following section has been included in this paper to set the stage and to increase understanding and awareness of the complex transformation the public service has been subjected to, including expected changes to the culture through human resource practices such as performance appraisals.

The Australian Public Service has undergone drastic changes over the last 20 to 30 years. In the 1980's the Public Service was faced with major review processes and administrative reforms (Dixon, 1995, Mascarenhas, 1993). Globalisation, heightened consumer expectations and increased use of information technology transformed the economic arena the public service was operating in (Vardon, 1998). This resulted in the proposed re-positioning from a bureaucratic enterprise to one that incorporated entrepreneurship and empowerment, decentralization and a flatter management structure. Valle (1999) and Mascarenhas (1993) espouse the widely accepted view that the traditional bureaucratic structure of the public service is centered on a stable, predictable environment with an emphasis on processes, whereas the commercialized, competitive nature of the new public service sees a shift to a result oriented, customer focused and performance-based culture that is flexible and innovative (Mascarenhas, 1993, Brown, Ryan & Parker, 2000, Kernaghan, 2003). This denotes that,

"...the re-organisation of ... a public agency is not merely a technical issue... it is also a matter of social interventions...change depending on the assumptions that are shared".

(Claver, Llopis, Gasco, Molina, Conca, 1999)

It is a widely held view amongst management theorists and practitioners that those shared assumptions need to be the drivers for change in the public service.

Tsoukas (2005) writes about organisational and cultural change from a discursive point of view stating that change is the process of constructing and sharing new meanings and interpretations of activities, '...a new language is used to re-constitute the organization'.

Although an analysis of the discursive practices within the performance appraisal activity may provide new insights into the shaping of the new culture, the discursive approach has an underlying assumption that social phenomena (such as culture) are constructed through discourse (Fairclough, 2005). Even though discourse does play an important role, discourse analysis 'as such' may be too limiting. Fairclough (2005) proposes an 'analytical dualism' instead, where the relationship between social processes (agency) and social structures is analysed. This provides a fundamental ontological distinction between agency and structure (Fairclough, 2005) and can provide richer insights into social phenomena.

PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

MANAGERIAL PERSPECTIVES

Performance appraisal is a contentious issue for many researchers, theorists and practitioners. Implementation and operational problems and the perceived subjectivity as well as validity and usability of the outcomes have been addressed in a range of studies. Despite the

controversy surrounding performance appraisal, this human resource technique is widely practiced in organisations in public and private sectors (Roberts, 1998). Within the Australian public service employee performance was traditionally measured through a classification system with the reward being an orderly movement through increments (O'Donnell & O'Brien, 2000). During the commercialization process a new performance appraisal system was introduced based on goal setting and merit pay. Although concerns were raised in regards to the ambiguous nature of goal setting, the subjectivity of the assessment and the interdependent nature of employees' performance to systems and structures that are beyond the control of the individual, the implementation process started in 1992 (O'Donnell & O'Brien, 2000).

Performance appraisal in the public service is built on a Management by Objective (MBO) approach including statements about strategic alignment, integrated learning, shared behaviours as well as advancement being dependent on performance (Centrelink Development Agreement 2003-2005). The managerial approach acknowledges that those principles within the one appraisal system pose several problems. The most common critique relates to the two concepts of development and advancement within the same performance appraisal and dates as far back as 1957 to McGregor (as cited in Newton & Findlay, 1996). McGregor outlined the problem of the conflicting roles of the appraiser as both a disciplinary 'judge' and helpful 'counselor' (Newton & Findlay, 1996). Although, the human relations paradigm is still used by many researchers (Fletcher and Williams, 1985, Bowles and Coates, 1993, as cited by Newton and Findlay, 1996) there is wide criticism for its unitary approach and for the uncertain relationship to actual practice due to a heavy reliance on experimental laboratory findings (Newton and Findlay, 1996).

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

From a more critical perspective Bowles and Coates (1993) found that employees undertaking performance appraisal are aware of some of those mismatched concepts, such as performance appraisal being used as a developmental tool for their own benefit on the one hand and the conscious manipulation of the expression of their beliefs and attitudes on the other. This notion brings to the fore some of the more radical criticisms of performance appraisal. Winstanley and Stuart-Smith (1996) mention one of those by stating that performance management is a new form of 'Taylorism'. They write that,

"Control through specification of contracts (performance objectives and measures), and checks to ensure that performance meets that required performance evaluation, places performance management at the centre of the process for controlling the labour process in the public sector." (1996, p. 69)

Both articles, as quoted above, (Winstanley & Stuart-Smith and Bowles & Coates) provide critiques on various managerial performance appraisal approaches, however their own view is still influenced by the managerial paradigm albeit with an ethical influence. Bowles and Coates are guided by the common unitarist framework within the management literature, although they postulate self-management and self-responsibility of employees. Winstanley and Stuart-Smith's study aims to reconcile the pluralist views of the stakeholders in the organization through ethical principles. Both studies lack a critical approach of the actual text (performance appraisal) and the relationship of that text to the actors and structures, which critical discourse analysis (CDA) can provide.

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA)

Maravelias (2003) conducted research on the 'post' – bureaucratic organisation (or the New Public Service) from both a managerial discourse perspective, and a critical discourse perspective. His managerial perspective finds the changed organisation being presented as a set of networks that is anti-bureaucratic, creative, emancipated and entrepreneurial. Maravelias then goes on to state that this flexibility within the organisation has its own problems as it clouds the clear boundaries set by a conventional bureaucracy, thus invoking trust relationships and drawing on the potential of the actors, which means including aspects of the individuals life that were hitherto outside the organisation. Comparing the managerial discourse perspective to that of critical discourse Maravelias states that the dominant strand of the critical perspective is based on Marxist thought wherein the liberal façade hides managerial domination (Maravelias, 2003). In this scenario the post-bureaucratic employee is controlled more completely than previously through the shaping of norms and values that target not only individuals' behaviour but also their thoughts, emotions and identities (Maravelias, 2003).

Maravelias then goes on to refute the managerial discourse perspective, at the same time stating that the critical discourse perspective is exaggerated and implausible in its totalitarian tendency, yet its notion of control links with the general notion of social constructivist theory whereby individuals are at least partly influenced by social practices (2003). This social constructivist theory is central to most discourse analytical methods as outlined by Hardy (2004) who states that the organizing properties of discourse are imperative in shaping a specific social or organizational reality.

One author who studied performance appraisal in a critical discourse paradigm is Barbara Townley (1993). Her study, based on the work of Foucault, looked at appraisal systems from a textual point of view, the manner in which information was obtained and what was done with it thereafter. Her study illustrated how power relations are engendered in organisations, concluding that texts help to enhance the 'capillary functioning of power' (Townley, 1993, pp236). Townley (1993) uses the Foucauldian analogy of a panopticon, an architectural model designed to observe prisoners from a central tower (Foucault, as cited by Townley, 1993, pp232). Performance appraisal is seen as the monitoring and surveying of performance, not just of the employees but also of the supervisors and managers enabling those higher up in the hierarchy to 'see everything constantly' (Foucault, as quoted by Townley, 1993, pp233). As such, performance appraisal becomes a tool for power, albeit not 'held' by an individual but by the organization, actively creating a managerial structure and an organizational reality.

Critical Discourse Analysis as proposed by Foucault involves the close examination of the relationship between discourse, as bodies of professionalized knowledge, and power (Mumby, in Grant et.al., 2004). However, Foucauldian analyses have often been criticized for neglecting the agency of those who are subjected to discourse (Reed, 1998, 2000). Townley's study as mentioned above is missing an exploration of subject agency. It did not take into account the relationships between the various actors, the context or network of practices including frames of reference of the various actors and the symbolism that performance appraisal represents (e.g. legitimizing decisions) (Fairclough, 2005). It is exactly these relationships and networks that may be able to shed light on the problems that are associated with performance appraisal systems, particularly in a new paradigm such as the new public service.

Another critical analysis conducted by Wilson and Nutley (2003) stated that by taking a critical (Foucauldian) approach to performance appraisal it is possible to understand some of the complex dynamics of this HR practice, including its relationships to other disciplinary actions and also the effects on the people involved. Wilson and Nutley (2003) found plenty of evidence in their research that performance appraisal schemes met with resistance from both the appraiser and the appraisee, leading to widespread collusion to ignore this practice altogether or at a minimum to treat it as a mere formality. However, they also found that women in general valued performance appraisal for the guidance and feedback this practice offered as well as for career advice and to provide management with insights into their promotional abilities (Wilson and Nutley, 2003). Even though they found some explanations from their analysis, many questions were left unanswered. The article states that current

‘critical literature does not shed much light on the reasons for and process of such widespread and multi-faceted resistance’ (Wilson and Nutley, 2003, pp 314).

In other words Wilson and Nutley (2003) found that Foucault's approach is limited because it did not address all the issues raised by their study. In their view a radical or socialist feminist approach would have provided better insights for that particular study (gender based research).

Fleming and Spicer (2003) on reviewing recent literature on CDA and Foucault also found that there has been a preoccupation with control systems that work unobtrusively to achieve managerial goals; discourse, symbols and signs influence the subjectivity of employees to favour dominant power relations. These concepts of power and control are central to critical discourse analysis (Hardy, 2001), however, they are the source of much cited critique.

Wodak and Meyer ((2001) define CDA as

‘...fundamentally concerned with analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language.’ (pp.2).

Looking at this definition it does appear to be a suitable methodology for further research into performance appraisal within the public service. However, research into performance appraisal should not only be concerned with the actual textual content and the structural relationships (such as power and control) but also with the intentions, actions and the relationships of the actors that implement and operate the task of employee evaluations, (Hardy, 2001, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) as well as the semiotic aspects of the practices concerned (Fairclough, 2001).

A POSSIBLE FRAMEWORK FOR A METHODOLOGY

The Foucauldian view of discourse analysis (as discussed by Mills, 1997) sees power not as all negative, but rather as an action or relation between people and as such is negotiated as opposed to being fixed and stable. Fairclough (as quoted by Mills, 1997) acknowledges Foucault's view by recognizing this complexity of power, however, Fairclough sets himself apart from other critical discourse analysts as he is not solely concerned with control and power but also with the processes, the social context, symbolism and agency (Mills, 1997).

It is especially the 'agency' aspect within critical discourse analysis that would benefit further research into performance appraisal and that has been neglected in previous studies. Fairclough (2005) argues for a critical realist position within discourse analysis, which locates the analysis of discourse within an analytically dualist epistemology, giving primacy to researching relations between agency (process and events) and structure. Reed (1998, 2000) points out that a realist ontology makes it possible to treat discourse as a generative mechanism; to discover what discourse 'does' rather than what it represents. Thus, performance appraisal has 'performative' potentials which may or may not be enacted depending on the situation and the capacity and intentions of the actors (Reed, 1998, 2000).

Fairclough's analytical framework for CDA (in Wodak & Meyer, 2001) is in the author's view one that would benefit research in performance appraisal within the public service. It outlines five key points that take into account relationships of agency and structure (as proposed by Reed above):

1. Focus upon a social problem, which has a semiotic aspect (dissatisfaction with and inadequacies of performance appraisal, specifically as a symbol of control and also the unquestioned acceptance of performance appraisal as such)
2. Identify obstacles to it being tackled, through analysis of
 - a) the network of practices it is located within (HRM practices such as advancement within salary bands, training and development)
 - b) the relationship of semiosis to other elements within the particular practice concerned
 - c) the discourse:
 - o structural analysis - the order of discourse
 - o interactional analysis
 - o interdiscursive analysis
 - o linguistic and semiotic analysis
3. Consider whether the social order (network of practices) in a sense 'needs' the problem
4. Identify possible ways past the obstacles
5. Reflect critically on the analysis (steps 1 – 4)

(Fairclough in Wodak & Meyer, 2001, pp125)

The above framework firstly identifies a social problem; in this case the inadequacies and general dissatisfaction with performance appraisal by all participants. Fairclough states that this framework 'begs a question: a problem for whom?' and although CDA has a tendency to look at problems associated with the 'losers' or oppressed subjects within society (Fairclough in Wodak & Meyer, 2001), within the proposed research the line between the losers and winners is not as clear cut. In regards to performance appraisal the question that needs to be asked is how the performance appraisal activity is contributing to the well being of the organisation, the employees and the government who are the funding body for this service (Townley, 1993). This is particularly important in the public sector industry, as the well being of the organisation is not only linked to the well being of the employees but is ultimately linked to the well being of the customers, taxpayers and citizens who benefit from an efficient and effective public service.

The gap in literature that needs to be filled is thus the question: Does performance appraisal (and if so, to what extent) have the potential to generate and/or influence (even inadvertently) a particular organisational and social reality? Critical Discourse Analysis, as outlined by Fairclough's model, seems particularly fitting to attempt an answer to this question.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined contemporary literature in regards to studies and research in the fields of public sector organisations, performance appraisal and critical discourse analysis. The aim of this literature review was to establish a distinct need for further research into the field of performance appraisal and its value in the public service through critical discourse analysis. This need was identified through reviewing managerial literature that has acknowledged numerous problems but so far has failed to make an impact on the actual practice of performance appraisal as carried out in public service organisations. Those identified problems still continue to be a problem and the value of performance appraisal systems is still a contentious issue. It follows that there is a more critical method required to establish issues that go beyond systems and structures, issues that look at relationships, intentions, resistance, values, norms and perceptions that may help or hinder the effective operation of performance appraisal systems within the public sector. The research method that is most suitable to look at those issues was identified as a critical discourse analysis based on Fairclough's analytical framework, as it takes into account the systems and structures performance appraisal is operating in as well as the relationships of the various actors and their frames of references in regards to performance appraisal as well as the use of language and symbols to legitimize this activity. Thus, critical research into performance appraisals within the public service will provide rich insights for both practitioners and academics alike on the use of performance appraisals as a discursive element that has

'the innate potential to structure social action in certain ways'
(Reed, 1998, pp. 212).

Therefore there is ample justification for more comprehensive and critical research into performance appraisals and the actual contribution this human resource activity provides (or not) towards the effective management of the new public service.

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