



REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A spatial consideration of organisational performance: an excess of representation?

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to consider managers' and society's approaches to organisational performance.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper utilizes an approach informed by Lefebvre's theory of space, and presents a Lefebvrian analysis of organisational performance.

Findings – The analysis in this paper identifies a number of problematic issues within current considerations of organisational performance. The paper makes transparent the domination of the abstract representations of performance, while facilitating an engagement with the aspects of performance this domination neglects. It suggests that through neglecting the everyday lived aspects of performance, in their obsession with abstract "representations of performance", managers make decisions without a sufficiently clear concept of the effect of those decisions on the organisation.

Research limitations/implications – As an introduction in this paper, to Lefebvrian spatial analysis in the field of organisational performance, the depth of the analysis is rather constrained.

Practical implications – In highlighting the relative neglect of the role of evolved social conventions of tolerable behaviour, or the physical lived experience of the everyday interactions of the workforce in considerations of organisational performance, the paper suggests managers run the risk of their decisions being ineffective. In light of this suggestion, a number of potential areas where Lefebvre's theory may be beneficial in the study and management of organisations are identified.

Originality/value – The paper introduces a Lefebvrian spatial analysis to the field of organisational performance and provides readers with an alternative approach to the study and management of performance in organisations.

Keywords Organizational performance, Performance measurement, Management decisions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore managers' and society's ongoing fetish with performance and performance indicators; an obsession informed by a desire for an ease of understanding and decision-making. In order to explore this phenomenon it utilizes a spatial lens informed by Lefebvre (1991) consideration of space. Lefebvre's posits a spatial triad, which develops an approach to understanding the social world that facilitates a contemplation of social, physical and mental spaces of performance to provide an integrated view of organisational performance. This approach integrates the socially constructed aspects of life with its formal and material properties (Coronil, 1997; Fairbanks, 2003; Soja, 1989), and as such has the potential to provide a more vivid and sensitive exploration of organisation performance, than



that produced by current approaches dominated by socially constructed performance indicators.

This, as we shall see, is in contrast to the majority of current discussions of organisational performance, in which the focus is primarily on abstract representations of performance. As such, Lefebvre offers us an opportunity to engage with organisations and organisational performance in a manner that is richer, more insightful than the ordinary. In order to illustrate the potential of this approach, this paper begins by exploring the current dominant forms of engagement with organisational performance, before introducing some of Henri Lefebvre's reflections on space. It then draws on a range of empirical material in order to reveal the inherent potentialities of this theory. To conclude, a number of implications of this type of approach for organisational analysis are raised.

An unhealthy obsession

Society currently gives the impression of being obsessed with performance; it is seemingly impossible to open a newspaper, turn on the radio, or watch television news, without the topic of performance, or quite often the lack of it, raising its head. It covers the whole spectrum of society from specific individuals; through various organisations whether private, public, voluntary, for profit, governmental, national or international; to whole states or groupings of states. Everything and everybody must not only perform, but must be seen to perform. This popular, and populist, judgement of performance is apparently fixated on the quantification of performance into indicators, and their comparison through the use of set performance levels or hierarchical performance tables. Any failure to top (or at least be sufficiently high) in the requisite performance tables inevitably elicits calls for drastic action in order to prevent any reoccurrence of this under performance. Performance has become ubiquitous in all areas of life, performance and performance measurement has become, a fetish of modern life (Baudrillard, 1988), virtually impossible to avoid.

National newspapers publish performance tables and rankings for: primary schools, secondary schools, GCSE results, A level results, Universities, Hospitals, Local Councils Health Authorities, Health Trusts, Death Rates, Council Tax levels, Life Expectancy, Cleanliness of Hospitals, Post-University Employment, to name but a few. Some of which are deemed sufficiently important to justify their own national newspaper supplements. However, it is not only organisations that are subject to this regime, a number of individual's performances also makes news stories and headlines, whether it is that of a Chairman or Chief Executive; or that of individual "workers"; the need to perform, and to measure that performance has permeated throughout society. To "not perform" or, to "under-perform", has become one of the great anathemas of our time, be it the National Health Service, the National Football Team, or the part-time assistant at Tesco. Thus, we have a situation where these headlines discussing performance, particularly in the case of what is perceived as unsatisfactory performance, stimulate even more calls to identify acceptable performance levels, through more measurement, hierarchies and league tables (see, for example, Ahmed and Walsh, 2001).

However, despite this high profile given to performance, and the requirement to perform, there are signs of disquiet with the current overemphasis on this

quantitative representation of performance, and its management through these representations. The persistent drive for quantification in the consideration of organisational performance is criticised by Boyle (2000) amongst others (Caulkin, 2001; Tsoukas, 1995; Seddon, 2000), who explores the impossibility of measuring much, if not most, of the aspects of life and organisations that are important. He argues that despite this impossibility people still “find themselves isolating something which can be counted. They then measure, measure, measure, knowing what they measure is alive and will not keep still, and suspecting that maybe – however much they count – they will not capture the essence of the question they are asking. Things have to keep static if you’re going to count them: that’s probably why the first statisticians were known as ‘statists’. But real life isn’t still” (Boyle, 2000, p. xvii). Thus he emphasises the difficulties of reducing an inherently complex and ongoing phenomenon to a simple measure. A process that is made even more problematic when these simple measures are used to pass judgement on organisational performance, through the setting of targets, or as comparative measures in “league tables”, to the detriment of a richer more complex consideration. As Miller (Rough Counting, 1999) points out in a discussion of the problems with the consideration of organisational performance, “without doubt one of my favourite phrases is ‘What is counted, counts’, and as soon as we start counting something we tend to become fixed on it.” Thus once these measures become recognized as the primary criteria for assessment, a fixation is manifested which causes these measures to dominate the consideration of performance.

These quantitative measures are habitually utilised in the production of performance targets, which set levels of required performance, regardless of the inherent difficulties with this method. This is despite these difficulties having been well documented from the earliest management writers, right up to the present day. These problems have been evident from Taylor (1911) “soldiering”, through the Hawthorne Studies informal quotas in the Bank Wiring Room (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939), up to Seddon (2000, p. 9) understanding that “The whole idea of targets is flawed – that their use in an hierarchical system engages people’s ingenuity in managing the numbers instead of improving their methods. People’s attention turns to being seen to meet the targets – fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements of reporting that which they have become ‘accountable’ for – at the expense of achieving the organisation’s purpose”.

However it is not only this manipulation of targets that is problematic, but also their very simplicity, which may divert attention from where it is required (Waldersee, 1999). “The fact is that targets don’t help us get to where we want to be. Worse they actually obviate the possibility by making people focus on the wrong things. In the police force, schools, health service and local authorities targets are hindering performance rather than fostering improvement” (Seddon, 2000, p. 9). The inclusion of these crude quantitative performance measures into “league tables” further exacerbates this problem, diverting the focus of attention away from the complexity of performance itself, on to the simplistic measures used to represent it, and the formats derived for their assessment. Once organisations are judged by their position in a “league table”, or hierarchy of measures, it is the position in that hierarchy that becomes the focus of attention and efforts. As Tsoukas explains “managing via league tables leads to managing the league tables themselves”

(Tsoukas, 1995, p. 8, emphasis in original). A position, that is reinforced, by the linkage of various management rewards, to these specified performance criteria (Eccles, 1991). These league tables seem to be more about persuasion as to the success of a particular managements' performance, rather than facilitating the consideration, or management of that performance.

This drive for quantification and comparison does indeed seem to be a fetish, "What we can't do is leave things as they are – all of those numbers are making us misunderstand things. They make us ignorant of the world past the end of our noses, measuring things means defining them and reducing them" (Boyle, 2000, p. xix). Even our pleasures are quantified and ranked; we reduce something as inherently individual, complex, and linked to personal taste and context as wine, to a score out of 100 (Atkin, 2000).

Ease of decision making

The reason for the hegemonic role of abstract performance indicators is all about "ease", the seductiveness of a clear path to follow, that organisations and their stakeholders appear to crave, to be able to read organisational performance, quickly and easily, allowing judgements to be made, decisions actioned, and to thus continue the onward march to success. It is a craving firmly anchored in the Western tradition of thought since the Renaissance, and manifest in its discourse obsessed with "power and knowledge, its constraint of language to primarily symbolic function, its ethic of winning, its categorical and dualistic modes of definition, its belief in the quantitative and objective, its linear time and individual subject, and above all its common media of exchange (time, space, money) which guarantee certain political and social systems" (Ermarth, 1992, p. 7).

Gombrich (1982) encapsulates the reason for this situation when he describes how a musician reads and understands a musical score with surprising ease and at amazing speed:

Does he not have to take in information at an uncanny rate? Certainly the feat is admirable, but it is only possible because the notes of the score . . . are not unconnected signs. Music is an art that follows certain laws or rules, which enable the musician to scan the score with certain expectations. Though he cannot know what to expect in the next bar, he knows at least that many possibilities are ruled out. Indeed if any of those occurred he would probably disregard it as a misprint. In reading a familiar language of course, we proceed a similar way, looking ahead for cues to conform to our expectations and filling in the remainder more or less from experience . . . assumptions of this kind are so ingrained in us that it needs quite a jolt to prevent our interpretation from running along these convenient grooves (p. 154).

To satisfy this craving for success and ease of understanding in organisations, has required the development of easy to follow performance indicators, that through defining what is acceptable inform our expectations, and allow us to predetermine the range of potential possibilities, discarding in advance much of "organisational action", and like our musician disregarding anything that does not conform to the accepted schema as irrelevant. The essence of utilising simple indicators is that they narrow the area for consideration, eliminate and simplify. Here it is suggested that this modernist based understanding of organisations is so embedded in management culture, that its ingrained assumptions are very rarely recognised let alone considered. Thus the "reading" of organisational performance within these

frameworks requires the (often unaware) dismissal, of organisational actions and characteristics that do not conform, as “misprints” or irrelevancies. However it may be that what these frameworks encourage, or insist are, dismissed is far from irrelevant, and may even be vital, to understanding and survival for organisations into the twenty-first century.

This ease of understanding and decision making may even help explain the enormous success of the many prescriptions for outstanding organisational performance, based on performance indicators, which ease understanding. Whether it is Peters and Waterman (1982) rules for excellence, the mantra of Business Process Reengineering (Hammer, 1990), or the promises of management in a minute. Furthermore it may intimate the source of many management difficulties, and provide pointers to explain the sometimes spectacular demise of Peters and Waterman’s “excellent companies” or the devastation caused by much Business Process Reengineering.

Furthermore the search to solve the riddle of how to produce “outstanding performance” dominates the performance literature. Tsoukas (1995, p. 5) highlights how management thinking is dominated by “search for the regularities exhibited by social systems, [to] establish their validity and codify them in the form of rules (that is, ‘if, then’ statements) which managers would then be able to put into practice with confidence”. A position clearly established by March and Sutton for the field of research into organisational performance, who demonstrated that “most studies of organisational performance define performance as a dependent variable and seek to identify variables that produce variations in performance” (March and Sutton, 1997, p. 698), and the continuing ubiquity of which, we invite the reader to confirm for themselves, by simply browsing a few recent issues of highly regarded journals such as: the *Strategic Management Journal*, the *Academy of Management Journal* or the *Administrative Science Quarterly*. This body of literature amounts to a search for the relatively simple if/then rules that will hopefully allow the improvement of performance. It implies that once the correct relationships are established, then by basically following the requisite prescriptions, such as for example amending board member diversity (Siciliano, 1996) or market and quality orientation (Sussan and Johnson, 1997), it will enable the holy grail of improved performance to be achieved.

Organisational performance viewed through a Lefebvrian lens

Lefebvre (1991) positing of a spatial triad suggests an approach that facilitates the contemplation of social, physical and mental spaces of performance to provide a more integrated view of organisational performance than that which currently dominates. As such, Lefebvre offers us an opportunity to engage with organisations and organisational performance in a manner that is richer, more insightful than the ordinary. This approach is in clear contrast to many current discussions of organisational performance, in which the focus is primarily on the abstract aspect of performance.

The epistemological foundation of Lefebvre’s theory is his positing of a spatial triad, which utilises three considerations of space, in order to make lucid the complexities of everyday life. He suggests that space is fundamental to our lived experience of the world, and that every experience is comprised of three interrelated aspects of space; “representations of space” (conceived space), “spatial practices” (perceived space) and

“spaces of representation”[1] (lived space). Representations of space, Lefebvre suggests is the dominant space in society (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38/39), and is a conceptualised space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations. Spatial practices embrace “production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) and as such come together with the other two elements of the triad to ensure the levels of cohesion and competence required for the everyday functions of society, the spatial events of life. The final aspect, which completes the triadic model, comprises spaces of representation, the spaces of lived experience; this is space “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original).

Abstract considerations dominate

Lefebvre (1991) argues that the dominant contemporary notion of space has emerged from a traditional western, Cartesian logic to produce an abstract space – a scientific space. He suggests that the perception of scientific understanding, and its apparent success in unravelling the mysteries of the natural world, has led to scientific method being accepted as the primary mode for the development of insights into society. Therefore, it was the “natural” route to follow when engaging with the concept of space, with the vast majority of mainstream considerations of space (as were mainstream considerations of management) being informed by, and delimited within, the powerful ideological tendencies that inform all attempts at scientific understanding. This has resulted in a mathematico-scientifically informed search for an understanding of space, the outcome of which has mandated a notion of space as a Euclidean geometric space. As Lefebvre (1991), p. 28, emphasis in original) elaborates “this is that Euclidean space which philosophical thought has treated as an ‘absolute’, and hence a space (or a representation of space) long used as a space of reference”. Since this space of reference came to prominence, explorations of space have tended to be reduced to a search for “that which is contained within this space” and the identification and classification of spaces within the accepted parameters. Thus many attempts at engaging with the social world, including those within organisational performance studies, have become a process of distinction and classification, in which numerous “mental spaces” of understanding are postulated. However, the spaces generated in this manner, although purporting to explore the social world, are very much an abstraction, a mental construction, and as such have become disassociated from the physical and social realities of lived experience. An abyss has opened up between the theories of space and the empirical world of actions, interactions and understandings, leaving our lived experiences estranged from the conceptions that purport to represent them. This notion of space as a “mental thing” or “mental place”, has been inherited by, and has arguably near completely colonised, the majority of current forms of epistemological enquiry. A specific theoretical practice has evolved that “produces a mental space which is apparently, but only apparently, extra-ideological” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 6); an apparition which serves to shroud the envelopment of the physical and social realms by that of the mental.

For Lefebvre, the dominance of these mental spaces is extremely problematic. The prominence of such abstract constructs in our societal modes of perception has

led to the circumscription of the range of understandings, and thus actions with which we may engage in everyday life. The socially constructed nature of space has tended to be ignored, with space being typically considered “as an abstract, with physical contexts, as the container for our lives rather than the structures we helped create” (Ross, 1988; cited in Shields, 1999, p. 119).

In order to reconcile this disjuncture in his seminal text “The production of Space”, Lefebvre (1991) identified space as fundamental to our understanding and interaction with the world, and sought to develop an alternate theory of space that would clarify the role it should play. He posits space as the primary locus of lived experience in the world, and has conceived an approach to space, which moves it from the realm of the mental to become the foundation of our engagement with the world. In this his aim was not “to produce a (or the) discourse on space, but rather to expose the actual production of space by bringing the various kinds of space and the modalities of their generation together” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 16, emphasis in original). The act of producing space is recognized as fundamental to our experiences of the world, and as such should be the focus of our attempts at appreciation of that experience. After all “we are, and always have been, intrinsically spatial beings, active participants in the social construction of our embracing spatialities. Perhaps more than ever before, a strategic awareness of this collectively created spatiality and its social consequences has become a vital part of making both theoretical and practical sense of our contemporary life-worlds at all scales, from the most intimate to the most global” (Soja, 1996, p. 1). Lefebvre’s triad was intended to facilitate this engagement; it was not to be simply another abstract model subject to intellectual conjecture, as the triad “loses all force if it is treated as an abstract ‘model’. If the model cannot grasp the concrete (as distinct from the ‘immediate’), then its import is severely limited, amounting to no more than that of one ideological mediation among others” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 40). Rather, the triad would enable both abstract conceptions and lived experiences to be engaged with as a coherent entity

Thus “In Lefebvre’s hands, space becomes re-described not as a dead, inert thing or object, but as organic and fluid and alive; it has a pulse, it palpates, it flows and collides with other spaces. And these interpenetrations – many with different temporalities – get superimposed upon one another to create a present space” (Merrifield, 2000, p. 171, emphasis in original). It is this process of creation and being, the production of present space, rather than the privileging of a singular aspect of space, which needs to be apprehended as fully as possible if a richer understanding of the world is to be achieved. In response to this need I now take up the challenge inherent in Lefebvre’s work, that is, that his spatial triad “needs to be embodied with actual flesh and blood and culture, with real life relationships and events” (Merrifield, 2000, p. 175, emphasis in original), if it is to have any significance for our understandings.

This triad is now explored through an engagement with the space of organisational performance, beginning with Representations of Space, which Lefebvre suggests is the dominant space in current society (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38/39), and is the conceptualised space constructed out of symbols, codifications and abstract representations. These representations are the “logic and forms of knowledge, and the ideological content of codes, theories, and the conceptual depictions of space” (Shields, 1999, p. 163), and are thus the manifest representation

of our mental constructs of the spaces of our rational, abstract understandings. It is this aspect that codifies epistemological approaches to understanding, against which claims of knowledge and truth are evaluated. It is an abstract representation, which has arisen through the proliferation of symbol systems providing categories, forms and taxonomies of analysis, which dominate attempts at understanding and representation in modern society.

In the case of performance, as illustrated earlier in this paper, this aspect of the triad is the abstract conceptual space that has become the dominant societal discourse on performance. It is performance represented by extreme reductionism, the reliance on simplistic quantitative measures and their comparison through the use of hierarchical performance tables. However it is not just at a societal level that abstract the abstract representations of space aspects of performance dominate, but it also suffuses the understanding and thus actions of managers. For example in Ford and Harding (2004), p. 821) interviews with “middle and senior managers” they discovered an “organization described in numerical codes”, a position clearly illustrated in the “typical quote” they supply:

Yes. You know there are two general managers mmm one 14 million pounds and another 20 million pound outfits. And there are I don't know, 140 consultants in the mmm division. In total 20 care of the elderly consultants, that's the size of the specialty. And mmm you know, each clinical group could do with you know, a manager working with them. But we are having the one general manager with dozens and dozens and dozens of consultants. And beneath him we have got you know, Gerry's patch of fourteen million pound patch, something like 1,000 beds – he has got five managers and they are covering mmm beds on four sites. And their job is to manage all the nurses, manage all the things that go on, to write complaint letters, to you know, do everything. And er there isn't really mmm enough time for people to er get the groups together and you know, do all the off-line work in the way we like to in every specialty. You have to pick and choose a bit (Ford and Harding, 2004, p. 821).

Ford and Harding go on to demonstrate how, more senior managers such as managing directors and chief executives, if anything, are even more in thrall to representations of space, and suggest that abstract space has so gained the upper hand that “the NHS is judged on measurable ‘outcomes’ rather than its services or the processes by which care is delivered ... In Britain's National Health Service the processes of care (the day-to-day work of the ward, surgery and clinic) are represented in the State's abstract space by numbers (e.g. tables showing numbers of procedures carried out, league tables showing which are supposedly better or worst, etc.) The places where care and cure are provided are absent from the machismo of hard numbers” (Ford and Harding, 2004, p. 825).

The understandings of Ford and Harding's managers seems to be a more extreme illustration of my own research findings into performance in a repertory theatre[2], where the representations of space aspects of performance played a more prominent role in the management cadre of the theatre's discussions of performance in than in that of the other participants. An extract from my field notes on a green room discussion about a performance of *Richard III* should give you a feel for this emphasis:

... general discussion and agreement amongst the cast about the weakness of last night's performance. Trevor suggested it was poor and that “he couldn't get into it”. Ann told him it

wasn't his fault that it was a Tuesday audience and she "felt patches of it worked and in patches I was lost and that never changed and so I was quite glad to see the back of it really although it was a great learning experience, I was very aware that I kept dropping in and out of what I was doing on stage". Raised this issue with George and Diana (the Chief executive and Artistic Director of the theatre) and they acknowledged the difficulties of the performance but seemed quite satisfied as it was a "good house" for Tuesday and there were no complaints.

However, it is not only managers that are in thrall to the abstract representations of space aspect of performance, similar abstractions also dominate the academic literature on organisational performance. By far the vast majority of studies into organisational performance follow a very similar, if not identical pattern, and are informed by the same underlying assumptions. Organisational performance is implicitly assumed to be an unproblematic consistent, unified, objective phenomenon, which is available to apprehension through a process of extreme abstraction, leading to a stance where performance was deemed to be represented by some simple construct(s) such as; sales growth, earnings growth, deposit growth, return on assets, return on equity, return on sales, and return on total invested capital. The assumption is implicit that these simplistic representations may, without undue difficulty, be equated with the actual totality of organisational performance, which is itself assumed to be an unproblematic unified entity. These studies are fairly standard in that they are based on an assumed or predicted causal linkage, between their particular understanding of organisational performance, and a selected variable, or range of variables. This linkage is then examined using a variety of statistical methods such as regression and variance analysis, or more occasionally speculative historical analysis, in order to confirm the veracity of the causal model, and the strength of the tentative linkages. Thus current studies into organisational performance seem to be continuing in the same vein that March and Sutton identified as prevalent, that is "most studies of organisational performance define performance as a dependent variable and seek to identify variables that produce variations in performance" (March and Sutton, 1997, p. 698). This position suggests Lefebvre's claims that abstract representations dominate our perceptions to the detriment of a richer understanding seems to be manifest in, and exacerbated by, the simplicity of the performance representations or indicators selected, and the often automatic, or unconsidered, assumption that these simplistic representations may, without undue difficulty, be equated with the actual totality of organisational performance, that is itself assumed to be an unproblematic unified entity.

The neglected aspects

However, this obsession with the abstract representations of performance neglects the two other aspects of Lefebvre's triad "Spatial practices" and "Spaces of Representation". "Spatial practices", which "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) and as such comes together with other triadic elements to ensure the levels of cohesion and competence required for the everyday functions of society, the spatial events of life. This "cohesion through space implies, in connection with social practice and the relating of individuals to that space, a certain level of spatial 'competence' and a distinct type of 'spatial performance' by individuals" (Shields, 1999, p.162). It is the learnt, but often eventually intuitive, spatial practices that enable

individuals to participate effectively in a spatial event. To understand this aspect of the triad, we need to comprehend the abstract representations of the spatial event, and the routines and understandings, which they serve to shape; in this case, the accepted and acceptable *spatial practices* of everyday aspects of performance, on which individuals draw. These spatial practices include everyday routines and evolved social conventions of tolerable behaviour. “This aspect of the triad is the materialized, socially produced empirical space described as perceived space, directly open within limits, to accurate measurement and description” (Soja, 1996, p. 66). These spatial practices, come to reflect the dominance of the representations of space within the discourse on performance. The daily conventions through which individuals perform in organisations, and by which they are judged become infiltrated by a regime of simplification and fragmentation. Part of individual’s conventions for effective participation become the sales target, number of phone calls taken, customer waiting time, or any other of the myriad of performance indicators that individuals are expected to achieve.

The third element of the triad, “Spaces of representation” is the space of lived experience, it is space “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original). As such it is the space that overlays physical space as it is lived everyday. This is the aspect of space that embraces the partiality of representation and knowledge systems, and which Lefebvre tries to ensure retains a prominence in any engagement within a spatial event. However, this lived experience is largely ignored in the implicit and explicit claims of performance indicators to accurately represent organisational performance. It is these “spaces of representation” that forms, informs and facilitates the deviations, diversity and individuality that are a fundamental aspect of the daily social encounters essential to effective performance. This distinctiveness is achieved in conjunction with, while not being completely constrained by, the strictures of the “representations of space” and the “spatial practices” that have developed to provide the necessary cohesion and competence for successful social interaction. It is this experiential aspect of space that is submerged and near abandoned beneath the dominance of abstract representations of performance. The lived experience of the individuals performing everyday in organisations is an ongoing process of engagement with the physical space, which helps constitute the ever-varying nature of the social world. However, the abstract representations of space endow this lived environment with the signs that make it readable, and influence the spatial practices that inform individual competency.

Ford and Harding (2004) suggest that the spaces of representation, can be subsumed under the term “place”[3], as widely used in geography (Entrikin, 1991), and argue that it is place that is present in the conversations of non-managerial staff as they articulate their understanding of the environment in which they carry out the embodied practices of the workplace. Non-managerial staff appear to perform in “place” rather than the abstract spaces of management, a position clearly illustrated by a junior nurse who suggests:

So the only way I thought well it [the merger] did affect me was when a couple . . . well I think it was about last year sometime the vascular ward over at [the other hospital] was a little bit short, was short of staff. And I think there were rumours going around from the ward . . . on the ward that we were going to have to move across to [the other hospital] too. Because I think

our manager is the same manager over there too. And I thought well you know, he is going to move us over there in which case I thought “oh”. You start to panic, because you are used to an environment and you are going to get moved out of it. But that was soon quashed anyway . . . the . . . one of the doctors or one of the senior sisters said that she couldn’t spare us so (Ford and Harding, 2004, pp. 817-818).

A position again mirrored in my own data where the participants in the study were adamant that to achieve effective performance requires engagement with its everyday lived aspects, what Lefebvre’s identifies as spatial practices and spaces of representation, not simply the abstract “representations of performance”. They emphasised the need to develop the performance in the actual physical space in which it is to occur as being paramount, thus elaborating the importance of spaces of representation, the spaces of lived experience; space “as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original). This position was clearly illustrated by the emphasis the cast placed on the final rehearsals taking place in the same physical space, with the same costumes, props etc. as the final performance. While their commitment to spatial practices included a devotion to the everyday routines and evolved social conventions of tolerable behaviour within the milieu of the theatre, aspects such as “knowing your lines well enough” and “giving the right cue”, or definitely “not grandstanding or upstaging another actor”. Any cast member failing to adhere to these social conventions was soon reminded of the need to heed these routines if the performance was to be successful.

Some implications for management

The domination of considerations of organisational performance by the simple abstract representations of space of performance indicators is problematic, although they facilitate easy judgement and decision-making. The formulation of these abstractions into simple representations as quantitative measures, performance targets or league tables, underpin a discourse that is about providing for managers evidence of, or prescriptions for, or remedies to, organisational action that supposedly, no, that they are themselves convinced, will undoubtedly lead to improved, superior, optimal, fantastic (etc.) outcomes. However, the social order of the organization is hidden behind this abstract space of performance, disguised by it, in “a violence intrinsic to abstraction and to abstraction’s practical (social) use” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 289). Here, “things, acts and situations are forever being replaced by representations”. It is as Ford and Harding (2004, p. 821) perceives “that the most powerful managers occupy a space that facilitates their defining the conditions of being of all employees. This distances them from any understanding of the organization beyond that of a dire and monolithic concept whereby organization is nothing but a tool for achieving certain designated ends. The humanity of employees is elided and they can be regarded as no more than mechanical nuts and bolts within the technology of the organization. The deracinated, desiccated and dried imaginary organization, the organization ‘in the heads’ of the power-full, offers a capricious toy for manipulation and play. The impact of these games is felt, in the imaginings of the chief executives, only by a mechanistic organization that is by definition devoid of feeling. Employees inhabit a place that is a long, long way away, in another paradigm”. Through neglecting the spatial practices and spaces of representation, in their obsession with abstract “representations of

performance”, managers make decisions without any concept of the likely effect of those decisions on other members of the organisation. By not considering the evolved social conventions of tolerable behaviour, or the physical lived experience of the everyday interactions of their workforce in producing the required performance, they run the danger of their decisions being ineffective, ignored or even absurd.

An excess of representation?

Concluding comments

The preceding Lefebvrian analysis of performance has served to illustrate the potential of Lefebvre’s consideration of space as a resource to investigate organisational performance. The evidence presented showed how a Lefebvrian analysis may be used as an analytic tool to identify problematic issues within current considerations of organisational performance, and as such provides the opportunity to address those issues. Lefebvre’s spatial triad has served to illustrate a disjuncture in considerations of organisational performance, making transparent the domination of the abstract representations of performance while facilitating an engagement with the aspects of performance this domination neglects.

In light of this analysis, it is hoped readers may view this paper as illustrating the potential of Lefebvre’s theory of space in organisational analysis, and in the consideration of organisational performance. As such it invites readers to draw on Lefebvre in order to:

- Stimulate managers and researchers to consider a spatial view of organisations as a useful tool.
- Develop research tools that may act to identify the disjunction between current representations of performance and the everyday performance within organisations.
- Facilitate the reconnection of the everyday spaces of organisation with the abstract representations in the decision making process.

Notes

1. Here “spaces of representation” is used as a translation of the lived space (*espace vécu*) element of the spatial triad. This translation follows Shields (1999) and Soja (1996) rather than the term “representational space” used by Nicholson-Smith in his 1991 translation of *The Production of Space*, as it is felt it provides a more transparent understanding.
2. The data in this paper is taken from a six-month period of participant observation research with a repertory theatre company. The understandings presented were developed in an iterative and collaborative process involving continuing discussions and interviews with the theatre cast over the research period. While well aware of the potential difficulties and problematic nature of the presentation of small extracts of this type of qualitative data and its lack of context, readers are asked to accept that the quotes provided are not only as literally accurate as possible, but are used in the spirit of the understandings of the participants.
3. I feel this assumption of the simple subsuming of representations of space into place, a rather simplistic understanding of the complexities of Lefebvre’s understanding, however this does not adversely affect the value of the study as an illustration of the neglected aspects of the spatial triad.

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