

Transforming Power

Expanding the Inheritance of Michel Foucault in Organizational Studies

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Although critical scholars have used the work of Michel Foucault to theorize about organizational power for almost 20 years now, many such scholars see his work as limiting and regulate his ideas to theoretical explorations of domination and resistance. Leaning heavily on the work of Jones (2002), I argue that Foucault's work has broader usefulness when developed through the process of reinheritance. I illustrate how a reinheritance reading of Foucault's work on power provides new insights into the enactment of power in organizational life. Such a reinheritance of Foucault broadens organizational theorizing on power to move it beyond domination and discipline and on to pleasure, desire, and choice. Furthermore, my expanded reading of Foucault's work permits the exploration of relational constructs that are predominately voluntary, nontask related, and pleasurable, yet nonetheless powerful in organizational life.

Keywords: *power; Foucault; organizational studies*

For almost 20 years, whether in fields such as management (Barratt, 2004; Burrell, 1988), accounting (McMillan, 2004), communication (Pierce & Dougherty, 2002; Trethewey, 2000a, 2000b), and teamwork (Barker, 1999), Michel Foucault's work has influenced critical scholars in their examinations of power and discipline in organizational life. As is often the case with relationships of such longevity, we readily find those who question Foucault's continued usefulness in critical organizational studies (Jones, 2002). Jones (2002) pointed out that the issue is not Foucault's usefulness but the field's limited knowledge of him: "There is a sentiment amongst many today that Foucault's time has passed, that we have now finished with

Author's Note: The author wishes to thank Debbie Dougherty, Joe Downing Sharon Welch, James Faubion, James Barker, Linda Putnam, and Nina Flournoy for their support in this endeavor. She remains deeply indebted to the reviewers of this text for their assistance in shaping the manuscript for publication.

Foucault. . . . Maybe what we have finished with is the Foucault that we have come to know” (p. 235). He argued that if scholars move beyond their original inheritance of Foucault and expand their readings of his work, they will once again have a vital partner to assist them in their exploration of organizational life.

Toward that end, I illustrate here how an expanded reading of Foucault’s work on power creates new insights into the way power manifests itself in organizational life. Such a reinheritance of Foucault broadens organizational scholarship’s understanding that his theorizing on power includes not only domination and discipline but also pleasure, desire, and choice. Furthermore, I argue that an expanded reading of Foucault’s work will permit the exploration of relational constructs that are predominately voluntary, nontask related, and pleasurable, yet nonetheless powerful in organizational life.

First, I briefly review how the process of inheritance has served to create limitations on the ways scholars use Foucault in organizational studies of power. I next address how Foucault’s later works fosters new understandings of power, offering remarkable implications for enabling organizational scholars to examine alternative conceptualizations of pleasure, desire, and other elements of organizational power.

The Importance of Thinking About Inheritance

Jones (2002), Barratt (2004), and Prichard (2003) have each identified serious problems with the way organizational scholars have interpreted the work of Foucault. Though they differ as to the structure of the problem (whether one of framing or simple hermeneutics), these scholars concur that what continues to exacerbate the problem is the issue of scholarly inheritance.

Jones (2002) defined disciplinary inheritance as something scholars pass down to future generations like a type of genetic code. It is not just an examination of “hand me downs;” scholars must understand disciplinary inheritance as a complex interaction between scholarly generations. The goal is more than a mere description of the history of a concept but rather the “active process of its construction” (Jones, 2002, p. 226) by scholars over a concept’s history. Jones argued that a scholar’s inheritance is invisibly “marked by a dynamic of decisions made in one direction rather than another, and then repeated. . . . Questions of heritage thus pose questions not only of inheritance and of iteration, but crucially for us here of reading, of interpretation, and of decision (What do we inherit? How to inherit? and

so forth)" (p. 226). Crucial to understanding how a discipline has embraced scholarly work such as Foucault's is the examination of who has interpreted the scholar and what decisions were made in those subsequent interpretations. Moreover, once published, that interpretation becomes a part of the discipline's intellectual heritage of a given scholar's work.

After key scholars interpret and revise another's scholarly bequest, the end product vaguely resembles the original work. In the case of Foucault, Jones (2002) argued that interpretations often obscure the true character of Foucault in relation to other scholars of his time. Moreover, Barratt (2004) added that issues with inheritance continue to limit organizational scholars' interaction with the true breadth of Foucault's work and legacy.¹ Therefore, the question that remains is, Who is Michel Foucault and what did he really say?

Original Foucault?

No case illustrates the concerns voiced by Jones (2002) and Barratt (2004) regarding the problems of inheriting Foucault better than the way organizational studies inherited Foucault's work on power. With traditions passed down by disciplinary parents such as Mumby and Deetz (1990), communication scholars² in particular view Foucault as a social theorist whose work could do little else than explain domination in organizational life (Barratt, 2004).

Juxtaposing Foucault with Habermas, Mumby and Deetz (1990) sought to explore managerial rationality and its impact on identity formation. Finding Foucault's work on the intersect of knowledge and disciplinary power useful, the two commented,

Foucault adopts a technical and strategic approach to power in which the goal is to delineate the growth of disciplinary techniques . . . we have attempted to show the nature of this privilege and how continued domination is accomplished. . . . Foucault's insight is [used] to show the pervasiveness of power relations and to indicate how essential it is that we understand how inextricable linked power and knowledge really are. (p. 39)

The two authors failed to explicitly link Foucault with the concept of domination; instead, they subtly created the tie by linking Foucault with the emergence of a new form of power embodied within the oppressed.

Deetz's (1992) exploration of the rise of corporate colonization finally made the direct tie between Foucault and the concept of domination. Deetz

maintained that the use of Foucault for scholars interested in topics beyond domination would be problematic. Deetz instructed his readers, “Foucault’s concepts provide us with a useful analytic for describing domination but little guidance for developing preferable social relations” (p. 60). Deetz’s statement sets up a clear expectation for the type of intellectual resource that Foucault’s work with power could provide organizational scholars—that of domination detector and little else. The scholars who immediately followed those two influential works³ (Deetz, 1992; Mumby & Deetz, 1990) would continue to limit Foucault’s usage to the exploration of the link between disciplinary power, practices of domination, and hegemonic behavior.

The limited-use Foucault passed down by Deetz (1992) and Mumby (Mumby & Deetz, 1990) is important because it determined the way an entire generation of organizational scholars, particularly in communication, would choose to use the published cannon of Foucault’s work. For example, Mumby and Deetz cited these Foucauldian texts in their research: *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), *The Order of Things* (1970), *Discipline and Punish* (1977a), *Power/Knowledge* (1976), *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (1978a), and *The Subject and Power* (1983). In the essays on power that cited Foucault and were published after the initial works of Mumby and Deetz, only two authors (Langsdorf, 1997; Pierce & Dougherty, 2002)⁴ used texts other than those cited by the original two. This pattern is no mere coincidence and gives much credence to the claim that the cannon of Mumby and Deetz taught communication scholars what they knew of Foucault and his views on power.

Consequently, the power-as-domination motif around Foucault’s work became so pervasive that despite alternatives offered by Smith and Keyton (2001), Dougherty (1999), and Pierce and Dougherty (2002) concluded,

Although each of these constructions of power [functionalist, materialist, and postmodern] has important differences, they also have at least one important similarity that should be examined: *the assumption that power is equivalent to domination. Although the enactment of power as domination may be viewed differently for each of these traditions, this common assumption is very much in evidence* [italics added]. (p. 131)

Pierce and Dougherty maintained that using the lens of race, gender, and class scholars could see how power works in a more sophisticated way. They argued, “Understanding the subtle workings of power in organizational communication may also serve to denaturalize the assumption of power-as-domination, making it less stable and therefore, open to evolution and intervention” (p. 131).

Pierce and Dougherty's (2002) argument remains revolutionary until reading the rest of their enterprise. Although Pierce and Dougherty's call to rethink power as domination is laudable, the more interesting point is to note that when the authors analyzed the merger between Trans World Airlines and Ozark Air they reverted to the disciplinary standard they inherited. Using Mumby and Deetz's (1990) Foucault linked with domination, Pierce and Dougherty proved the difficulty of returning a failed inheritance.

An Expanded Foucault

One of the unfortunate byproducts of the limited Foucault is that the theoretical evolution and promise of Foucault's work remains hidden. Unlike scholars such as Derrida and Marx,⁵ whose works proceed along a linear trajectory, Foucault's work is at times circular and self-reflective, often picking up themes from previous works for deeper analysis or dismissing them all together (Sheridan, 1980). Many scholars of Foucault, like Sheridan (1980), Starkey & Hatchuel (2002), and Faubion (1994) have seen his work in a three-phased evolutionary model (early, middle, and late). However, Lemke (2000) argued that scholars can best see Foucault's evolution in relation to its development either prior to or after *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Moreover, the intellectual space between the two periods of Foucault's thought offers scholars the greatest opportunity for new insight to Foucault's work.

Prior to the publication of *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault's interest could be best described as a development of the "genealogy of the state" (Lemke, 2000, p. 2). His primary interest was to uncover the historical contexts that led to the development of external mechanisms of control, medical surveillance, and technologies of knowledge. Works of this period include *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *Birth of the Clinic* (1973), and *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972). Although clearly present, Foucault had never fully developed his conceptualizations of power before *Discipline and Punish*, and his thought remained concerned with issues of structure and hierarchy (Sheridan, 1980). However, the publication of *Discipline and Punish* revealed a more fully developed Foucault who viewed power as domination manifested in the microprocesses of human interaction with institutions.

The period after *Discipline and Punish* (1977) begins a subject shift for Foucault's interest in power. During this time, Foucault altered his view on the character of the subject in the face of power. Are we always constrained against our will? Is domination the only way power becomes manifest? Such questions forced Foucault to correct himself:

Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self. (Foucault, 1988, p.19)

Therefore, scholars understand this shift as Foucault moving from focusing on individuals who were constrained and disciplined against their will to examining the ways in which individuals willingly are constrained through their desires (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998; Starkey & Hatchuel, 2002).

The period on either side of the publication of *Discipline and Punish* (1977) has long concerned organizational scholars but Lemke (2000) argued that we can discover a more valuable bounty in the epistemological link that binds the two research projects together: governmentality. What is essential to understand is that Foucault did not make an immediate switch from focusing on the genealogy of the state to the genealogy of the individual. Instead, he problematized the ideal of governing to facilitate his movement between the two larger bodies of thought. Moving beyond the political meaning of the term, Foucault viewed the *government* in its larger philosophical context, which includes the management of emotions (self-control), the family unit, and one's spirituality (Lemke, 2000). Therefore, Foucault (1994a) defined *governmentality* as the "conduct of conduct" (p. 208). Foucault viewed governmentality as a lens appropriate for understanding how "the modern sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence" (Lemke, 2000, p. 3).

Foucault's focus on governmentality inevitably served to assist him in the creation of a more complex analysis of power (Lemke, 2000). In his early work on power, Foucault was most interested in a type of power that moved beyond the power of the sovereign to understanding the micropractices of power, particularly those that manifested in discursive practices. Taking up the Nietzsche hypothesis, Foucault commented on the juridical model of power and viewed power as an issue not of law but of struggle (Foucault, 1997, 2003; Lemke, 2000). The addition of governmentality to his existing work forced Foucault to reconcile himself to the interplay between the conduct of the self and the way in which it could serve to allow people to be active if not willing participants in their own exploitation.

I think if one wants to analyze the genealogy of the subject in Western civilization, he has to take into account not only techniques of domination but also techniques of the self. . . . He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse

to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures for coercion and domination. The contact point, where the individuals are driven by others is tied to the way they conduct themselves, is what we can call, I think government. (1993, pp. 203-204)

In analyzing Foucault's incorporation of governmentality, Lemke (2000) posited that its addition permitted Foucault to move from examining power's exterior workings to gaining the important viewpoint permitted when one goes inside the belly of the beast. Therefore, rather than the one manifestation of power (domination) that existed previously in his work, three distinctive manifestations of power emerge for Foucault in this period: domination, strategic games of liberty, and government (Lemke, 2000).⁶

Foucault moved to characterize power as domination as hierarchical, stable asymmetrical relationships wherein one member of the dyad is powerful and the other powerless (Foucault, 1988). Foucault added the idea that a central conduit for this power is the human network of relationships (a basis he subsequently revisited in other conceptions of power) in which power is fluid and constantly moving. With this in mind, Foucault then viewed domination as a blockage of power in one area of the network preventing power from flowing to others.

The notion of power as strategic games emerges directly from human interaction (Lemke, 2000). Foucault surmised that as individuals engaged in interpersonal relationships a power tie would emerge that influenced the range of choices available to its members. Played out in the day-to-day activity of negotiating the social networks of our lives, power in this productive form (neither negative nor positive) is conducted between relational partners on various levels of interactions ranging in intimacy, frequency, and duration. Conduct within such relationships is not judged as oppressive or submissive but selections freely made out of a number of possible behavioral options. Power in this vein would "take many forms, e.g., ideological manipulation or rational argumentation, moral advice, or economic exploitation" (Lemke, 2000, p. 5).

Lemke believed that Foucault viewed power as government as a rational, systematized, and regulated mode of power that emphasized not power over but a well-argued power because. As an extension of power as strategic games, power as government analyzed the individual in relation to the organization. Within this framework, Foucault examined the power of the pastorate in the Christian Church and its role in developing the discourse on sexuality. He also examined the state's use of pastoral power in the formation of the welfare state (Foucault, 1983, 1978b).

The bridge of governmentality allowed Foucault (1988) to consider the impact of human emotions on the manifestation and response to power. Foucault posited that because of the character of human entanglements the variables of desire and pleasure become vital in any true analysis of power. Foucault pointed out relationships that are most compelling allow individuals to engage

by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and soul, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (1988, p. 18)

In a type of pleasure principal, Foucault's idea here radicalizes the assumption that when individuals act in specific ways that seem antithetical to their own best interests they do so for reasons rooted in oppression or domination. Instead, under this principal we would expect that the more pleasurable and transformative the relational tie, the more power actually flows between the relational partners. Consequently, friendships or relationships that provide partners a sense of well-being, pleasure, and personal self-actualization could manifest a power that, as it grows in pleasure, could supersede the power of transactional, organizationally structured relationships (such as manager-subordinate) to shape organizational behavior.

Foucault believed that the tie of friendship, not sexual intercourse, was the most provocative tie in the network of human power relations. For example, regarding homosexuality, Foucault (1994b) argued that the intense emotional nonsexual ties between men, as opposed to the sexual act, actually were the more anxiety-provoking tension within society:

One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure. . . . There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease, and for two reasons: it responds to a reassuring canon of beauty, it cancels everything that can be troubling in affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie . . . things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force. . . . To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love each other—there's the problem. Institutional codes can't validate these relations . . . these relations introduce love where there's supposed to be only law, rule, or habit. (p. 136-137)⁷

Therefore, in Foucault's estimation, what the institution feared was not the power of human sexuality but the power of human friendship.

Foucault's explanation infers that our interpersonal relationships, which provide a sense of pleasure and well-being, are stronger determinants of how we experience and enact power than the fear and oppression that might characterize our structured organizational entanglements. Subsequently, this strength could result in the ability of an interpersonal relationship to supersede or alter the flow of power between the hierarchical relationships found within organizations. Under such a rubric, one could surmise that voluntary peer relationships that are pleasurable, mutually satisfying, and instill a feeling of well-being could prove to be more influential than traditional, organizational constructs such as supervisor-subordinate or work groups.

The impact of taking a human friendship focus not only serves to open new ways to examine power but actively includes the very messy byproduct of human relationships. Moreover, this refocused lens of power offered by Foucault, serves to release his work from the intellectual yoke of domination detector to enable it to provide a means to examine a broader view of power in organizations.

The Opportunities and Limitations of Expanding the Inherited Foucault

The adoption of Foucault's larger framework of power places a new interpretive lens on the discipline's understanding of organizationally situated discourse. What this lens permits is another plausible theoretical explanation of how individuals enact and experience power within their everyday organizational interactions. More specifically, the expanded Foucault serves to reframe the definition of the powerful organizational relationship, which leads to new opportunities for organizational scholarship on power.

The expanded Foucault would change how powerful relations in the organizational context are defined. The character of human relationships deemed powerful in organizations would now extend beyond those portrayed as conflictual and antagonistic to those that are pleasurable. Consequently, one could no longer frame an individual's failure to report a coworker's organizational misbehavior such as sexual harassment, hazing, or embezzlement as simply the result of fear. Instead, one must now consider that the empathy felt for a beloved friend provides motivation for us to accept or cover up wrongdoing and misbehavior as an act of protective love.

Foucault's more full context enables one to recognize that the needs and mandates of the organization are secondary considerations when decisions directly influence an individual's most pleasurable relationships. One would

then have a means of interpreting behavior in which an individual chooses an option that would seem against his or her best interests organizationally or even personally as being a choice that individual made out of love rather than fear.⁸

These new insights from Foucault further enable organizational communication scholars to develop a greater sensitivity for the distinctions between corporate and nonprofit organizations. Foucault's relational concept of power serves to explain power relationships in organizations in which voluntary ties replace fiduciary ties as in volunteer and congregational memberships. Toward that end, I believe organizational scholars can make great strides in this area by examining the unique power of the pastor in shaping the self-identity of the congregant through sermons, counseling, and religious educational forums such as Sunday or Hebrew schools. Furthermore, the adoption of the more-full Foucault permits the investigation of how the pastor-created identity influences the enacted identity that emerges in the day-to-day work place. Finally, through Foucault's work on pastoral power, I believe that scholars can scrutinize the unique contextual reality and organizational processes that inevitably socialize clergy and staff who work in religious settings.

This new view of power calls organizational scholars to account for the depiction and explanation of discursive practices of sexual harassment. Foucault's framework demands that we avoid automatically assuming that the genders are unequal in the organizational setting. As a result, we must argue that both parties regardless of sex or organizational position have several avenues of response available, whether they chose to exercise them or not.

This adoption of the expanded Foucault radically changes organizational scholarship's explanation of why victims of sexual harassment fail to report their situations. Previous scholarship (Dougherty, 1999) argued that a victim's failure to report an incident of sexual harassment might not be out of fear of reprisal but out of fear of the loss of key friendships within the organizational setting. However, because of Foucault, another more troubling but likely scenario also emerges from this new framework of power. An acceptance of Foucault's work permits the argument that victims fail to report harassment because they believe the harassment is either couched in a relational tie of love that permits such behavioral expressions (making it not harassment) or they refuse to report because they do not wish to see harm come to someone they love.⁹ Foucault might argue¹⁰ that as long as all parties had the ability to choose their response domination is therefore not a consideration and that other forms of relational power might explain the outcome between the two.¹¹

Although such a definition would be provocative for scholarship, it does serve to provide a pause in my full embrace of Foucault's theorizing of power because adoption means the acceptance of the assumption of the equality of options. Is it plausible to say a secretary or clerk has the same opportunities to exercise power as the boss? When faced with this explanatory possibility as she was constructing a feminist theory of power, Allen (1996) surmised,

If we take up Foucault's account of states of domination, we have to claim that she is able exercise power, she is capable of resisting. Obviously, this is not the case. It is my contention however, that it is always the case that the secretary does not have the same options that the executive has. (p. 278)

Despite this limitation, I believe scholars must trouble their traditional assumptions regarding the nature and the perpetrators of sexual harassment. Scholars seeking to understand failure to report or prevent and willingness to endure are encouraged to examine the additional elements of choice and friendship within their analysis.

Foucault (1980), an idealist by his own admission, sought to expand limited understandings of power toward more inclusive possibilities. Nevertheless, as Allen's (1996) critique pointed out, Foucault's corrected view of domination fails to consider the broad social and organizational influences that gender, race, age, and sexual orientation have on an individual's range of choice. Domination as enacted in human history and as depicted in some of Foucault's earliest writings as the exercise of "power over" does exist and does limit the organizational responses of oppressed individuals. In ideologies in which the exposure of domination is essential, the incommensurability between those ideological mandates and Foucault's evolutionary understanding of power should be honored and articulated.

The challenge, then, calls for a full inheritance of Foucault's work on power, recognizing that it is both idealistic and pragmatic. By increasing our inheritance, we as researchers continue to build on the exemplary scholarship that already exists. Despite the limitations, Foucault's conceptions of power have the potential to provide us with a new way to understand the impact of pleasure and desire in organizational life.

Notes

1. Ironically, to argue for an expansion of Foucault's work within the discipline of critical organizational studies, I must analyze the very process that will ultimately determine the fate

of my work. Even more ironic is that should I be successful my work will be subsequently used to discipline someone else.

2. Barratt (2004) pointed out that most management, accounting, and behavior scholars tend to frame Foucault as postmodernist, genealogist, or neo-Weberian. Consequently, scholars such as Sewell and Wilkinson (2002), McKinlay and Starkey (1998), and Knights and Willmott (1989) represent a very small number of management scholars breaking this trend by cultivating an interest in power.

3. Determining the influence of a scholar's work is quite subjective. Therefore, in this case I ground my claim of influence in the number of subsequent works that cited these monographs: 150.

4. Mumby (1996) used several texts not referenced in his or Deetz's (1992) original works.

5. Even a cursory review of Marx's work, such as *Capital* (1906) or *Grundrisse* (1973), or Derrida's collected works edited by Reynolds & Roffe (2004), would reveal a linear trajectory of research that lends itself to both a chronological and linear characterization.

6. Lemke (2000) is right in noting that Foucault toyed with this distinction in his earlier works and now simply made it explicit by the addition of governmentality.

7. Perhaps best illustrated in the articulated fears of *Brokeback Mountain's* (Lee, 2005) Jack and Ennis, "this thing" that Ennis feared would get them killed was something they both knew was against the principles of the church, the institution of manhood, and their families expectations. Yet, this thing was so powerful, it forced Jack to lament, "I wish I knew how to quit you."

8. Are fear and love mutually exclusive? Most therapists and counselors understand fear and desire as two sides of the same coin; however, as a theologian, I contend that fear cannot exist in the presence of love. Fear seeks to save self; love seeks to save the other.

9. "Can you love your harasser?" This question from an anonymous reviewer resonates as one thinks of the problematic tie between the harassed and the harasser. However, I believe we have the possibility to love the one who is abusive, oppressive, or dangerous. Is this love healthy? As a theologian and as an African American woman, I would shout an unequivocal "no!" But my outrage and that of others does not negate the possibility of the relational tie of love either shaping one's view that what is happening is not abusive or that despite its personal pain the desire to see someone we love punished is equally undesirable. Foucault addresses this issue in *Technologies of the Self* (1998c) under rubric that perhaps we must first engage in the care of the self.

10. It is dangerous to hypothesize how a dead scholar might respond to specific scenarios. However, based on the case made from many of Foucault's actual writings, I believe the ground is firm to make at least a plausible suggestion of his intentions in this area.

11. Hollway and Jefferson (1996) picked up strands of this argument in their article.

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