Assumptions Concerning the Social Sciences: A Comparative Perspective

Ebtihaj Al-A'ali

This paper comprises three major sections. The first section discusses modern social assumptions concerning the existence of human beings and their societies. It also explains the impact of these assumptions on organizational theory. The second section explores Islamic assumptions concerning these same two elements and explains a major attribute of Islamic organizations. The third section compares the above-mentioned assumptions of modern social science to those of Islam and illustrates that knowledge-transfer creates its own organizational and social problems.

Modern Social Science Assumptions: Human Existence and Society

In reviewing the modern science of human existence and society, Burrell and Morgan (1979) state that the relevant assumptions in this area can be viewed in the light of two strands of thought: nominalism and realism. Nominalism indicates that no real world structure exists outside of the individual's concepts, ideas, and thoughts. This implies that reality is constructed by individuals and leads them to experience multiple realities (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Societies and external existants to individuals are merely names perceived individually (Taylor and Bodgon 1979). Societies, therefore, consist of individuals who have real existence and, without them, there would be no societies (Behechti and Bahonar 1990). According to nominalism, knowledge about multiple realities is gathered from individuals themselves.

Ebtihaj Al-A'ali is a professor in the Department of Business and Management, University of Bahrain, Isa Town, Bahrain.

Nominalism leads individuals to underestimate and neglect external reality as a separate source of information and knowledge (Williams 1972; Al-A'ali 1991). Organizational theory, based on nominalism, seems to be limited to one single way of thinking. This limitation hampers individuals and organizational students seeking to question the viability of theories in relation to their reflection of neglected and external reality (ibid.). Thus Al-Meraie (1984) explains that any organizational theory based on the above assumptions is incapable of change, for it is not characterized by open-endedness.

Realism assumes that there is an objective reality in isolation of individuals. The laws and rules of this external reality can be discovered and studied. These rules are applied to the study of phenomena associated with human beings (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Individuals, therefore, are not assumed to have real existence (Behechti and Bahonar 1990; Muthahari 1986). Knowledge, according to realism, is generated by conducting scientific research that uses and is based on an objective, detached stance (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Bachlard (1962) explains that naive realism assumes that labels used to describe an issue, situation, object, or person reflect its/his/her real nature. Though objective reality agrees with naive realism on the existence of external objective reality (Lincoln and Guba 1986), it adopts a different method for learning about the same reality (Bachlard 1962).

Objective reality believes that it is possible to accumulate knowledge about natural phenomena by applying the rules of scientific methods. These methods are based on a detached observer position that seeks to understand social phenomena in terms of relationships between variables (ibid.).

Whyte (1965) explains that the above realism stances have led to the development of certain organizational values and ethics. These stances assume that an objective reality exists in isolation of individuals. Accordingly, the existence of individuals is an extension of the existence of other objects (Behechti and Bahonar 1990; Muthahari 1986).

Whyte (1965) further explains that the development of certain organizational values and ethics is assumed to be universal and leads to the development of an "organization man." The ethics and values of this "organization man," according to Whyte, stifles creativity, for these same values are not questioned by individuals. Al-Meraie (1984) adds that the existence of unquestioned values and morals underlying organizational theories have led to limiting the same theory by one style of thinking, which is characterized by rigidity and a closed mind.

Islamic Assumptions: Human Existence and Society

Islamic assumptions concerning human existence and society take a different direction from nominalism and realism, for they are based on a wider perspective. Islam believes that human beings have their own real existence. This belief emphasizes individual differences acknowledged by nominalism (Behechti and Bahonar 1990). This also substantiates Lincoln and Guba's (1986) description of multiple realities. But this acknowledgement of individual differences neither neglects nor underestimates the role of societies (i.e., the external reality represented in inherited values, customs, and traditions and the recognition of the existence of nonhuman phenomena) on shaping individual differences (Behechti and Bahonar 1990; Muthahari 1986). The Islamic view concerning society reflects the belief of an objective reality based on realism.

Human existence and society are seen on the basis of a comprehensive complementary view supported by ongoing and holistic transaction processes between individuals and their societies (Al-A'ali 1991; Al-Meraie 1984). In Islam, individuals' transactions with their societies stand on an equal basis. Islam believes that individuals are free to question the practices of their organizations. These same organizations also have an impact on those individuals.

The major attribute of Islamic society is that an organization and society cannot exist in isolation of each other. Organization theories take into account the unique Islamic view that holds individuals responsible for their behavior. Islam also holds societies accountable for providing tentative guidelines and a set of norms to ensure societal cohesiveness.

Islamic organizations are not like modern organizational theory's views of organizations. Modern theories assume that organizations represent intentional society, which they define as a society reflecting what a modern theory has to say about organizations. Behechti and Bahonar (1990) describe intentional society as "a group or small society [that] comes into existence, whose members join each other and work together with prior intention to do so."

Islam propounds that individuals and societies exist and transact on a complementary ongoing basis. Society, organizations, and individuals are thought to influence and to be influenced by each other. This reflects the Islamic assumption that individuals and society, with its organizations, have their own real existence—a holistic view. The Islamic view of organizations is characterized by open-endedness and holism.

A Comparative Analysis

To illustrate the impact of assumptions concerning human existence and society as well as problems related to knowledge transfer, one issue is chosen: human relationships in organizations. This choice was made because a) both nominalism and realism have their own perspectives concerning human relationships in organizations. The elaboration of these perspectives helps to shed light on knowledge developed styles concerning intentional society; and b) assumptions about human relations in organizations can reflect and be based on other organizational issues: learning, stress, and motivation (Al-A'ali 1991).

As stated earlier, assumptions about human existence and society can, according to the social sciences, be grouped into two major categories. The first category assumes that individuals exist in reality and that through them, multiple realities can be perceived (nominalism). Nominalism is based on a partial view of reality. Human relations, therefore, are studied and looked at in a partial manner. It is assumed that human beings decide the styles of their relationships with others and neglect the impact of other existing elements (i.e., objective reality represented in the traditions and culture of a given society). For example, Williams (1972) questions the viability of our description of color-blind individuals. He explains that if individuals perceive and develop their own realities, what is the use of giving such descriptions? Although nominalism describes individuals' interactions, its description is partial. Knowledge generated through nominalism is partial. Any organizational theory of human relations based on nominalism is therefore unable to promote a comprehensive, synergetic view (Al-Meraie 1984; Al-A'ali 1991; Behechti and Bahonar 1990; Bachlard 1962).

In relation to realism, it is assumed that societies, including their institutions and organizations, do exist. The laws of what does or does not exist are believed to rest upon a reciprocal basis. Organization theory, underpinned by reciprocity, postulates that human relations are merely judged and viewed according to the same reciprocal basis (Behechti and Bahonar 1990). Human relations are simply a matter of action and re-action; the uniqueness of individuals has just been neglected and underestimated. Any organizational theory based on realism therefore lacks the ability to advance a holistic synergetic perspective of human interactions.

Islam assumes that objective reality (realism) and subjective reality (based on nominalism) coexist. This coexistence, however, is not based on dualism, for that would violate the Islamic concept of complementarity. Islam views human relations as based on the concept of *īthār* (Al-Meraie 1984), which encapsulates the concept of altruism and goes be-

yond its literal meanings. *Īthār* is the essence of synergism. Human relations should not only be based on unselfishness, for the well-being of an individual is based on the well-being of society. This leads to the immersion of oneself by others, and the immersion of others by oneself. This immersion, however, acknowledges the importance of oneself and the importance of others in developing a synergistic style of relations.

Modern organizational theory has been discussed and developed in the West and imported by the East. This development has carried with it the values, beliefs, customs, and traditions underlying organization theory. In addition, it has been accomplished in different ways, i.e., the impact of colonization, appointing western educated experts and advisors, and students from the East being educated in the West.

Individuals who have been brought up to believe in certain values and attitudes (i.e., *īthār*) have learned a new set of imported organizational values and beliefs (Al-A'ali 1991). The impact of this new and learned set of values and beliefs did not have a direct influence on individual practices, attitudes, and beliefs at first, for Bahraini organizations and society were still relatively small. As organizations became larger and more complex, individuals began to act according to western organizational theory. Individuals found themselves making choices that seemed to be alien to their society, themselves, and each other. These choices, as explained earlier, are based on a partial view of human existence and society (ibid.). Individuals start questioning the viability of organizational values and the viability of their society's values. This questioning has led individuals in Bahrain to experience controversy and conflict arising from their organizational and societal roles, as their societal roles are based on a learned set of values different than that of western organizational roles.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to review the assumptions of modern organizations and Islam concerning human existence and society. It explained that assumptions of modern social sciences (i.e., nominalism and realism) are based on partial views. Nominalism is based on the belief that reality exists in individuals, who in turn perceive it differently. Realism assumes that reality exists externally and in isolation of individuals who study their affairs. Laws of external reality are applied. Islam, however, believes that societies and individuals have equal coexistence.

The perspectives of nominalism and realism tend to promote partial views regarding human interaction and organizations. Islam, on the contrary, develops a comprehensive perspective of human transactions based on synergism.

References

Al-A'ali, E. *The Phenomenon of Women in Management in Bahrain: The Case of Bahrain.* Unpublished diss., University of Lancaster, United Kingdom, 1991.

Bachlard, G. *La Philosophie du No.* Translated by C. G. Waterston. *The Philosophy of No.* New York: The Orient Press, 1968.

Behechti, M. H. and J. Bahonar. *Philosophy of Islam.* Iran: Ansariyan Publications, 1990.

Burrell, G. and G. Morgan. *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis.* Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower, 1979.

Lincoln, Y. and E. Guba. *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Beverley Hills: Sage, 1985.

Al-Meraie, A. M. *Prisoners of Aristotle.* Los Angeles: Epistemics Institute Press, 1984.

Muthahari, M. *Al 'Adl al Ilāhī.* Kuwait: Al Dār al Islāmīyah, 1981.

Taylor, S. and R. Bogdon. *Introduction to Qualitative Research.* New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1984.

Whyte, J. *Organisational Man.* Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965.

Williams, W. J. *General Semantics and the Social Sciences.* New York: Philosophical Library, 1972.