



The Scripting of Total Quality Management within its Organizational Biography

Frank Mueller and Chris Carter

Abstract

Frank Mueller
University of
St Andrews, UK

Chris Carter
University of St
Andrews, UK

The last 20 years or so have seen a proliferation of managerialist innovations, including Total Quality Management. Many existing accounts, however, tend to view TQM either as a copy of an institutional template or lose themselves in the richness of 'the case'. Our intention is to *trace* institutional influences at the organizational level. For this purpose, we put forward an organizational biography perspective. The main promise of an organizational biography perspective is its concern with scripts of *typical* activities occurring during the 'biography' of an organizational innovation. We argue that scripts such as 'exhortation', 'mimetic learning', 'structuring', 'contesting', 'routinizing' and 'disbanding' are useful concepts in order to understand the dynamics of a management innovation at organizational level. The scripts refer to different combinations of rhetoric and practice(s). There will be some form of temporal sequence, but it will not be a strict sequence: for example, exhortation in some parts of the organization will co-exist with routinization in others. Accounting for such diversity is a strength of scripting analysis.

Keywords: institutional theory, script, total quality management, fashion, organizational biography perspective

This paper deals with the biography of a managerial innovation within a newly privatized organization belonging to the UK utility sector. The paper traces the development of a managerial innovation, namely total quality management, over a period of three years. For this purpose, we employ the concept of scripts, which allows for both agency and constraint. We propose an organizational biography framework, which, we suggest, has broader applicability.

By way of background, it is worth pointing out that over the last 20 years or so a whole range of management innovations, typically originating in the US, have spread across the industrialized world (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996). They have typically followed the life cycle of a fashion, moving from being the preserve of exclusive pioneers through to mass-market penetration before tapering off. A variety of fashion-related theoretical frameworks have been adopted in order to make sense of these patterns (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000). From a different, but related, perspective these patterns have been interpreted with regard to organizations', or their managers', need to be seen by external

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stakeholders to be doing the *'right thing'*. This tendency, to conform to stakeholder expectations, has been characterized as 'mimetic isomorphism', which refers to the widespread propensity for managers to adopt practices that are already in place in other organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). In particular during the last 20 years, the pressure to imitate companies perceived as successful has weighed very heavily on corporate management, sometimes challenging or displacing normative (or professional) expectations (Mizruchi and Fein 1999). This development has extended to the public sector, where it has been analysed in a number of industrialized countries through concepts such as 'new public management' or 'managerialism' (Exworthy and Halford 1999; Hood 1995; Clarke and Newman 1997). The driving forces have been found in a whole range of factors including, but by no means confined to, the motivational effects of CEO pay schemes (Staw and Epstein 2000); managerial identity and career management (Grey and Garsten 2001: esp. p.241); and the role of rhetoric in an image-conscious corporate landscape (Alvesson 1990).

This paper is located within this context of debate; it wants to address the question of what the dynamics are that drive a managerial innovation during its organizational biography. We will critically analyse these literatures and will attempt to demonstrate their relevance for understanding the innovation under scrutiny. The next section will justify the particular methodological approach that was adopted for the analysis and presentation of 'data'. Next comes the narrative, which is structured into subsections (i.e. scripts), followed by a theoretically guided analysis of our narrative. Finally comes a summary of the argument and what we see as our contribution to the literature.

Literature

Scripts and Circuits

For Giddens (1984), the gap between analyses of structural constraints on the one hand, and agency motivation on the other hand, was highly problematic (Reed 1997). One way of overcoming this analytical dilemma was through the employment of the script concept with its dimensions of signification, domination and legitimation (Giddens 1984; cf. Reed 1988). For Barley (1986, 1996) and Oliver (1991), scripts are promising analytical instruments that take account of institutionalized expectations and legitimations, while also incorporating an analysis of the processes of structuration. Barley (1986), in analysing a workplace contest between two occupational groups, radiologists and technologists, one an aspiring, one an established group, distinguished the scripts of 'direction seeking', 'direction giving' and 'usurping control'. However, the question is opportune whether 'direction seeking' describes a repeated pattern of behaviour perhaps just in a *particular stage* of the introduction of a technological or organizational innovation. Thus if the researcher were to return to the workplace after, for instance, two years, he or she might no longer find a repeated behavioural pattern of 'direction seeking' or

'direction giving'. Therefore, we would argue that scripts are useful analytical categories in order to analyse a particular *episode* in the biography of an organizational innovation. It is important to note that we are in no way suggesting a perfect match between stages and scripts; rather we only suggest some kind of temporal arrangement of scripts. This is why we think that using the notion of scripts is superior to the notion of stages within a life cycle.

An alternative to the notion of script is that of 'circuit': Hardy et al. (2000) advance extant understandings regarding the interface between language, institutions and practice, and for this purpose distinguish between the circuit of *activity*, the circuit of *performativity* and the circuit of *connectivity*. This is seen as a 'model that does justice to the complexity of discursive activity and shows how individuals can strategically intervene in these processes' (Hardy et al. 2000: 1244). Thus, such latest contributions to and applications of discourse theory give the lie to the notion that discourses are ineluctably *ephemeral*, as suggested by Reed (1998): instead there is a cogent articulation of the need to analyse their *embeddedness* and connection with organizational practice(s).

While we are sympathetic to the notion of circuit, we will adopt the notion of script for theorizing our narrative. Furthermore, we suggest that the *content* of the relevant scripts should be derived from a review of relevant literature.

Normative Perspectives

Inevitably, theorists have taken normative positions on (the diffusion of) management initiatives. Broadly speaking, the receptions of such initiatives have fallen into two broad, intertextual discourses (Watson 1994; Sitkin et al. 1994; Mueller et al. 2000). The first concentrates on the possibilities for 'improving' the lot of organizations and those that work within them. By way of an illustration, much has been made within this managerialist discourse of the seductive watchwords of learning, teamwork and empowerment (Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Oakland 1989). In contrast, a 'critical' discourse has sought to unveil false consciousness through drawing attention to the injurious reality of new initiatives which, among other things, equate to indoctrination, emasculation, increased control and work intensification (Sewell and Wilkinson 1992: esp. p.102). A feature of David Knights' work (Knights 2002) has been to challenge such dualisms as a way out of this analytical imbroglio. For instance, Knights and McCabe (1999) have argued that when engaging with managerial initiatives it is fruitful to move beyond the 'paradise gardens' of the gurus and the 'dangerous jungles' of their critics. For them, managerial innovations are complex and variegated, thus not readily explicable by way of seeking recourse in simplistic dichotomies (also Wilkinson et al. 1997: esp. p.816). From a more empirical angle, Edwards et al. (1998) find neither optimism (empowerment) nor pessimism (intensification) appropriate when analysing employee responses to TQM.

Taking these notes of caution further, we argue that a critical perspective needs to *prove* its relevance to a data set, which is a point that has resonance with Knights' (2002) plausible attack on the tendency to use theory as an

ornamental garnish. Therefore, we suggest that we will need to look for a ‘*critiquing*’ or ‘*contesting*’ script in the empirical material, rather than having a critical perspective simply imposed by the academic observer *ex post facto*.

New Institutional Theory

The Meyer and Rowan (1977) branch of New Institutional Theory illustrated the way in which certain practices (e.g. budgeting in universities, see Covaleski and Dirsmith 1988) can be used in order to portray an *image* of rationality in the eyes of outside agencies (Gioia and Thomas 1996). The ensuing rhetoric-intensive, symbolic display might well be decoupled, or loosely coupled (Dirsmith et al. 2000) with backstage operating processes, in realist terms, with ‘what actually happens’. The more influential, at least in terms of its reception, branch of new institutionalism is best represented by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), whose various hypotheses have been widely tested in subsequent research (Mizruchi and Fein 1999). While some research has concentrated on *conflicts* between isomorphic pressures, often playing out and observed at organizational level (Ginsberg and Buchholtz 1990; Milliken 1990; Fennell and Alexander 1993; Montgomery and Oliver 1996; Edelman 1992; Goodrick and Salancik 1996: 5), it is the concept of mimetic isomorphism that has attracted most interest. Mimetic isomorphism has had a substantial impact on research, in that it informed a good deal of the theorizing that attempted to explain the explosive diffusion of fashionable management techniques over the last 20 years or so (Staw and Epstein 2000; O’Neill et al. 1998; Westphal et al. 1997; cf. Mizruchi and Fein 1999). This preoccupation has led to New Institutional Theory being critiqued, not unfairly, for being overly concerned with ‘rationalized’ packages, models and techniques (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos 2000).

We suggest that a useful way of taking the debate forward is by making institutional analysis more readily usable for longitudinal studies (Slack and Hinings 1994: 804–5). We propose to achieve this through incorporating New Institutional Theory’s contributions in the form of typical scripts, which can be analysed as responses to rationalized expectations. We suggest three scripts: the first is that of ‘*exhortation*’, i.e. urging a new practice with rhetoric-intensive language, which incorporates the role of ceremony, image and rhetoric. The second is that of ‘*mimetic learning*’, a script that incorporates the role of widely diffused, rationalized management techniques. The third script is that of ‘*routinizing*’ which reflects the process of rationalization at the organizational level, where the magic of newness fades as expectations become normalized.

Fashion Theory

One direction of the development of New Institutionalism has taken place through the theorization of organizational ‘fads and fashions’ (Abrahamson 1991; Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999). The fashion view is an attempt to make sense of the emergence, exponential proliferation and fall of packaged

management initiatives (Abrahamson 1991, 1996). Inspired by metaphors from the ‘catwalk’, such analyses demonstrate a temporal fashion life cycle, whereby an initiative has a shelf life of around three years. In this period fashions go from being haute couture to prêt-a-porter (Mazza and Alvarez 2000) through to being *démodé*.

According to the fashion view, managers have increasingly become ‘dedicated followers of fashion’ in that, partly in response to shareholder expectations, they adopt those ideas, strategies and practices that are viewed as being at the very zenith of management thought and practice (Jackson 1996; Meyer 1996). Abrahamson (1996) provides an account of the supply of management fashions; in particular he identifies the important role that consultants play in creating, sustaining, killing off and re-inventing management fads and fashions. Numerous writers (see Kipping 2001; Fincham 1999; Kieser 1997; Wilson 1992; Abrahamson 1996) have highlighted the emergence of the powerful management consulting complex, which has had a supply side role in terms of the production of programmed change initiatives that have gone on to become widely diffused throughout the corporate landscape. The management consulting complex is one reason why, as far as the diffusion of programmed change initiatives is concerned, there is often a snowball effect (Abrahamson 1996). Resonant with such a view are the observations of Barringer and Milkovitch (1998: 320) according to whom HR innovations are more likely to be adopted in sectors where they are already prevalent. Abrahamson and Rosenkopf (1993) analyse ‘bandwagon effects’, which are diffusion processes whereby an adopter takes on an innovation simply because of the sheer number of adoptions that have already taken place. In a further development of fashion theory, Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999: 735) propose an ‘evolutionary theory of institutions’, focused on the population level, which puts forward stages of variation, selection and retention, or alternatively, rejection. Bandwagon effects can create self-reinforcing loops in that legitimating effects are due to the *number* of adopters. Awareness of proliferation can give management the confidence and authority to speak in order to frequently engage in an ‘exhortation’ script: ‘we need to ... or else’.

Abrahamsonesque-style research identifies management fashion by conducting bibliometric analyses, whereby the supposed popularity of a management fashion is linked to the number of articles published on a particular initiative. This research has an undoubted capacity to illuminate broad trends as to which management ideas are in vogue at any given time through their citation or non-citation. Such an approach is, however, limited, especially through its inveterate capacity to suppress an account of the *actual means* through which managers actually consume such ideas — therefore, it is necessary to discuss a *structuring* script. This again justifies a focus on organization-level scripts.

Concluding Comments

The preceding discussion relating to the theorization of an organizational innovation has been underpinned by our interest in organizational scripts.

Scripts play a dual role whereby they connect language to practice and vice versa. Moreover, the script concept is an important device in terms of drawing a distinction between our notion of *organizational biography* as compared with influential life cycle models. The main research question that we have derived from the literature is: 'How do the different scripts that we identified link up with each other?' Or: 'How can they be employed in order to make sense of the dynamics of a managerial innovation in a specific organization over a significant period of time?'

Methodology, Research Methods and Case Study

The paper seeks to study the institutionalization of TQM; it will use an ethnographic approach in order to construct a case study narrative. While such methods are commonplace within organization studies (Adler and Adler 1988; Bartunek 1984), Kirk and Millard (1986: 42) have suggested that, in general, the *reliability* of a case-study-based data set needs to be problematized. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers to articulate both the data sources and the data analysis that were drawn upon in order to make a case for the credibility of the study (Eisenhardt 1989). A narrative *can* be very high in accuracy (Langley 1999: 706) and validity (Tsoukas 1989), but only if the author can *convince* the reader by the account of the construction of the case study. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) argue that the dimensions of convincing consist of authenticity, plausibility and criticality. We will turn first to authenticity, which 'concerns the ability of the text to convey the vitality of everyday life encountered by the researcher in the field setting'. In late 1992, one of the authors entered CoastElectric for the first time to broker research access for an investigation into organizational change. The organization was well known to the researcher for it was one of the major employers in the region of his upbringing; moreover, he had family members who had worked at CoastElectric. Yet this was the first occasion he had visited the head office and talked to the senior management. Given that CoastElectric's senior management were very interested in TQM and culture change more generally, it was probably not surprising that they expressed an interest in allowing access to a Business School researcher on the grounds that the researcher would be in a position to provide a 'neutral and objective' account of the initiative. This was but a small part of the organization's embrace of management thought: building a research relationship with a Business School academic — as opposed to technical researchers — was emblematic of the mimetic isomorphism that CoastElectric was engaged in. It was a strategy that attempted to deliver to the organization an escape route from being 'behind the times'. The ground rules for access were established: the organization was to be known by a pseudonym (CoastElectric), while the researcher insisted that any report on the TQM initiative should be made publicly available to staff in the CoastElectric library. Moreover, the researcher was free to pursue 'informal access' (Hardy 1996) in addition to the formal links that the senior management of the organization had agreed to provide.

In 1993, data collection commenced with one of the researchers attending two TQM training weekends at hotels across the CoastElectric region. It was during this time that the researcher came to know many of the senior managers, especially Peter Marsh, the head of the TQM initiative. The researcher was able to learn the argot that the TQM modernizers were employing. For instance, we soon learnt that a 'blockage' was a reference to an engineer that did not embrace TQM. More generous terms included 'an old school engineer' and 'a collar and tie engineer'. Equally, CoastElectric employees viewed head office with suspicion, referring to them as being the 'dinosaurs' from 'Jurraztec Park' which was a pun on the name of the head office and the popular fantasy movie *Jurassic Park*.

CoastElectric was spread over a wide geographic area, which necessitated a good deal of travel. Wherever possible the researcher got lifts to meetings with senior managers. Long conversations with senior managers during car journeys were to reveal much about the way in which individuals made sense of the organization and its change programme. It also served to cement acquaintances such that managers became comfortable with talking openly and freely with the researcher. One senior manager revealed:

'Talking to you, our little chats, is the only time that I have time to speak my mind on things ... the rest of the time, it is err too political ... I really get to think about things and bounce ideas off you.'

These relationships were to take on a new dimension when CoastElectric was taken over in 1995. Senior managers, fully aware that their careers in the organization were likely to be foreshortened, began to expose far more about the organization — the quarrels, the political wrangles, the mistakes, the regrets began to be aired in a form that took on many of the features of a confessional (Townley 1994). The relationship with key actors in the field had become a familiar one, to the extent that the researcher was invited to a number of retirement parties and indeed, following the last visit to the organization (1998), one of the former senior managers came and presented on 'TQM: Lessons from the CoastElectric experience' to an MBA class organized by one of the researchers. More recently, both of the authors have been invited to deliver a talk on our findings by the CoastElectric Historical Society.

The commentary above has established the extent to which the researcher was credible within the context being researched. But what about the plausibility of the account? To what extent does the account prepared make sense to the reader? The research process was such that every attempt was made to ensure that the narrative presented exhibits verisimilitude. To achieve this, following the data collection, the case of CoastElectric was written into a narrative. This narrative was then presented and discussed with members of the organization, to establish whether they recognized the events that were recorded and various positions taken on such events. To achieve this, managers and employees were often presented with drafts and accounts of events; i.e. did they agree, not with the conclusions, but with the events set out in the narrative? This took place through a focus group in the organization, but,

more significantly through a number of employees reading a report that was produced by the researcher. A CoastElectric case study was used with several MBA cohorts; in one case a class member claimed that the case was based on his organization — such was the resonance of the case with him. If nothing else, this does much to suggest that the story is robust in its plausibility.

The final dimension of Golden-Biddle and Locke's notion of 'convincing' is the notion of criticality. This addresses the extent to which authors are reflexive about their own work and the degree to which texts succeed in prompting other writers, or in this case managers, to re-examine their own assumptions. Increasingly, we came to make sense of one aspect of the case study through the notion of the emergence of a new powerful group that swept away 'the *ancien régime*'. This metaphor was used by the researchers intentionally in order to create a vivid image of regime change in the reader's mind, and emphasize the negative language and feelings directed at the old order.

The narrative was independently analysed, by both authors, as a part of the process of writing this paper. We viewed the narrative as 'raw material' (Pentland 1999) which needed to be subjected to attempts at 'analytic generalization' (Yin 1994). It was at this point that the types of scripts were generated, a process during which attention was paid *both to established literature and the narrative*. The scripts were a means to achieve some form of 'temporal bracketing', a strategy with which 'a shapeless mass of process data is transformed into a series of more discrete but connected blocks' (Langley 1999: 703). While the narrative as a whole shows the uniqueness of an ethnography, each 'bracketed' block can be seen as highlighting a typical feature that, potentially, can guide the analysis of future case studies. In conclusion, we argue that every attempt was made to ensure the empirical accuracy and analytical validity of the paper.

The Scripting of Total Quality Management

Exhortation Script

The overarching logic of privatization was to prepare the ground for far-reaching changes in management practice. Indeed, the decision-makers within CoastElectric were in no doubt that dramatic change was expected of the organization. This was a point made by the Director of Corporate Development:

'We [the directors] were all agreed on the need to change ... The question was: what to change.'

The decision was taken to adopt TQM: TQM, being as it was at the vanguard of management thought, was hardly a surprising choice for the organization. Indeed, TQM was *exhorted* as a 'new way of working'. According to the chief executive, TQM 'enables us to cut staff numbers and improve customer service' (*Annual Report 1995*). This was exactly what was needed by an organization like CoastElectric, which needed to build positive 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 2000: 241). It is important to remind ourselves that in 1992 TQM was widely regarded as being at the zenith of management thought and practice in the UK (Hill 1991; Oakland 1989; Tuckman 1994; Wilson 1992).

It was rhetoric-intensive and represented itself as a crucial part of the algebra of corporate success. As a practice it was consecrated by management consultancies, which concomitantly played an important role in translating it into a commodifiable, programmed change initiative: thus, TQM should be seen as a mantra, which through the intensity of its promotion and packaging asserts that there is a 'one best way'. The corollary of the promotion of a superior form of organizing is that it problematizes the previously existing organization:

'We were 20 years behind the times. Now with TQM, we are state of the art. I go to companies to tell them about what we're doing.' (senior manager)

Again, the rhetoric intensity of this declaration is striking. TQM's new-found centrality to CoastElectric's future development was reflected in a declaration from the chief executive, who claimed: 'TQM is a new way of working that will enable us to cut staffing levels and costs while improving customer service.' What is interesting is the way in which TQM was represented as a method that would allow, simultaneously, improved customer service improvement, while cutting costs. Peter Marsh, a senior manager in CoastElectric, was appointed as TQM project manager in 1992. His brief was to promote and facilitate TQM within CoastElectric; the enthusiasm with which he delivered the TQM message was described by some staff as bordering on evangelical. This is reminiscent of Tuckman's (1995: 63) description of TQM as an 'evangelical crusade'.

The *exhortation* script involved de-legitimation of the 'traditional', 'outdated' ways of going about things, by seeking to unravel the professional black box of engineering that had been firmly protected under the public sector regime. The exhortation script aims to strip away the dominant position that had historically been the preserve of engineering, while contemporaneously promoting the logic of TQM. For instance, in his role Peter Marsh had involvement with all departments and all hierarchical levels of the organization; relatively junior 'quality champions' would report to Marsh, detailing whether managers in their region were 'supporters' or 'blockages' of TQM. To be labelled a 'blockage' was clearly unhelpful for somebody's career prospects. Language was an instrument of power.

Part of Marsh's remit was to be able to challenge any manager or director on their commitment to TQM, if he felt that they were not sufficiently enthusiastic towards the initiative: Marsh's analyses were regularly fed to the chief executive. This labelling process was an important weapon in the armoury of those who were 'for' TQM. Still, millions of pounds were earmarked for the TQM initiative, and a ledger was kept detailing the savings made by various TQM-inspired improvements. The chief executive announced in 1995 that 'This year (1994) improvement in performance has been due to the application of TQM principles, we are very pleased with its progress, and look forward to future gains' (*Annual Report*). Increasingly there was no possibility of a rapprochement as TQM, with its master concepts of empowerment, customer service and charismatic leadership, envisaged a very different future for the organization than that traditionally held in an engineering

organization. Managerial fashions, especially TQM, *became obligatory*, while engineering values were now classified as peripheral: the corollary being that the socialization of newcomers (Grey 1998) would change substantively:

‘The language of TQM is a powerful device in the hands of top managers aimed at producing organizational practices and employees of a certain sort.’ (Keleman 2000: 494–5)

Thus, the sudden exploding onto the scene of exhortatory language use can be clearly seen in the narrative above. Negative labelling was part of the overall attempt to implode the pre-existing organization. Exhortations like the examples given above were a commonplace feature of the organization. They reflected the self-confidence of management that new ways needed to be adopted and their certainty that existing modes of operating were without prospect. We now proceed to analyse the mimetic script, which is broadly happening contemporaneously.

Mimetic Learning Script

TQM was introduced by new actors within CoastElectric’s organizational field. The finance director, recruited from a well-respected UK plc, first mooted the idea of TQM. He argued that the initiative had brought considerable benefits to his previous organization. The chief executive was similarly influenced by his previous work experience at another company. Thus the finance director’s in-depth knowledge of another organization was used to lend support to the idea of TQM. The credibility of the TQM discourse was further enhanced by the credentialed and specialist knowledge of the consultancy firm employed (cf. Meyer 1996): ‘We hired Quest [Consulting] because they knew about TQM, so they could help guide us through the process ... to be honest, we were hoping for knowledge transfer and that did not really happen’ (Peter Marsh, TQM manager). The internal report that was commissioned throws up an interesting example of the validation of a preference held by some of the senior management team. The TQM feasibility report itself took only a fortnight to complete. The study was an investigation of the experience of a sample of private sector organizations with TQM, and the finding was that a customer service attitude was central to a successful implementation of TQM.

Contesting Script

As an engineering organization, CoastElectric was embedded in an ambiguous environment, which allowed engineers to draw on a different interpretive repertoire to that adopted by managers. Engineers’ talk was partly about defending a highly developed safety culture (Collinson 1999). Thus, we are confronted by a situation whereby there is already in place a highly recursive, routinized resource base: that of professional engineering. There was therefore a contest between the newly emerged praetorian guard of TQM and the pre-existing cadre of professional engineers. The conflict was particularly fractious and intense: this was perhaps a consequence of the promoters of TQM being drawn largely from the ranks of the engineers. Thus

some engineers were reconstituting their identities and their career trajectories (Grey 1994) such that it was not unusual to hear the sentiment: 'I used to be an engineer, now I am a manager.' To the traditionalist engineers, the preservers of the profession, TQM champions were regarded to varying degrees as 'turncoats', 'opportunists' or simply 'misguided'. Indeed, a report identified a number of problems:

'The TQM support group had the Industrial Society carry out a staff survey, the staff survey recognized that there is a high level of empowerment, lots of resistance in engineering, communication between departments is poor. Power Projects have died a death ...' (Peter Marsh, TQM manager)

There was indeed a tension between those exhorting a rhetoric of TQM and those contesting the new rhetoric with a counter-rhetoric of expertise and safety, which centred on maintaining the electrical distribution network. In addition, there were those questioning the seriousness behind the TQM project. A senior employee described TQM as not serious game playing: 'The directors are not really committed to it, they are just playing games ...' However, the TQM enthusiasts among senior management were largely dismissive of claims made by engineers that new working methods contained serious threats to health and safety.

The clash between engineering and managerialism can be read as a contest between management and a profession and their respective identities and rhetoric. What was being fought over was the very way in which the organization would be run and the rhetoric that would be afforded greater importance or dominance.

Structuring Script

Translating TQM into practice in CoastElectric necessitated the creation of a 'quality structure'. Indeed, creating 'positions' with specific responsibilities is a typical expression of the 'structuring' script. The key position to be filled was that of TQM project manager. Peter Marsh, a senior executive within the organization, was chosen by the chief executive and had a very close working relationship with him. The reason behind his appointment was that he was regarded as working in a 'TQM fashion'. In addition to the enthusiasm of Marsh, a TQM hierarchy was constructed. Significantly, the TQM nomenclature, by virtue of Marsh being independent, quickly started to function as a shadow organizational structure. It consisted of a Quality Council convened by Peter Marsh and Barry Reed (the Chief Executive), regional quality boards, and 'quality champions' in departments throughout the organization, who were expected to 'drive TQM'. This commenced with a huge training initiative (5500 staff attending a three or five-day residential course); the training was designed by Peter Marsh and Quest Consulting. It was conducted by quality champions drawn from within the organization and took place in smart hotels throughout CoastElectric's region. Indeed, Peter Marsh had the authority to back projects financially and to create new jobs within his TQM team. In a context of 'downsizing' and general economic recession, this was far from insignificant. Many senior managers reported, not surprisingly, that they felt a pressure to

demonstrate that TQM was working within their respective departments. The TQM project organization made use of externally legitimated fashionable words such as 'empowerment' in order to drive the process of structuring forward. Moreover, their discourse captured the notion of TQM as a 'journey'. In addition to this, the TQM programme made extensive use of tools and techniques that were new to the organization (Tuckman 1994). Examples included 'brainstorming exercises', 'herringbone diagrams', 'process mapping' and the like. In combination with parable-like 'war stories' drawn from other organizations, a powerful, rhetoric-intensive cocktail resulted that served to elevate and promote the cause of structuring TQM.

Initiating studies, setting up working groups, creating new positions can be seen as a process of embedding an innovation (Coopey et al. 1998). While TQM's *rhetoric* was anti-bureaucracy, it went about creating its own layers of bureaucracy:

'I have to say that I felt myself with TQM, that as they say there is nothing new under the sun, and that many people in fact were always using TQM they hadn't just called it TQM and gone through all the bureaucracy of [it] ...' (manager)

Even more, at the organization-wide level the structuring of TQM was implicated in bureaucratization: papers, forms, targets, league tables (cf. Tuckman 1994: 732). There are instances where old and new bureaucracy are intertwined in a rather complex way:

'There was a kind of hiatus as TQM came in, coughed and spluttered a little bit. That was because the hierarchy of the company wasn't up to it. You know TQM requires a degree of commitment from the very top to really work, and also a degree of almost risk taking in the sense that you are losing some control of what's been a very prescriptive and hierarchical organization ... You are empowered up to a point, but then as we used to call 'Old CoastElectric' would reappear.' (senior manager)

'I'm quite frustrated in how slowly CoastElectric has changed ... If you wanted to change a policy you had to write a 20-page report, then go and argue with the operations director, and he'd correct the English and a 101 other things ...' (senior manager)

While the first quote talks primarily about the recursiveness of the existing hierarchy, the second quote is about the newly created 'bureaucracy' of TQM. Structuring is closely related to routinizing, which will be discussed in the section that follows.

Routinizing Script

To what extent did TQM practices manage to become routinized in CoastElectric? Firstly, we would point to the savings made 'year on year' as a result of Quality projects. The savings were estimated at £1m per annum: bracketing off questions that could be raised from critical accounting as to the ontological standing of such 'savings', the £1m a year could be mooted as evidence of some routinization. For the most part, the project improvements were small and delivered relatively modest savings. An example, which is fairly typical, is a project conducted by some industrial staff responsible for painting electricity substations. Every month the painters would receive

a list of substations that needed to be repainted (due to corrosion caused by the weather). In a different part of the organization, power engineers would be planning the overhaul and maintenance of the substations: a process that at the end point would require the substations to be repainted. However, the two activities were not linked: thereby it was not unusual for a substation to be repainted, only for it to be overhauled the next month, thus the painters would find themselves back at the substation painting once more. Empowerment and quality projects gave the opportunity for this situation, largely unknown to management, to be resolved. There were hundreds of other similar examples, which can be read as a form of routinization of TQM. Routinization implies that a technique is no longer executed only if consciously planned, but has become part of routine and ‘normality’:

‘TQM is certainly used, sometimes we don’t realise that it is part of the culture ...’

But there are also formal routines, like the use of flipcharts:

‘The TQM idea is absolutely right, but the techniques of achieving a result are quite ponderous ... The Business Plan took 90 flipcharts dealing with how you wanted to be, and how you were going to get there ...’

Indeed, probably the clearest case where routinization had taken place was in terms of the conduct of meetings and in the approach to problem solving. For instance, one manager made the point that:

‘TQM has had an impact in the way we approach things ... but it is along the lines that we never start a meeting without having a brainstorm, everyone gets a chance to speak. This sounds obvious but it never happened before.’

This is an illustration of where it could be argued that the techniques of TQM had been appropriated in such a way that it became part of the dispositional practice of managers, that is, part of the ‘habitus’ — that which is expected within the organization. Thus, to use Bernstein’s (1975) terms, the particular conduct of meetings became part of an elaborate communication code. Changed conduct at meetings hardly constitutes a managerial revolution — however, it does constitute a routinized practice that no longer requires explicit legitimation. Routinization might continue for a long time, thus becoming recursive. Or it might descend into ritualism, where the form becomes the *sole purpose* (Gouldner 1954). Lastly, it might be followed by disbanding. In any case, what is crucial about the routinizing script is that rhetoric is no longer important, as routinized practices have become *taken-for-granted*.

Disbanding Script

Disbanding means, quite simply, that a routinized practice is being discontinued. This can happen for a number of reasons: new senior management arriving (e.g. via a takeover); existing senior management becoming disenchanting with the routinized practice; perceived conflict with profit objectives (cf. Knights and McCabe 1999: 219–220); or external signalling of abandonment being seen as opportune. We argue that we also need to study the *new rhetoric* that can justify the abandonment of what previously was seen as mandatory.

First of all, we are not suggesting that TQM was equally pervasive throughout the organization; indeed, there was a substantial variety of opinion as far as the question of management commitment to TQM was concerned:

‘The introduction was highly successful because there was great commitment, it was difficult to keep this going. The drive was lost, it was a good idea but it faded off. Now we don’t see much activity, just from a few managers.’ (manager)

‘... going back to the TQM issue that’s where there wasn’t any real commitment to the whole process of TQM ...’ (manager)

‘The directors are not really committed to it, they are just playing games. They like to say in the City that we’ve introduced TQM but (they) don’t actually make any changes on the ground.’ (manager)

‘Because Reed, the chief executive, was keen for TQM to work, it had to be seen to work ... Peter Marsh kept the thing alive.’ (manager)

This strongly confirms an analysis along the lines that external image can be the main driving force. Lack of embeddedness can be seen as making later abandonment easier. However, it is important to emphasize that such instances of image-driven pretence *co-existed* with routinized TQM in other parts of the organization.

In August 1995, coinciding with the British holiday season, FedCo, a large American utility, announced its intention to launch a takeover of CoastElectric. The predatory gambit was accompanied by a rhetorical onslaught directed towards the existing board of directors: indeed, Barry Reed and his fellow directors were branded by FedCo as ‘not being up to the job of running CoastElectric’. This was widely publicized in the media. Moreover, FedCo claimed that it had been studying the work practices of CoastElectric employees and had identified several key areas that could be improved. The American organization was questioning the very legitimacy of CoastElectric’s management. We would argue that FedCo was appealing to institutional shareholders to judge the competence of the existing CoastElectric management or at least to compare it against itself — as a competitive, indeed world class, organization. After a brief takeover battle, FedCo assumed control of the organization.

It was clear before the takeover that FedCo intended to reshape CoastElectric in its own image. One of its first actions was to abandon the TQM programme, arguing that it constituted an unnecessary expense. Moreover, it asserted that CoastElectric was going to adopt the ‘FedCo way’, which aimed at delivering ‘excellent customer satisfaction’. Thus, FedCo was drawing on a new rhetoric that helped to de-legitimize the practice of TQM.

‘For years I have been talking about customer service, the need for empowerment, putting the customer first. That is what I was doing with TQM. Now they have abandoned it, I just don’t understand ... they came in talking about the need for customer service. I asked for a meeting with Tex Nicholls [the CE], now that meeting has never happened.’ (Peter Marsh, TQM manager)

The label of TQM was now seen as redundant or even obstructive, imbued, as it was, with a certain world-weary disappointment:

‘Tex Nicholls gave a speech to us and said all the things I wanted him to say like: customer focus; being a world class company; teamwork; people taking ownership of their jobs; people taking responsibility for their jobs; people having clear goals to work towards; being proud to work for CoastElectric. But they were not committed to TQM. That came over very strongly, it was a big disappointment. I asked Tex for a meeting to discuss TQM and it never took place. He didn’t have any desire to discuss TQM. I still don’t understand why not ... it seems like a conflict between what they said they believed in. I think in one of their companies ... Cubana Light ... they implemented TQM and they had problems ... Their minds were made up that TQM would disappear ...’ (TQM projects manager)

Neither TQM language nor TQM practice were seen as being in tune with the culture and philosophy prevalent in the new owner’s organization. Instead of accepting the ambiguity inherent in the relationship between TQM and customer service, FedCo decided on the abandonment of TQM. With the new owners taking over, actors’ constructions and connotations of TQM had changed. TQM, being the former chief executive’s personal initiative, was ineluctably part of the *‘ancien régime’* and as a consequence had to be discontinued. TQM language was no longer acceptable — picking up on Xu’s (1999, 2000) work, it was seen no longer a desirable sign to be played with. Still, TQM left traces in that it had changed people’s outlook and practices. Indeed, there is evidence for some kind of ‘sedimentation’ (cf. Denis et al. 1996):

‘I think in practical terms [TQM having an effect] no. In other words I think if you went around the company now I don’t think you would find a TQM group or even people really talking TQM language anymore. What I think it probably did, indirectly is that it did open up some communication that helped with the introduction of Job Redesign ... But until things like TQM, empowerment those kind ... the start if you like of the cultural change. I don’t think you could even have had the conversations that we had well with Job Redesign. ... It did raise a level of expectation, a level of consciousness if you like. So we started to have conversations about Job Redesign. ... I’m not sure if we hadn’t been through TQM, if we had tried to start the process then, then we might have got a very blank look.’ (senior manager)

Ex post reflection after abandonment by somebody else suggests a relatively superficial degree of entrenchment (cf. Mittal et al. 1999):

‘It gave everyone in the company a different view of the business, and of the way we could and should do things. I don’t think it actually changed much other than increasing awareness of how things were done in the world. It went no further than that; the timeframe was not enough.’ (senior manager)

However, a senior TQM Manager emphasized the *indirect* impact of the programme:

‘As a senior manager I have welcomed it because it has helped share the burden, helping to bring about innovative new methods ... Most of the significant projects probably would not have happened without TQM.’

In summary, disbanding TQM can be analysed in the context of the new owners having a disdain for the label; wanting disassociation from the *‘ancien régime’*; wanting to be seen as haute couture, capable of noticing that a practice had become *démodé*. However, it is worth emphasizing that in some respects, and in some parts of the organization, TQM had been more than image and rhetoric and had changed practices.

Analysis: The Scripting of Total Quality Management

In outlining our framework, akin to Hardy et al. (2000), we seek to contribute to an understanding of the engagement between language and practice, or rhetoric and reality (Zbaracki 1998). By ‘crossing’ language (rhetoric either evoked or not realized) with practices (practices evoked or not realized) we can deductively construct a matrix with four boxes (Figure 1).

The skeleton (without scripts) is an analytical construct and has no place in organizational real time; in fact, locating it there would amount to a crass reification. This means we are *not* arguing that organizations move counter-clockwise from the top right corner. What we *are* saying is that we can locate scripts inside that matrix. The foundations of these scripts in our paper are twofold: they are derived from existing theoretical contributions, with their relevance demonstrated through the role they play in structuring our narrative.

After privatization, senior managers in the organization, under the gaze of expectations from external stakeholders, felt the need to adopt rhetoric-

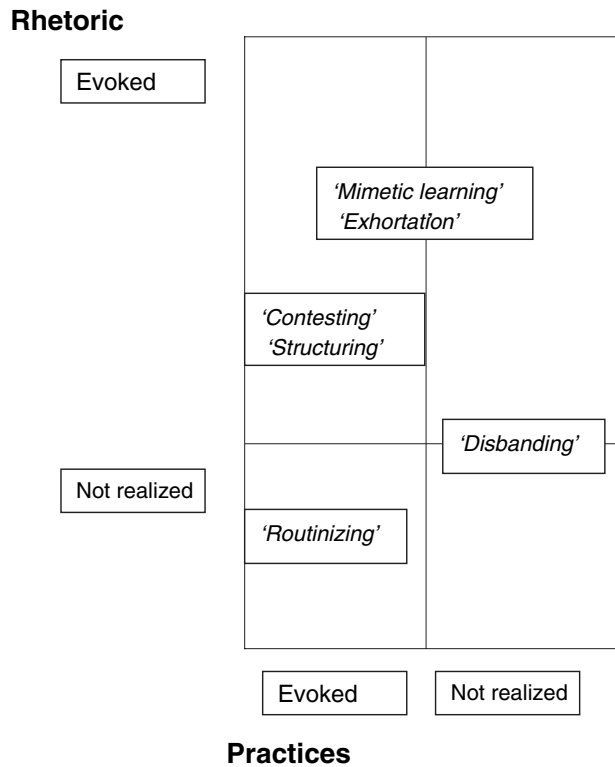


Figure 1.
The Scripting of
Total Quality
Management within
its Organizational
Biography

intensive management fashion that was cast as ‘best practices’. Thus, we can speak of an ‘exhortation’ script, which outlines the need to do things differently: it is normative, it outlines what must be done. Links existed to other organizations through the finance director and the CEO, who thus became importing agents (mimetic learning). The decision to adopt TQM was consecrated by management consultants, who as ‘cultural bankers’ or ‘intermediaries’ were important players. Furthermore, the fact alone that other organizations are employing a certain practice has a legitimating force: rhetoric of organizational agents builds on this legitimating force of already existing exemplars or templates. Thirdly, there is a ‘contesting’ script, which involves a critique of scripts one and two. This took the form of a clash between the TQM modernizers and the defenders of the engineering profession. This clash witnessed the use of language-based symbolic violence by the modernizers on those not seen to be supporting TQM: a manager was either a driver of change (good) or a blockage (bad). Fourthly, there is a ‘structuring’ script, which is about the mechanisms, tools and instruments that are (to be) employed in order to turn what has been rhetorically embraced into reality. This script bridges the gap between pure language, and language outlining and justifying a certain practice. *Structuring* involved the creation of formal positions with responsibility for driving the process. Fifthly, there is a ‘routinizing’ script, which refers to routinized practices, and a reduced need for ongoing rhetorical legitimation. This script is about the routinization (or even ritualization) of organizational innovations: the innovation is expected to have become a part of the everyday ‘habitus’ of a competent manager. Finally, the *disbanding* script has to be understood in the context of a US utility having made a successful takeover; the new owners engaging in a different type of language, namely that of ‘excellent customer satisfaction’ rather than ‘total quality’. The new owners, confident of their positive reputation, viewed TQM as becoming a burden, as it was no longer sufficiently ‘haute couture’.

Table 1 summarizes some distinct phrases from the interviews for each script.

By arranging extracts in this way, we can see that exhortation consists of flowering rhetoric with only partial indications for congruence of practice. As we emphasized before, instead of a life cycle analysis, we suggest a framework that is organized around the scripting of an innovation within an organizational biography. These scripts show some degree of *loose temporal ordering*; however, one that falls far short of the deterministic chronology of a life cycle. Indeed, by analysing organizational innovations with the notion of scripts, it becomes possible to account for *different parts of an organization ‘doing’ different things*.

Table 1:
Illustrations of
Scripts

Exhortation script

'We [the directors] were all agreed on the need to change'
'We were twenty years behind the times. Now with TQM, we are state of the art'
'TQM is a new way of working'
'we . . . look forward to future gains'

Mimetic learning script

'We hired Quest [Consulting] because they knew about TQM, so they could help guide us through the process . . .'
[CEO] [finance director]

Contesting script

'lots of resistance in engineering'
'The Directors are not really committed to it, they are just playing games . . .'

Structuring script

[a TQM hierarchy was constructed]
[a Quality Council convened]
[regional quality boards]
[Quality Champions]
'all the bureaucracy of [it] . . .'
'Old CoastElectric would reappear'
'I'm quite frustrated in how slowly CoastElectric has changed'

Routinizing script

'TQM is certainly used, sometimes we don't realize that it is part of the culture . . .'
'the techniques of achieving a result are quite ponderous . . . The Business Plan took 90 flipcharts'
'that we never start a meeting without having a brainstorm'

Disbanding script

'The introduction was highly successful because there was great commitment, it was difficult to keep this going'
'there wasn't any real commitment to the whole process of TQM'
'The Directors are not really committed to it, they are just playing games'
'Their minds were made up that TQM would disappear'
'the TQM department was being disbanded'
'I don't think you would find a TQM group or even people really talking TQM language any more'
'communication that helped with the introduction of Job Redesign'
'it did raise a level of expectation, a level of consciousness if you like'
'I don't think it actually changed much other than increasing awareness of how things were done in the world'
'Most of the significant projects probably would not have happened without TQM'

Summary, Contribution and Implications for Further Research

Summary

In this paper, we have analysed the organizational biography of a managerial innovation, namely total quality management, in a privatized electricity utility company in the UK. The paper deals with a change programme in a post-privatization context. This remains a highly topical issue, in particular in the European context, where privatization-related change programmes have typically started more recently. The paper is not a first wave paper: i.e. it is

not one of those papers that first reported on post-privatization issues in the UK context. But the paper *takes account of* these first wave papers, and develops theory by building on their efforts. For this purpose we employed the analytical instrument of ‘script’ in order to analyse typical activities that characterized certain episodes in the organization’s biography. The scripts refer to different combinations between rhetoric and practice(s). There will be some form of temporal sequence, but it will not be a strict sequence: for example, exhortation (with absence of practice) in some parts of the organization will co-exist with routinization in others. Accounting for such diversity is a strength of scripting analysis. Scripts are constructed with reference to both the data set, and existing literature. We illustrated these scripts by looking at carefully chosen episodes in the biography of the ‘total quality management’ innovation.

We constructed analytical scenarios by considering that both rhetoric and practice are independent dimensions, either of which can be enacted or not. We realize that some will object to this dualist point of departure. We argue that an organizational biography perspective is superior to a life cycle analysis, as the organizational biography perspective acknowledges the complexity of rhetoric–practice combinations. Our approach thus goes beyond more simplistic analyses along the lines of ‘TQM is only a management rhetoric’ on the one hand, and ‘TQM is at the core of corporate transformation’ on the other hand. For example, at CoastElectric statements like ‘The directors ... are just playing games’ *co-existed* with the creation of a TQM structure. In this we built upon Edwards et al.’s (1998: 450) point that ‘As with any organizational initiative [...] much will depend on the context. It is time to move away from attempts to judge TQM as a whole to more nuanced analysis which considers the conditions for its success or failure.’ We also established that ‘fail’ can mean different things: continuation in practice, but discontinuation of rhetoric: we analyse this as routinization, but others might describe it as abandonment; continuation of rhetoric, but discontinuation in practice: innovation exists then only as a rhetorical shell; discontinuation of rhetoric and discontinuation in practice, i.e. abandonment in our sense.

Contribution to the literature

TQM as a Rhetoric and as a Practice

In the early 1990s, TQM could be seen as being at the zenith of management thought and practice in the UK (Hill 1991; Wilson 1992; Tuckman 1994). Indeed, in the US literature, the main thrust of the argument was to understand TQM as a management innovation that could be analysed with the same analytical instruments as other organizational innovations (Sitkin et al. 1994; Spencer 1994; Hackman and Wageman 1995), with a particular emphasis on its performance impact (Reed et al. 1996). TQM became an element in a global rhetoric of competitiveness and progress, which, unsurprisingly, became itself the object of academic critique (DeCock and Hipkin 1997). Indeed, the disruptive, threatening and pernicious impacts of developments

associated with 'new managerialism' have been highlighted within critical and Foucauldian perspectives (Townley 2002; McKinlay and Starkey 1998). From a critical perspective it was argued that, far from being only representational, the language of TQM needed to be seen as an *anchor of the project of TQM* (for example, Xu 1999; Keleman 2000).

Existing literature tends to treat TQM either as a set of practices or as a form of rhetoric. In our view, it is time to embrace an analytical framework that allows us to take account of the complex and variable role played by rhetoric *and* practice. For this purpose, the notions of script and organizational biography were employed: to help us understand why sometimes rhetoric and practice can exist largely alone, and sometimes they strongly need each other. We present an argument that an organization can show *internal* variety as far as change programmes like TQM are concerned and we therefore need to move away from more simplistic analyses that dismiss management innovations as 'simple rhetoric' or hail it as a milestone in the competitive process. We argue that the existing theoretical approaches (new institutional theory and fashion theory) do not provide a framework for analysing *internal* variety in organizations.

Life Cycles, Circuits and Scripts

The starting point for our analysis was evidence that TQM in private sector companies can be seen as an institutionalized field: in the maelstrom of the early 1990s corporate landscape there were institutionalized expectations that managers adopt one form or another of quality improvement or customer service programmes. A variety of actors encompassing gurus, academics, journalists, consultants and managers, in ways that are difficult to be exactly traced, gave credence to such programmes (Hackman and Wageman 1995; Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999, 2000; Kipping 2001). Building on Covaleski and Dirsmith's (1988) paper on the rise, transformation and fall of a university budget category, or McCabe and Wilkinson (1998) on the rise and fall of TQM, or Zbaracki's (1998) evolutionary model of TQM, we suggested that a *periodization* of the institutionalization and structuration of TQM might be appropriate.

We argued that the utilization of the script concept allowed a detailed and empirically sensitive analysis, which can show the varying role played by rhetoric. Indeed, our aim was to show the typical activities that are involved in bringing about significant organizational change. We arrange scripts roughly in the ordering of an organizational chronology, in order to emphasize their embeddedness in a specific context. Indeed, the embedding into an economic or competitive context and a material practice is distinctive about scripts (Giddens 1984; Granovetter 1985; Barley and Tolbert 1997; Nelsen and Barley 1997) and makes the script concept, quite unlike the discourse concept, less open to criticism about self-referentiality and being free-floating (Reed 1998, 2000). For example, in our case study the language of disbanding TQM needs to be understood in the *material* context of a new owner being at the helm. Thus, scripts are analysed as useful constructs in order to discern the interaction between (internal or external) structures, (internal or external) values and language (rhetoric).

Outlook and Further Research

We have put forward an organizational biography perspective, which, at its core, has scripts of typical activities occurring during the ‘biography’ of an organizational innovation. The main promise of an organizational biography perspective is its concern with typical activities, each of which are associated with typical actors, rather than with outcomes. From this perspective, bemoaning ‘lack of implementation’ is simplistic, as it can refer to various rhetoric–practice combinations. In our view, other theories predominantly focus on structural *outcomes* (fit, retention at population level, appearance of copies, expectations having taken on rule-like status), rather than the *processes* leading to these outcomes. Scripts are seen as useful theoretical concepts in order to connect *field*-wide processes with *organization*-level processes (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Barley 1996). This is similar in intention to the analytical efforts by Hardy et al. (2000) and also Zbaracki (1998). The latter analyses how ‘how institutional processes shape the technical reality of TQM’, and technical reality needs to be ascertained at organizational level (Zbaracki 1998: 604).

Our paper has contributed to demonstrating how organizational innovations like TQM can be analysed by employing an ‘organizational biography’ framework. This can help us in understanding the *variable* role played by rhetoric in its engagement with the stockmarket, new owners, senior management and consultants, and we can therefore avoid over-generalizing statements regarding their influence on TQM programmes. For example, we suggest that the alleged contradiction between profit and customer service objectives (Knights and McCabe 1999; McCabe and Wilkinson 1998), or the systematic creation of ‘unrealistic expectations’ in order to make TQM more acceptable (Zbaracki 1998: 631), needs to be located within *specific contexts* and *episodes* of TQM programmes, rather than being stated as if a transhistorical fact. Also, the abandonment episode raises the question of whether part of the skilled dispositional practice of a manager is to decode when a managerial initiative is likely to become prodromal and start to lose its prestige value. We also found that while TQM’s *rhetoric* is anti-bureaucracy, it went about creating its own layers of bureaucracy. These issues need to be addressed by future research.

In terms of the wider applicability of our framework, we assume that other organizational innovations, such as job redesign or teamworking, can be analysed in comparable ways — but it is still important to emphasize the *distinctive* features of an innovation (*contra* Spencer 1994). In terms of methodological implications, an organizational biography perspective requires a longitudinal, highly qualitative data set that allows writing a biography of an innovation. However, the biography must not lose itself in the limitless detail of an individual case — instead the detail of a case becomes enriched through knowledge of the institutional context, and vice versa.

Note

The practice of the authors is to rotate the order of their names. Contributions were equal.

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Frank Mueller

Frank Mueller MA (Konstanz) MSc DPhil (Oxon) holds a Chair in Management at the University of St Andrews. Previously he held positions at the University of Leicester, Royal Holloway University of London, Aston University, and London Business School. His research interests include (1) comparative organizational behaviour and national business systems; (2) rhetoric and reality of human resource management and teamworking; (3) the 'new managerialism' in (ex)public sector organizations. He has published widely on these topics in journals including *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations* and *Journal of Management Studies*.

Address: School of Management, University of St Andrews, The Gateway, North Haugh, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9RW, Scotland.

E-mail: frankmueller100@yahoo.co.uk

Chris Carter

Chris Carter is a Reader in Management at the University of St Andrews. His work spans the disciplinary areas of critical accounting and organizational theory and has a particular focus on the tensions between organized professions and managerialism in the workplace. He received his PhD from Aston University.

Address: School of Management, University of St Andrews, The Gateway, North Haugh, Fife KY16 9AJ, Scotland.

E-mail: cc67@st-andrews.ac.uk