

Linda Evans

University of Leeds, United Kingdom

Location, location, location, and acquiring the ideal home: a new conception of academic practice (0185)

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Drawing parallels with, and using metaphors related to, the quest for an ideal home, this theoretical paper proposes a new conception of academic practice based upon proximity theory. Proximity theory proposes that perceived proximity to what s/he conceives as his/her current 'ideal' job determines the individual's current job satisfaction level: the closer s/he perceives her/himself to the 'ideal' job, the greater will be her/his job satisfaction. The individual strives to pursue her/his 'ideal' job by making choices and seizing opportunities that – consciously or unconsciously – are pursued because of their potential to make the current job more ideal. Academic practice may thus be understood as the pursuit of the 'ideal', which, it is argued, involves shaping one's work situation to correspond with one's self-conception and hoped-for self-image – not exclusively in a professional context, but also within a more holistic framework encompassing one's self-at-work alongside personal life and priorities.

Location, location, location, and acquiring the ideal home: a new conception of academic practice

The paper will introduce and propose a new theory – 'proximity theory' – as the motivational basis of academic practice that may be conceived of as the 'pursuit of the ideal'.

Calling it 'proximity theory', I explain the fundamental determinant of job-related attitudes as the individual's perceived proximity to her/his 'ideal' job, or, expressed another way, job-related ideals. This – the individual's conception of her/his 'ideal' job - comprises and reflects, *inter alia*, values, needs, interests and desires: all of those specific psychologically-, sociologically-, socio-culturally- and affectively-oriented properties of individuals that occupational psychologists have variously identified as influential on one or more job-related attitudes. I argue, too, in the full conference paper, that 'proximity theory' may be located within the sociological theory of the distributive-justice force (Jasso, 1988), which I present as a possible explanation for what drives the 'pursuit of the ideal', and associated with Sternberg's (1999) theory of successful intelligence.

Essentially, proximity theory incorporates my contention that the individual evaluates (often unconsciously) her/his current total job situation (by which I mean the contextualized job as a whole, with all its components, as perceived subjectively by the job incumbent) on the basis of how close it is to her/his current conception of his/her 'ideal' job: that is, how closely it matches her/his job-related ideals. This evaluation underpins levels of job satisfaction and morale, and it influences motivation by serving as a motivator or demotivator.

For the most part academics enjoy considerable freedom of choice in relation to the various research components of their work and thus are able to pursue their ideals. In the more expansive conference paper I demonstrate how, applied to different layers of academic practice – which I identify

as: the foundation, the location, the layout specification, the structural design, and the fixtures and fittings - this parallels the pursuit of an ideal home in the right location. I interpret 'pursuit', within the context of this paper, as a motivational attitudinal force that influences activity that may or may not result in aspirations-fulfilment. In many cases pursuit of the ideal does not involve 'big action'; it occurs through the (often slight) situational adjustments and routine choices (which are often unconsciously determined) and decision-making that underpin everyday practice. Since many people's pursuit of the ideal will be unconscious, reflecting its remoteness as a focus of direction, it may be considered as a process of successive attempts to enhance or improve one's work situation on a minor-event-by-minor-event basis: that is, trying to optimize, in relation to currently held preferences and priorities, the execution and results of each 'unit' of practice encountered.

Pursuit of the ideal is not necessarily a process of engineering or negotiating a self-aggrandizement-focused bigger and brighter future that better matches one's self-conception and hoped-for self-image. It may indeed take this form, but equally it simply involves trying to make one's work situation as pleasant and favourable as possible. This – a pleasant, favourable, trouble-free, hassle-free work situation – represents a more realizable and imminent ideal that most – if not all – people pursue.

The complex ecologies of people's lives are integral to the notion of pursuit of the ideal, for one's 'ideal-self-at-work' cannot be entirely divorced from the myriad collection of overlapping and inter-related other ideal selves that reflect people's complex combination of (sometimes intermittent; sometimes temporally- and situationally-determined) identities: as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, life partners, colleagues, responsible citizens, and many others. At various times any one or more of these may compete with and constrain the pursuit of the ideal-self-at-work; at other times they may facilitate it.

Pursuit of the ideal is not exclusively about following one's dreams or goals; it is fundamentally about pursuing a conception of oneself-at-work – one's professional self – that, at any one time, appears to represent the 'ideal', and as such it is inextricably linked to professional identities, for one's current 'ideal' incorporates a conception of one's current identity (recognizing fully the accuracy of Clegg's (2008) observation that identity is complex, dynamic and multifarious). Both one's ideals and the self-conceptions that these reflect are liable to fluctuation and change, sometimes suddenly and abruptly, in response to critical incidents, sometimes frequently, in response to successive constraints and obstructions, but also gradually, over a longer time span. Pursuit of the ideal is therefore a dynamic, relationally-determined, process that is constantly re-directing itself in response to the inevitable situational changes that persist in re-defining the ideal.

What I refer to as 'the ideal' may be translated into Bourdieuan terms as an envisaged or consciously or unconsciously desired position, as defined by its perceived power and status, within a specific field. Achieving that ideal – again, in Bourdieuan terms – involves acquiring the symbolic capital that is the currency within the specified field, with the amount of capital accrued correlating with degree of power and status (Bourdieu, 1984). Academic practice is the medium through which capital is acquired, and so, if it is to follow the direction of the ideal, practice must be focused on the appropriate form of capital. Individuals' habituses will determine the ease and success with which

scientific-capital-acquisition-focused practice is undertaken. Yet, since habituses are fluid and alterable, they may, through a process akin to morphogenetic structure-agency interaction (Archer, 1995), become more aligned to or compatible with such practice, *through* the practice.

The evident trend of representing and examining academic practice within socio-cultural or cultural-psychological frameworks has yielded an array of valuable insights and compelling theoretical perspectives that have augmented and enhanced the knowledge base. Yet what is generally lacking from these is consideration of the fundamental basis of practice: what motivates people to act as they do, whether it be, for example, to assume a particular (professional) identity, to develop and enact a particular habitus, or to pursue specific forms of cultural capital. With its explicitly motivational focus, the new conception of academic practice presented in this paper complements existing ones by offering such elucidation. Framed within a proposed new theory, it incorporates a motivation-oriented explanation for human activity in the workplace context.

References

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