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Performance Appraisal Research: A Critical Review of Work on “The
Social Context and Politics of Appraisal”.

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ABSTRACT:
This paper reviews existing literatures on the analysis of performance appraisal (PA) paying special attention to those which try to take into account the “social context” of appraisal systems and processes. The special place of political action within these processes is underlined and the different levels at which politics need to be considered in research are outlined. Research on politics is considered and shown to lack an adequate consideration of the social relations involved in the reciprocal interactions between PA tools and processes and users interpretation and manipulation of them.

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- performance appraisal
- social context
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Introduction.

The main objective of this paper will be to accomplish a critical review of our knowledge of "the politics of performance appraisal", bringing together material from the different literatures which have tackled this problematic phenomenon. Such a review is important because the bulk of current research on performance appraisal (PA hereafter), and reviews of that research, remain dominated by a psychological approach to the subject which is at the same time ahistorical and as sociological. This state of affairs exists despite periodical calls for more analysis of what is termed “the social context” of PA and for moves away from the cognitivist paradigm which has dominated PA analysis for such a long time (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Levy and Williams, 2004).

In fact the “social context” just referred to has largely remained a “black box”: no adequately theorized role for historical change, for social structures or for power has found its way into the paradigm. To advance beyond this situation, I will argue that writing on the political dimension of PA does present interesting possibilities for greater depth in understanding “the context" if its insights are critically developed and theorized within a perspective which gives due weight to “structuration” processes in system-agent interactions. Such a perspective views management tools and systems as socially designed and highly influential on the attitudes and behaviours of those using them but also – and crucially - as malleable when users put them to use and “appropriate” them in their own way. It tries to understand in depth the reciprocal interactions between system users, systems’ properties and emerging forms of system appropriation after the manner of structurationist perspectives on information technology use in organizations (Orlikowski, 1992).

Right from the start however it is necessary to introduce some of the international historical background which has been lacking in research on PA, by making one or two remarks about the broader management and organizational changes with which modified or renewed PA processes – and the social tensions surrounding them - have been closely associated. In recent years Human Resources Management (HRM) innovations like performance appraisal reform have become particularly
important elements of larger projects of organizational change which have irrevocably changed the landscape of organizational structures and operations - TQM (total quality management) and BPR (business process reengineering) for example in both the USA and Europe, and also the implementation of team-based work restructuring (particularly in the USA and Canada under the broad label ‘high performance work systems’ (Ichniowski et al, 1996; Mueller, 1999; Murray et al, 2002)). While practitioner controversy has often centred on the “fit” or "alignment" between the HRM policies proposed and the projects’ various organizational implications, researchers have sometimes focused on excavating the managerial assumptions suspected to be behind the HR reforms themselves (Wilkinson et al, 1998).

Performance appraisal and evaluation has repeatedly been a central and sensitive area of these changes, and this has been so mainly because new accountabilities and "visibilities" of employees have often been deemed essential to the success of the business innovations concerned ; for example one of the clearly fundamental changes in work at lower levels of organizational hierarchies in the last decade has been the “entry” into the office, workshop or factory of the customer or client, either symbolically or physically. Systematic national surveys of employee responses to evolutions in working conditions have shown this clearly (see Gollac and Volkoff (1996) for example, for France). Translating this new "closeness of the client" and his/her needs concretely into new work targets and demands on employees has been at the heart of the logic of both TQM and BPR. Target setting at both group and individual levels, revised and refined employee surveillance methods, and new performance appraisal and evaluation methods have all been generalized to both individual workers and to groups of employees below the managerial level (see Jenkins, 2000, Ch. 3 and 4, on France). Overall, essential to a shift in the nature of "work" itself has been a transformation of concepts and criteria of "performance" in work.

In academic research a number of analytical perspectives – both sociological and psychological - have been mobilized to consider a variety of implications of this broader diffusion of new managerial systems and tools (without always focusing specifically on PA techniques). Three are important here.

One interpretation of this trend has been Foucauldian in inspiration, and as such, explicitly “political” – in this view a wide generalization of new surveillance and control techniques, along with objective setting, corresponds to a new all-encompassing and quasi-totalitarian management “gaze” which wields power over employees through attempting to generate a kind of behavioural transparency in the workplace (Townley, 1994; Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; Austrin, 1994; Hardy and Clegg, 1999).

A second (neo-institutionalist) interpretation focuses (like the first) on the evolution of paradigms in performance management, relating them to broad developments in organizational structures and
models of management. One interesting (but undeveloped) focus in this school has been on the essentially paradoxical nature of "fashion" in performance appraisal paradigms; according to this view criteria of performance are constantly being changed by managements because their perceived efficiency – linked to their capacity to differentiate and to compare pertinent cases – declines almost inevitably (or “runs down”) as they are used and reused in the firm (Meyer and Gupta, 1994).

A third – and much older - perspective, nearer to traditional HR management thinking and applied psychology, considers the actual use of performance appraisal "close up", using models of the interaction between PA tools and system elements (PA procedures, forms and criteria, training, etc), the rater/superior and the ratee/subordinate. In this (cognitivist) managerial perspective “politics” is not entirely evacuated from the issue, but it has tended to recede into the background behind the priority given to problems of management effectiveness and PA validity and reliability (rating distortions, discrimination, inequity, etc) (DeNisi, 1997, reviews this literature).

1. From cognitivism to “the social context of appraisal” – socio-political realism.

Nonetheless, it has been argued by some critical authors on the edges of this last tradition that PA must be seen as a broad social-psychological process – and not just a cognitive one – and that it is often embedded in social on the contingencies of the organizational setting and of PA system user groups (Murphy and Cleveland, 1991). This shift, to a more social and politically “realist” view of how performance appraisal activities are conditioned by group and inter-personal influence processes, occurred in the early to mid 90’s (Longenecker, Sims and Gioia, 1987 ; Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988 ; Murphy and Cleveland, 1991 and 1995; Ferris, Judge, Rowland and Fitzgibbons, 1994). This view has thus over time come to constitute a fourth problematic, which I will call "socio-political realism" which is explicitly concerned with the impact of inter-personal and inter-group influence processes, and political behaviour, on PA (Longenecker, Sims and Gioia, 1987 ; Villanova and Bernardin, 1991 ; Ferris, Judge, Rowland and Fitzgibbons, 1994). However "politics" is understood here in a manner quite different to that of the first (Foucauldian) perspective and, instead of remaining at the level of generalities concerning management control – one of the main defects of Foucault-inspired work - performance appraisal systems and tools are themselves usually considered in some detail as phenomena whose empirical variations do matter considerably in social processes.

It can be argued that two broad benefits have accrued from this (still embryonic) conceptual shift. Firstly, the relative sterility of approaches depending too heavily on cognitive-psychological laboratory studies and abstracting away the organizational "soil" of PA procedures and decision making has been avoided. This sterility was recognized in the perception by some critics of a crisis in the relations between psychological research, the sociology of appraisal behaviour, and actual

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management practices – despite the accumulated mass of studies concerned with the information processing dimensions of rating and decision making in PA and with psychometrics, it was not clear how this research had actually contributed to knowledge of PA evolution, practices and difficulties (Ilgen et al, 1993; Fletcher, 2001).

Secondly, the normative orientation of much work on PA – focused on avoiding rater/appraiser bias, seeking best management practices in appraisal preparation, tools and training – has been attenuated by a greater sociological and social-psychological "realism" about the use of management tools and techniques. This "realism" has not only emphasized that research models of PA must take on board work on inter-group and inter-personal influence processes like impression management (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1995), it has also stressed the rather obvious – but still poorly understood – "contextualisation" of those processes by specific organizational structures and processes.

Realism argues that these structures and processes ("the social context") are the bedrock of PA activities in the organization – they constitute the backcloth social norms, relations of reporting, responsibility and interdependence, and patterns of social interaction within which PA activities become embedded and which condition their use. They can either facilitate or obstruct the use of specific PA methods and techniques either through individual or group action (which might entail resistance) or inaction, as in failure or refusal to use PA resources like rating scales and forms, or follow rules and guidelines. Conversely PA activities themselves can gradually impact on those patterns of interaction and processes in their own way by shaping and modifying the behaviour, attitudes and expectations of the parties involved – shifts in the criteria for acceptable performance in work, and in the way controls are used to reward or sanction the (un)acceptable can have considerable influence on individuals and groups (Giacalone and Rosenfeld (Eds), 1991). In some empirical research, this reciprocal interaction has sometimes been regarded as having generated, over time, a new and identifiable "performance culture" in an organization, founding specific "psychological contracts" between populations of individuals and a given organization, although this is a somewhat static image for the processes involved (Bento and Ferreira, 1992; Rousseau, 1995).

2. Beyond Socio-political Realism – Charting Different Levels of PA Politics

However, if a certain academic "realism" has come to accept that PA is not just a relatively neutral (if cognitively problematic) administrative process for grading employees, but a mechanism crucially dependent on social processes and, often, the site of negotiation and contestation (Rosenfeld et al, 1995), it cannot be said that the different ways in which political activity can surround and penetrate PA have been clearly articulated in the literature. This will be accomplished here in Sections 2.1. and 2.2., which follow.
Nor can it be said that an adequate theoretical framework for integrating them has been developed. We will come to this in Section 3.

So, let us start by clarifying debates on different types of questions, suggesting that, schematically, politics can be brought into the understanding of PA on at least three levels, each of which demands a slightly different conceptual armoury for the issues of power and political activity which are raised. Here they are presented in descending order of aggregation:

1. Cross-national and cross-organizational diffusion of new "paradigms" in performance appraisal (new cognitive frameworks, tools and techniques). I will call this the politics of PA paradigm diffusion.
2. PA system modification / implementation in single organizations, called the politics of PA system change.
3. Evolving PA system use (and abuse …) by supervisors and subordinates in interaction in a specific organizational context: the politics of performance rating.

The interactions between these three forms of PA politics are particularly interesting and neglected areas of research, as we shall see.

2.1. The politics of paradigm diffusion and of system change. Cross national and organizational diffusion and adoption of new performance appraisal "paradigms".

Here the scattered literature has analysed a number of different broad empirical tendencies in PA change and innovation, but to my knowledge these have rarely been brought together. To get closer to these questions we can begin by outlining some important recent historical shifts, some of which were mentioned in the Introduction. Each of the following forms a part of a broader change in HR practices of course, but often also in industrial relations:

2.1.1. PA system diffusion into “virgin territories.”


(b) Cross-unit (often cross-national) transmission of PA systems and practices from headquarter to subsidiary in expanding business operations. Here management control systems are used as part of a strategy to constrain and guide the behaviour and attitudes of personnel in newly-established units. PA systems used in the “home” operation are sometimes imported for this purpose, but as many
researchers have made clear, the actual outcome is often a compromise between this “push” coming from the home-based firm (to adopt a version of its own tried and tested system) and the “pull” forces represented by the need to adapt systems to the social and cultural context of the subsidiary (Rosenzweig and Singh, 1991; Farley, Hoenig and Yang, 2004).

(c) **Worker individualization** : the widespread application of PA to non-management employee groups, such as production operators, in attempts to break with traditions of collectivism and introduce evaluation and remuneration based on assessment of individual skill possession and/or individual performance – "performance-based pay" and "skill-based pay" (Eustache, 1996; Jenkins and Klarsfeld, 2002; Katz, 1993).

2.1.2. **PA innovation as “appraisal intensification”.**
What I mean by this is the tendency to apply to traditional top-down PA (rater-ratee) various techniques and refinements whose aim is to enhance both the extent to which performance is under organizational surveillance, and the differentiation of employees into strong and weak, acceptable and unacceptable performers. Two techniques are notable here:
(a) **Multi-rater methods (such as "360° appraisal")**: the increasing international adoption of appraisal methods which use several data sources on individual behaviour and results (peers, subordinates, etc. (Jonson and Olson, 1996; Bracken et al, 2001)).
(b) **Forced ranking methods**: the PA system requirement that managers apply quotas / percentages of "high", "average" and "poor performer" to the populations of employees they appraise. Nicknamed pithily by American critics "rank and yank" - because of the link with subsequent firing - this technique has spread from the US (where important users have been Ford, General Electric, Microsoft and …Enron) to Europe (Gary, 2001).

As a PA system is imported into a new domain or an existing one significantly “intensified” by new additions or novelties, a real process of organizational change is begun and, put roughly, new system elements are over time “refracted” by the patterns of values and social interaction they meet within organizational stakeholder groups. Further, these often modify the elements nature during use. But what makes this at all “political”? I would argue that although the actual “mobilization” of actors to defend their interests (or to directly protest) may be very limited in such situations, everyday negotiation between both individuals and groups is a key element of the change processes. A “negotiated order” is at stake in these transitions and a new one has to be generated across everyday interactions as well as across those periods marked by the “round” of performance grading (Strauss, 1978).
If such “refraction” patterns are to be fully understood a number of important questions need to be carefully posed:

1. Why did the processes of diffusion occur on such a scale for such and such an economic sector or unit, and what are the forms of influence of institutional actors in shaping a given PA paradigm and its adoption / adaptation, in HR "projects” within firms / institutions ?

2. What organizational and personnel / HR objectives do these innovations serve in the discourses which articulate, legitimate and "sell" them ? What organizational and behavioural assumptions are embedded in those discourses ?

3. What is the relationship between a "project" of PA change, its "sponsors” and also its adopters or carriers (their perceptual frameworks, interests and ambitions as particular actors) within the firm ?

4. What is the relation between the content of proposed modifications – for example, increasing formalization in tools and methods, or using "forced ratings” - and the existing concepts of performance (and their underlying norms and values) traditionally and habitually held by different sub-populations of employees (perhaps in "sub-cultures") within the adopting organization ?

5. How do actors and groups position themselves in relation to the changes, before, during and after implementation? Acquiescence, apathy, negotiation or resistance, etc.?

6. Do specific organizations have "repertoires" of legitimate forms of contestation of shifts in processes like PA and, if so, how do they emerge, how are they sustained, and what is their impact ?

Commonalities.
Despite the fact that these shifts are radically different in that they concern different employment populations with different expectations, resources and privileges, literally different worlds of work – something often overlooked - there are in fact commonalities at certain levels. For example, it is not difficult to perceive in each of these tendencies a common thread in the management discourse surrounding them. This often invokes the twin ideas of motivation and accountability ; despite the well known widespread managerial disappointment with PA, use of these two concepts penetrates and legitimates all these major shifts in work relations, from the modification of industrial working processes to programmes of public sector "rationalization" and reform. Put simply, more or less sophisticated and elaborate notions of individual motivation and accountability usually underlie managements’ faith in PA reform as a source of enhanced efficiencies.
The precise paths to efficiency, via collective performance, are of course conceived differently in each case. Industrial individualization has often been premised on the idea that workers will respond better to incentives aimed at them not as "worker grade X" but as John or Jane, with distinctive personal capacities, qualities and "portfolios" of skills. This was articulated by academics like Lawler (1990) in the early nineties with formulae like "pay the person, not the job". The shift was ultimately propelled, however, by an international logistics (JIT) and quality (TQM) revolution, generated by more and more difficult competitive conditions in a number of sectors, which transformed notions of the employee-work process link. More and more tightly coupled in space and time, reengineered work processes required more labour "flexibility" and more individual employee "polyvalence" (Jenkins, 2000).

On the other hand public sector shifts have usually been premised on spreading new forms of control through the increased individual accountability to the public/customer of officers or agents. This was of course fuelled by the introduction of competition into domains (utilities, education, health, etc.) hitherto largely sheltered from its logic.

Appraisal intensification depends generally on increasing both the "density" of data on the appraised (which may or may not require physical surveillance) and formalization in the administration of HR tools and processes. In the case of multi-rater assessment the logic is one of both "accountability through high 'visibility'" and management skill enhancement (via enhanced feedback on behaviour with subordinates, respect for rules, etc.). Forced rating usually stipulates rater respect of a bell curve for the distribution of ratings across employees so as to combat leniency and "bunching" in PA judgements and to render more evident the distinction between "satisfactory" and "poor" individuals. Murphy's case study of Merck and Co. illustrates very well the managerial interest in using forced ratings to diminish bunching and raise the motivation of PA raters to rank "more accurately" (Murphy, 1992).

While the emphasis differs for each tendency, each nonetheless seeks to develop new patterns of motivation and accountability for specific key populations in the work place and, sometimes, new work trajectories constituting formalized "careers". We need to consider such PA changes as significant and sometimes momentous shifts in not only administration, but also more profoundly in the psychological contract on offer to different populations within a given firm (Rousseau, 1995).

What is quite remarkable however is that the managers responsible for the design and implementation of these programmes seem in many cases to have been guided by the same somewhat crude model of the "motivated employee"; an individual abstracted from his/her historical work culture and local beliefs – often themselves communitarian or collectivistic – and seen as highly susceptible to the
personalized judgements and rewards conferrable by his/her immediate supervisor. (Incidentally isn't this precisely the image articulated by many Organizational Behaviour text books?)

This is confirmed by research on the single organizations and cases that are, of course, the "bearers" of the innovations just mentioned, the units which decide to take up an innovation and then adapt and "refract" it as it is put into organizational service by both HR and line managers. Case work has shown how managements' reliance on abstract notions of employee motivation during the implementation of PA reform has often turned out to be an expensive mistake. What is revealed is the emergence of quite varied and – to managers - unexpected interpretations of the new elements of PA held by different actors and groups, allied with a considerable variety in individual motivational dynamics, these latter often corresponding to different personalized interpretations of how the psychological contract in employment is being modified. This work has also highlighted the tensions and forms of contestation which have developed between organizational actors during the implementation of PA processes in a formal performance management cycle across time.

Thus "individualization" has often ended up dividing work forces into new groups along quite unexpected lines, with large populations becoming clearly demotivated by the shift in performance and reward expectations (Eustache, 1996). It has also generated hostile union reactions, deteriorating industrial relations and outright conflict. Where the shift has "worked" in a collectivistic work climate – as in the French iron and steel sector – years of careful negotiation and adaptation of job grading systems and other HR practices have been necessary (Jenkins, 2000, Ch. 4.).

Overall this serves to underline a significant political dimension of both PA diffusion and implementation – while the constituent organizational projects making up the diffusion tendencies referred to above have often been federated around common general / neutral ideas of employee visibility, accountability and motivation, this very "neutrality" – a kind of assumption of unitary individualism - has been shown to be a superficial and inadequate guide to employee reactions to the new PA and remuneration processes being implemented. Neutral, unitary individualism has in fact often operated as a widespread ideology in the service of managements' PA reforms, giving them a logic, sense, and putative legitimacy. Furthermore, this "ideology" has actually been underpinned by academic psychology and management theory; "expectancy theory" approaches to motivation encourage, I would argue, a similar type of abstract individualism in the way effort, performance, reward and work satisfaction are inter-related. Managerial use of expectancy theory type ideas, I suspect, erases, flattens and elides the often highly significant differences in intrinsic and extrinsic values between work communities, craft and occupational groups.
In addition, it seems that there is also a "sector effect" in that groups of employers often share not only the same type of neutral discourse on the relations between employee performance, reward and motivation, but also adopt similar techniques and tools to achieve workforce change when environmental shifts reach a given intensity. Employers move, as Sisson has said, "like ships in a convoy", particularly in times of difficulty. Thus it is in a sector of "hyper competition" (IT and electronics) confronted by pressure on wage costs and possible downsizing that appraisal intensification has become widespread. Both "forced ranking" and "multi-rater assessment" became generalized in the sector in the last decade, for a series of complex reasons.

Recently allegations against companies in the sector (HP, IBM, Ericsson) of the abuse of PA ratings – of using raised forced ranking quotas of "poor" graded employees to generate lay-offs and thus facilitate downsizing – have been voiced. For example in France IBM has found itself getting ugly publicity in the pages of *Le Monde* and HP has been dragged into court, as we shall see. Inter-union coordination committees have been constituted in the sector to share information and debate the best methods of defence against (what is seen as) PA-assisted firing and downsizing methods. It is rare for PA changes to be so much under the spotlight and in the public arena, and this attests to the strong political potential of appraisal intensification as a system change.

However "forced ranking" arguably only really becomes politically explosive when upper management decides to, firstly, modify already existing rules/guidelines on the placing of employees in the category "poor" and, secondly, punish in some way those so graded (in pay, demotion or firing). If this happens secretly and without employee consultation, the playing field clearly tilts and the appraisal game's rules are radically altered. As one can read in the testimonies of IBM and HP employees (most with substantial seniority) on trade union web sites, the consequences of such shifts are dramatic – a sentiment of injustice, waste, loss and revolt is expressed. Mobilisation in defence of rights is the logical result - "rights" either clearly expressed in labour law relating to PA (as in France) or "rights" derived from prior company norms and practices which had come to constitute a core of the psychological contract experienced by employees. Here the intensification of appraisal has led to punishment instead of training and development, a polarization of attitudes between management levels, and the constitution of highly visible and organized employee resistance. These together are likely to dramatically degrade any future belief in HR management in the firm as well as to worsen its overall working climate (Constanty, 2002).

2.2. The politics of performance rating. Evolving PA system use by supervisors and subordinates in organizational interaction.

It can be easily argued – but easily forgotten - that PA systems require considerable time to be "embedded" in norms and behaviour, and that over time organizational behaviour itself forces formal
management tools to adapt and "bend" to individual and group preferences and interactions. Accepting this, we need to address the following kinds of issues concerning these interactions:

1. How are the "rational-legal" and formal elements of performance appraisal appropriated and modified by different groups and individuals through essentially informal social processes (of exchange, work relations and negotiation) as appraisal is itself "lived" over time? (Barlow, 1989)

2. Are political will and skill developed, mobilized and used by individuals and groups around appraisal processes? How does this "use of influence" unfold, and why does it occur more intensely in some cases, in some organizational settings, and why not in others? What typical "stances" and social processes characterise this mobilization (Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988), and can it be understood using the traditional metaphor of "games", or are other concepts needed? (Crozier and Friedberg, 1979; Mintzberg, 1983).

3. What role does the internal "design" of the PA system itself (types of formal performance criteria and their weighting, interview and decision procedures, etc.) play in minimizing or facilitating both impression management and political activity? (Villanova and Bernardin, 1991).

2.2.1. Resistance to PA change: games to conserve an existing psychological contract?

When organizations implement PA system changes employee reaction, as we have seen, is often poorly anticipated, and then misunderstood when it becomes visible. Earlier, in talking of the failures of "individualization" primacy was given to the role played by employee representation of the modified "deal" or contract that PA innovations offer to them. When that deal is considered to be unacceptable the classical reactions of "exit, voice and loyalty" are possible, and "voice" can bring opposition and political mobilization. Either individualist reactions can predominate, or more collective action can prevail. Among the former, "impression management" on the part of the individual has been analysed by many researchers, usually in the context of concern about performance rating distortions and "careerist" behaviour, which we will come to in a moment.

However, analyses of collective/group reactions to performance appraisal change are also of great significance, in part for the way they explore the "sub-cultural" basis of varying group perceptions of PA elements and processes. Recent and not so recent case studies have contributed much here (Barlow, 1989; Bruns, 1992). For example Barlow's (1989) analysis of manager's perceptions of PA processes at four sites of a British petrochemical firm is an attempt, not to rigorously test hypotheses, but to "explore areas of its members social knowledge" in an ethnographic mode. Concern to build up a faithful picture of management perceptions of PA and career management behaviour, and to patiently bring to the surface the often implicit notions of success and failure that connote "performance" in the firm, is particularly marked and subtle. Here real credence is given to the idea of the gradual emergence of a "performance culture"; a tissue of norms, values and beliefs which is
historically anchored and firm-dependent, but also relatively unstable and sometimes contested. Why unstable? In part because the tissue itself often depends, as Barlow shows, on forms of consensus which are generated and sustained by informal networks of personnel, themselves by definition fluid, as Strauss showed many years ago in another context (Strauss, 1978).

A similar approach is developed with considerable success by Bento and Ferreira (1992) in their analysis of the way implicit norms and beliefs conditioned both the design and the (hostile) reception of a performance-related pay plan in a University. What is particularly valuable in this study is, firstly, the careful and intelligent “mapping” of how system designers and users beliefs and values differed in terms of five dualities or oppositions (egalitarianism / inegalitarianism, certainty / uncertainty, controllability / uncontrollability, individualism / collectivism, materialism / personalism) and, secondly, the explanation of how these differences played a substantial role in a costly performance management failure: a well-intentioned and in some senses perfectly “rational” performance pay plan, based on assumptions of legitimate inequalities, the need for uncertainty as a motivator, and individualism, was rejected strongly by employees who had built up norms over long periods in their work communities which were actually based on the very antithesis of these beliefs. As many as 86% of the users indicated dissatisfaction with the pay plan and the performance appraisal processes related to it (which were in fact essential to the plan) were blocked or compromised in some units because of low compliance and substantial apathy in system use. A PA system reform here takes on a profoundly symbolic content and remains illegitimate in the eyes of many of its potential users.

Why some units and not others behaved "politically" in the face of this merit pay and performance appraisal reform project is an interesting question which was not examined however, which is a little regrettable. We are left with a central, simple, but perhaps rather weak hypothesis – when value differences between system reformers and system users attain significant levels then refusal of legitimacy, stigmatisation, collective discontent and (eventually) political action becomes probable. But we are no closer to elucidating the problematic relation between the scale of reforms, the extent of value differences, collective discontent, and an individual propensity to become politically active or mobilized, whether to engage in impression management or some other form of opposition / resistance to the reforms.

2.2.2. Rating influence and manipulation distortion: games of "careerism".

Steps forward in this direction have however been taken by researchers developing models of the conditions in organizations generating PA rating manipulation and distortion. Indeed analysis of what we can call "the politics of rating" has been dominated for some time by the conviction that social influence processes need to be fully, realistically, understood in PA, and not surprisingly different.
forms of both rater and ratee impression management have been seen as key elements in this. For example some studies focus on individual ratee self-protection in the face of possible exposure to criticism, or ingratiating with superiors / supervisors (conformity, flattery, favours, etc) or other techniques such as self-promotion (Rosenfeld et al, 1995; Watt, 1993). The heart of (and the problems with) this literature can be clearly seen in attempts to derive, from existing research findings, models of the probability that such impression management behaviours will be triggered in specific organizational and PA circumstances.

Manager/rater PA manipulation.

On the one hand, Villanova and Bernardin (1991) focus on appraisers / raters likelihood of manipulating ratings in PA. Their approach sees this probability as a function of two sets of factors:

1. Weaknesses in a PA system which provide the "means" or raw material for rating distortion, facilitating it. Villanova and Bernardin suggest the following:
   - infrequent appraisals
   - performance criteria are irrelevant to the job, and/or non-specific, and/or non-verifiable
   - raters are appraising alone, and/or are poorly trained, and/or are unaccountable for PA tasks and/or must provide overall summary judgements of subordinates.

2. Factors in the appraisal context "that provide motives for raters to manipulate their ratings purposely" (ibid. p 87) are:
   - appraisal data are crucial for important decisions in areas such as remuneration and promotions,
   - raters are poor at providing feedback, and/or have little faith in the PA system's validity and utility, and/or have low commitment to the unit or organization,
   - rater-ratee, manager-subordinate relations are poor

Their argument is that when appropriate elements of these two types come together then only an opportunity is needed for distortion behaviour, on the part of the appraiser, to become manifest. Thus "when raters are motivated to distort ratings and they perceive that the means to do so exist, they will take advantage of the perceived opportunity and purposely distort their ratings" (ibid. p 83).

Such a formulation is obviously aimed at a managerial diagnosis of the causes of PA rating anomalies and in this respect it could clearly be useful in generating simple realistic checklists which include situational and dispositional factors. We have to note however that the "probabilities" referred to here are sketchy to say the least (like so many in "organizational behaviour" causalities).

Subordinate/ratee PA tactics and games.

Adopting a different focus, both Ferris et al (1994) and Wayne and Liden (1995) concentrate on the ratee or subordinate's influence / political tactics in the PA process. Wayne and Liden show, in a longitudinal study, how ratee impression management behaviour, conceived as generative of both
supervisor liking of subordinates and of supervisor perceptions of similarity (to them) is systematically correlated with performance ratings (Wayne and Liden, 1995). This research relies on subordinates' self-reports of their own IM behaviour, registered by appropriately developed questionnaires.

A clear strength of this work is that for a given population of superiors and subordinates a measure of the incidence and types of impression management behaviours being used across a time scale is obtained. A second is that it taps into a common managerial concern to avoid rating distortions and unfairness in PA processes – in principle PA system redesign can be effected so as to diminish the means and opportunities for distortion and also to reduce the rater motivation to distort. On a common sense level this an objective that all those of us who are subject to PA in their jobs can consider laudable – if performance assessment has to be used, let the system at least diminish the most evident subjectivities!

On the other hand, weaknesses lie in the initial models of behaviour the questionnaire method is designed to test – neither the dynamics of the interaction of individuals with both superiors and the PA system itself, nor the real meaning of impression management in the context of the evolution of work tasks, and of expectations about them, are grasped in any real depth. It is indeed possible to show that IM is used by a sample of subordinates in one or two organizations (two in Wayne and Liden (1995)) but as the authors admit, while

"...a substantial body of research on the short-term tactical use of impression management has accumulated ...long term uses have been virtually ignored."

And they accept that, in future work

"One question that needs to be addressed is whether agents deliberately use strategic impression management in an attempt to influence future outcomes." (Wayne and Liden, 1995, p247)

It thus seems that my questions above (viz.1. to 3. in this section) remain largely unanswered with this research approach. The extent to which impression management can correspond to an individual "project" of social and organizational influence stretching over a period of time remains hidden to this perspective.

Ferris et al (1994) for their part also focus predominantly on ratte influence behaviour, and construct an interesting causal model of the PA process which incorporates "social, situational, affective and cognitive elements as they affect performance ratings, with particular emphasis on the role of subordinate influence behaviours." (ibid. p 101) This model proposes, building on previous research, that supervisor ratings of subordinates will be strongly influenced by supervisor affect/feeling towards them as persons and employees, and that this feeling has 4 main causal influences:

- spatial distance (and therefore frequency of interaction) between them

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- demographic similarity of the two individuals
- subordinate tactics/games of IM focused on the supervisor (ingratiation)
- subordinate tactics of IM focused on the job and performance/skill "appearances" (self-promotion).

The extent to which subordinates engaged in these latter types of IM and influence was assessed from the perspective of the supervisor.

This model was tested with a population of staff nurses and their supervisors in a US hospital (across 14 different departments), using questionnaires and the LISREL covariance method software. Summarizing rapidly, their findings show that supervisor-focused tactics led to higher levels of liking, and high performance grades, but that job-focused tactics had the reverse effect. They argue that

"…influence tactics are neither similarly perceived nor equally effective across situations, (and)… situational expectations and appropriateness are important considerations. The notion of "situated identities" refers to the social interaction pattern for that particular setting. Furthermore (it has been suggested that) people construct patterns of situationally appropriate behavior based upon their knowledge of these isolated identities." (ibid. p 123-4)

This seems to bring the contingencies of workplace identities and "sub-cultures" into the picture, which is crucial. However when the authors come to compare their findings with an earlier study of bank employees (Wayne and Ferris, 1990) this becomes unclear. In the study of bank subordinates the researchers found, using a similar method, that job-focused tactics/games were positively correlated with affect and high performance grades, in contrast to the study of nurses (where the link, as said, was negative). Their comment on this contrast is important. They say that

"These differences could be a function of the different occupational groups sampled in the two studies….Grabbing responsibility for positive events and self-enhancements simply may be less tolerated by supervisors in the nursing profession, whose roots trace to the example of the Good Samaritan." (ibid. p 125)

More needs to be said on this idea, because here the chance to go deeper into the relations between certain occupational realities and the incidence and type of subordinate influence games played (in PA processes) has been passed over. Two questions need to be posed. Firstly, it is found that nurses are not using self-promotion / enhancement but only ingratiation-type tactics, whereas bank employees are using both – at least according to supervisors. Does the reason lie in what the "roots" of a profession or occupation warrant as legitimate behaviour, as suggested? What does that actually mean? This issue demands the kind of fine-grained detail of nurses and bank employees actual jobs, and the different ways in which they deploy their skills, such as the sociology (and ethnography) of work provides, but which is absent from this research. It is not difficult to imagine radical differences in supervisor-
subordinate relations for the two types of job, differences linked to the different types of experienced stresses the job tasks involve, and linked to radically different notions of "performance" on the job (work "feedback" for the nurse and for the bank employee could not be more contrasted, for example). Indeed it seems important here to apply the idea of two quite different "work systems", using this concept to insist that job experiences (of the nurse, etc) should be understood as strongly conditioned by the dynamics of a minimum of four types of occupational and organizational elements – employees skills and qualities, job technologies, supervisor-employee relations, and HR systems (rewards in particular). Without such a vision nothing really systematic can be said about important work contingencies. Points like this have been made for some time by Sociologists of work – in examining the subjective meanings and contents of "skills" in particular job experiences, for example, and showing how they are different to - much richer than - formally recognized management conceptions (Darrah, 1994).

Secondly, to bring in the earlier research on raters (Villanova and Bernardin, 1991), might supervisors be manipulating ratings for their own purposes at the same time as nurses and bank workers manage impressions ? This clear possibility of interacting tactics muddies the waters of what factors produce the PA gradings in each case – strong subordinate influences via IM or supervisor desire to grade in a way that eases (for example) management difficulties. Perhaps both ? This issue could only be properly addressed by knowing more about the ways in which the PA systems, in both the hospital and the bank concerned, might provide both the means, and stimulate the motivation, for supervisors to distort ratings. But what is striking in the research on subordinate influence that I have discussed is precisely the fact that no details of the PA systems in the bank and hospitals concerned (performance criteria, PA frequency, grievance procedure, administrative processes, etc.) are actually discussed – the PA system seems here to be treated as a "black box", a given, instead of as a potentially important behaviour-structuring process.

This then is a plea for better understanding of the way occupational realities engender specific kinds of perceptions and expectations of supervisor-employee relations and, further, of the way these two interact with the detail of establishment-specific PA tools, procedures, norms and beliefs. Politics in performance appraisal has this set of processes for its stage and backcloth, and if "games" emerge around rating – whether of rater, ratee or both - then they cannot be understood outside of this context. This is not to say that tactics cannot be classified into types, as with Mintzberg's famous typology of 13 games (Mintzberg, 1983). But a "game" and its "rules" are profoundly interactionist and phenomenological, as Crozier and Friedberg (1979) have always insisted, in that their real organizational significance has to be reconstructed by giving a central place to the meanings attributed to actions, and to their reactions, by the different actors involved. These meanings are influenced, as I
have stressed above, by more or less stable collective beliefs and mental models, and they evolve through interaction itself.

This type of understanding – which is clearly at the same time both interactionist and structural - has already been developed in research, but not in the area of performance appraisal. It is in the social psychology of negotiation (Bazerman et al. 2000) and in the social psychology of protest (Klandermans, 1997) that, I believe, most progress has been made. For example, the "game of negotiation" is now being understood, as Bazerman et al. show in their review, by reference to "...how players define and create the game both psychologically and structurally" (ibid. p 286). This approach is building on work which focuses on a number of problem areas. Firstly, that of the interaction of the "mental models", or representations, of the parties, a model here being defined as

" ...a cognitive representation of the expected negotiation, a representation that encompasses understanding of the self, negotiator relationships, attributions about the other, and perceptions and knowledge of the bargaining structure and process. Mental models can be studied as individually held cognitive concepts or as shared definitions that develop interactively."

(Bazerman et al. p 287)

This latter development generates types of "collective scripts", the bases of a structure of roles and expectations by which parties accept to be minimally guided. While some emergent scripts embody reciprocity and openness, others express mistrust, distance and objectification.

This has important links with PA clearly, because as ethnographic work in Sociology shows "scripts" are indeed highly significant indicators of the "more or less shared" viewpoints of managers and employees about job performance which exist in the workplace. As regards appraisal two types of scripts emerge ; on the one hand through the constitution by actors – often through informal negotiation - of relatively stable and minimally shared expectations about acceptable "performance", about what appraisal is for and what functions it plays, and on the other hand through the constitution of manager-subordinate interpersonal judgements (Darrah, 1994). To use a social cognitivist terminology, on the one hand an organization over time institutionalises a script of a PA "event schema" and on the other hand managers and subordinates (and other parties if involved) interiorise elements of this latter alongside representations of everyday performance norms and of individual's qualities ("person schemas" - models which structure their judgements of each other (Fiske and Taylor, 1991)).

Secondly, there is the issue of how the communication media which become chosen for the channels of negotiation impact on schemas in "defining the game" and what is "appropriate behaviour". The influence of media richness on negotiation dyads and process outcomes, from face-to-face talk to audio, video and computer mediated methods, has been examined. This clearly has echoes with
performance appraisal in the sense that as formalization of PA increases, the place of the one-to-one traditional interview becomes modified, more heavily structured and contextualized. The use of small commissions begins the process of altering direct personal interactions and it is obvious that both forced ranking and multiple rater / 360° techniques generate further structuring of the PA judgement process: possible games of influence and interaction scripts are significantly affected by these types of formalization. While managers often introduce these formalisms to eliminate or diminish the play of social influence, as we have stressed – it being seen as leading to bias, rating distortion, etc – arguably PA influence processes are just displaced. This can be seen in the Harvard Business School case on the 360° system in the merchant bank Morgan Stanley (Burton, 1998); the data on the behaviour and performance of an individual "X" which the system furnishes, complex because coming from three hierarchical directions (four, if we include a self-evaluation), still has to be coordinated and synthesized by one overall rater who works with, and as usual depends on, X. In this synthesis the importance and significance of different pieces of data, and their "messages", remains subjectively assessed by this one rater, despite guidelines. He then interacts with a commission charged with comparative assessment of various manager PA recommendations. Politics is not eliminated here but changes in nature and scope, depending now on the evolution of the triadic relation between rater, ratee and commission, and of the mental models involved.

Thirdly there is the issue of the embedding of negotiations in different national cultural contexts, contexts which research has shown to favour or facilitate certain dominant mental models: for example how the individualism-collectivism bias of a culture conditions negotiators' representations of rights, rules and relationship integrity. However attempts to search, in a parallel manner, for the national cultural determinants of PA behaviours need to realize that, as Bazerman insists, value dimensions (like Hofstede's individualism-collectivism) lack predictive power – they are aggregated at a very high level and form only one dimension among others (local ones) which may have more significance for behavioural differences. As I have said elsewhere, it is quite impossible, for example, to deduce French managers behaviour with PA systems – or even their broad attitudes – from Hofstede's value dimensions in so far as they can "map" France culturally (Jenkins, 2000, p 128-9). These dimensions are mediated by many other systems of representation, individual, group and organizational. Nonetheless the idea that the cultural socialization of actors might influence in some way their dispositions to "play politics" in organizations and to accept conflict, and affect also the types of games likely to be considered legitimate, remains interesting. Vigoda's study of the contrasts between Israeli and British "reactions to organizational politics" explores some of the questions this issue raises but without really attacking the issue of the weight of the influences involved (Vigoda, 2001).
Conclusion.

This review of the "social context and politics of performance appraisal", while not pretending in any way to be exhaustive, has attempted to raise the essential questions that its analysis poses, to bring together a variety of literatures, and to point out some of their strengths and weaknesses. Emphasis was placed on two aspects of the overall area, each of which has generated a distinct literature; on the one hand, the "politics of diffusion and system change" and on the other "the politics of rating".

I have argued that the diffusion of PA system and paradigm changes owes its diversity to three main empirical tendencies, each of which has its own distinctive dynamics – worker individualization, public sector management reform and private sector "appraisal intensification". However behind that diversity lie commonalities in attempts to represent employee accountability, visibility and motivation. These attempts can be read as forming fragments of a management "ideology" which effaces and obscures crucial workplace and psychological differences. As empirical work on the three tendencies has shown, varied political reactions to the ideology have been expressed when established psychological contracts in organizations have been strained to breaking point by PA shifts and changes.

As regards the politics of rating, on which most time was spent, my efforts were directed at critically assessing the way both subordinate and supervisor influence "games" have been understood in the empirical literature. Highlighting psychological and sociological oversimplifications in that work, my argument focused on the necessity for this work to develop by taking more into account a series of interactionist issues in a similar manner to the social psychology of negotiation. Causal models of performance appraisal politics are at the moment too "linear" and need to integrate notions of mental models and scripts, notions which highlight the reciprocal determinations of actors perceptions, PA system details and precise workplace conditions. These latter relate in particular to shared or divergent expectations on "performance" and to the specifics of manager-employee relationships. Because understanding these conditions is vital, for this perspective the Sociology of work, and in particular detailed ethnographies of the workplace, constitute a major resource to be used: their insights, if carefully integrated, would be highly beneficial to the development of a richer view of performance appraisal.
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