

**The phenomenology of union decision-making:  
A new way to enquire into reality**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper inaugurates a discussion about the phenomenology of union decision-making. Phenomenology provides a new lens that may enable us to gain penetrating insights into how unions function in the fractious world of human resources management. The present paper is preliminary to any fieldwork that may be undertaken. Its main purposes are to identify theory that could be the foundation of further practical work, relate recent work in the phenomenology of management to union practices and to propose directions of enquiry. The relevant theory is that of Edmund Husserl who provides us with a practical method of enquiry into the real world of human resource practice. Husserl's work has already been applied in relation to local government functioning and some of the findings there appear relevant to the present enquiry. In particular, the nature and role of plebiscites – when seen with the phenomenological lens – challenges our ideas about the rationality of union decisions and how they affect union members and businesses.*

**Keywords:** unions, decision-making, business research methods, phenomenology

**INTRODUCTION**

Since its inception the trade union movement has involved democracy. The expression of power curbed by the vote of workers who all stand equal is a leading assertion by unions from their first days (Brown, 1986). As an alternative to the State, unions are often perceived as models of democracy. Plebiscites are complex events which are integral to the functioning of Western democracies. This paper argues that it would be worthwhile to understand more completely the effects of plebiscites – not in particular cases but in general. We are not the first to reach such a conclusion. Lyotard and Lefort, for example, have similar thoughts and their contributions are debated at length. We read as a challenge the statement that a “postmodern analysis of democracy reveals a provocative and compelling interpretation of its meaning that testifies to its uncertain and indeterminate character” (McKinlay, 1998, p. 481). Whilst the work of Lyotard and Lefort sometimes supports those who advocate for alternative form of democratic practice, there remains the need for a more fundamental, or grounding, account of what democracy is in and of itself. This we might say is urgent as attempts are made to promulgate democratic practices. For example, one popular author links democracy to human rights, workplace practices, religious tolerance, and human freedom writ large (Traub, 2008). Readers may recall that the United State incursion into Afghanistan was justified by some with reference to the desirability of democracy although it is said that ordinary people in that country knew little of democracy in any construct (Hill, 2010; Hussain, 2010; Rotberg, 2007).

What, you might ask, do we know of union practices as they relate to democracy. Recent research into union functioning abounds. To begin with, unions are often the most popular forms of indirect employee voice available to employees. Researchers from the USA (Jarley & Fiorito, 1991) found that if union activity focuses on aspects of job satisfaction such as career advancement, autonomy and interesting work, then the likelihood of organising success can be increased. The notion of union instrumentality and job dissatisfaction are among the prime reasons why employees elect to vote or express their intention to vote and provide unions the necessary legitimacy and certification to carry out their mandate (Deshpande & Fiorito, 1989; Thomas A. Kochan, 1979; McShane, 1986)

Despite a burgeoning literature on members' voting intention for union certification the findings are equivocal. Even before we consider the impact of the voting act to elect a union as a representative body, there are numerous inconsistencies in the interpretation of the measures of voter's beliefs. For example, despite job satisfaction and union beliefs being noted as strong predictors of voting intention, there are different interpretations and measures used (Thomas A. Kochan, 1979; McShane, 1986). The distinction with regard to union beliefs is twofold: union image (to do with leadership, style, self-interest, political affiliations) and union instrumentality (measures belief rather than attitude and includes aspects of a union's impact on wages and terms and conditions of employment of its members). Voting intentions have often been described at a general (in relation to unions at all workplaces) and specific (specific to a member's workplace) levels. Interestingly enough, survey data from the US suggests that three-fourths of non-union employees view unions as effective in negotiating their terms and conditions yet only a third would vote for their membership (T. A. Kochan, Katz, & McKersie, 1986). (T. A. Kochan, et al., 1986) explain that this disparity exists due to the perception and belief non-union employees hold about their ability to negotiate. More generally, the descriptive statistics from surveys suggest that there are specific and general beliefs about union voting behaviour. McHugh and Matthew (2002) found that in case of US pharmacists, union instrumentality and perceived threat to professionalism were key determinants of their intention to vote for union representation. Deshpande and Fiorito (1989) offer empirical evidence for determining this anomaly by explicating the differences between specificity of beliefs and behavioural intentions. They found that specific beliefs about intentions to vote are stronger predictors of a person's general beliefs. The general factors cover instrumentality beliefs and specific image beliefs of unions. More recent research (Martinez & Fiorito, 2009) found that union instrumentality has a limited impact on voting intention of members than general feelings about unionisation. The limited impact of union instrumentality may explain the declining membership and popularity of unions. They found that negative general feelings about the unions (for example, big role unions) and positive image of employers may have a negative impact on the members' intention to vote for unions despite their evaluating a high union instrumentality score.

Despite unions' certification and the legitimacy to act on behalf of their members, the quality of their decision-making does often does not reflect the rationale their members chose them for in the

first instance. Since the early 1980s, there are numerous accounts and speculations about the continued decline of unions, their memberships (Fiorito & Maranto, 1987) and performance. Further, increasing rate of decertification and declining union membership suggests there are some additional factors at play in employees voting decision for certification and decertification of unions (Bigoness & Tosi, 1984; Summers, Betton, & Decotiis, 1986). Martin (2008) found that while bargaining information is relevant in explaining ratification support, additional factors such as employer and union loyalty and providing detailed information about the contract are relevant to bargaining support. The quality of unions' decision-making is peppered with numerous adverse outcomes affecting the interests of its members. For example, Easterbrook (1983) found that workers had voted down concessions even when they were forced by the employer to close down the plant and become unemployed. Leonard (1992) found slower growth in employment in unionized plants. Analysing the impact of unions in British industries, Denny and Nickell (1992) found that even after keeping wages, product prices and productivity constant, the gross effect of unionisation on investment rate is 28% lower in firms that are unionised. Further, they state that "even if we take into account the effect of these factors, investment will still be 16% less in unionised firms. The impact of such high levels of under-investment is likely to adversely affect both the members and non-members. Similarly, Brunello (1992) found a negative impact of unionisation on profit, productivity and wages in Japanese organisations.

It is apparent from this brief review that decision-making by way of the plebiscite is ubiquitous and often contentious in the management of trade unions. It is timely that we seek to address the many issues that arise in the literature. Address the issues, that is, not directly with an existing research methodology of enquiry, but by seeking a new method of enquiry which is appropriate to our subject matter. That method, we advance is phenomenology, and it has the potential to provide a new lens for the study of union decision-making. We now turn to the theory of phenomenology as a first step towards its use in relation to union decision-making.

### **HUSSERL'S METHOD TO ACHIEVE INSIGHTS INTO THE REAL WORLD**

The word "phenomenology" – meaning "the science of the ways in which knowledge appears" – is found in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Mind* which was first published in 1807 (Hegel, 1931, p. 476, Vol. 2). The implications of Hegel's insights into the nature of knowledge were important when the Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) inaugurated a new method of enquiry into nature. The modern methodological sense of the word "phenomenology" is the legacy of Husserl's attempts to ground our knowledge of the world (including scientific knowledge and knowledge in business) in our lived experience, without in the process reducing the content of that knowledge to the contingent and subjective features of our experience. Phenomenology is a distinctive way of making sense of phenomena. Thus, at issue is the nature of phenomena and our human capacity to understand what comes to us through our own lived experience. Three cardinal and inevitably interwoven tenants of

phenomenology relate to how one begins to enquire into experience. They are: (1) attend to phenomena as they appear in themselves, which means (2) set aside the categories of things to which we normally attend (objects, things), and (3) seek out the structural invariant features of phenomena, which is to say in the language of phenomenology, essences.

Accordingly, Husserl suggests we must cease our habit of seeing business as the accumulation of buildings, strategy, budgets, employment positions, communications, and financial results. In his early work, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1931), he establishes a path of enquiry which is now influential in many diverse disciplines and practices such as nursing, psychiatry, religion, teaching, theatre, physics, biology, and indeed any categorization of lived human experience (Ihde & Zaner, 1977; van Manen, 1990; Zaner & Ihde, 1973).

### **The phenomenological reduction**

We seek to make operational Husserl's method of phenomenological seeing. We are to intuit business and management situations in a new way. How might we achieve a new comprehension of business and management? The short answer is by learning the skill that Husserl invents and practicing it when we are involved in business and management circumstances.

It requires practice to see situations in a new way – those who would enquire with the skills of the phenomenologist must both understand and practice pertinent techniques. Heidegger records his personal struggle to acquire the requisite skills – he calls it the achievement of “the phenomenological attitude” – learning from Husserl whose “teaching took place in the form of a step-by-step training in phenomenological ‘seeing’” (Heidegger, 2002, pp. 79, & p.78). Notwithstanding the challenge of learning techniques, management practitioners will be encouraged by phenomenology's concern with the practical world of the workplace. The notion that phenomenology enquires into lived day-by-day human experience is prominent in the work of Canadian theorist Max van Manen – “Phenomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize or reflect on it” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). This promises a way to address the complexity and flux of management that is the common experience of those emerged in events.

Researchers use Husserl's method of reduction, whereby the investigator must learn to eliminate whole categories of ideas from their experience (often called “bracketing” which accords with the notion of bracketing factors “out” of equations) to enquire into business phenomena. The word “reduction” derives from the compound “*re-ducere*” which means to lead back in to its origins. In classical Latin “*reductiōn-*, *reductiō*” is “the action of bringing back, action of drawing back”(Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). Husserl's technique is a skill that researchers must learn and apply in situations that take their interest. Each situation is unique to the experience of the researcher although the items/entities/thoughts/groups that a researcher may bracket are standard. Prime for business researchers is the need to bracket out all theories, be they about management, business, science, technology, or philosophy. Such bracketing is a step prior to that which most interested

Husserl. This is a special case of Husserl's *phenomenological reduction* (the *phenomenological Epoché*) which is about the absolute grounding of the human being.

A programme of work, which enquires into the essence of local government, uses Husserl's method of phenomenological reduction. The author enters into the practice of local government in the United States and the United Kingdom, and then in a reflection upon that experience seeks to remove all the categories of thought about local government and discern the irreducible essence that he cannot bracket away without losing the notion of local government (Shaw, 2003, 2007). Bracketed away are notions of citizenship and the Enlightenment ideals of democracy. The work focuses attention on the practice of decision-making through voting. Shaw then achieves insights of several kinds through a focus on that alleged essence. For example, it is apparent that the imperative for local government in practice is to dispatch decisions – there is no imperative to make correct or optimal decisions. This work then leads to a phenomenology of democracy (Shaw, 2009, 2011).

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT

Recent theorists of organisational behaviour indicate the scope of phenomenology in their discipline. They sometimes draw upon a distinction between subjectivism and objectivism and identify research methodologies or epistemologies that they claim are more appropriately for certain enquiries into management (Warner, 2001, p. 822, volume 3). Phenomenology is considered to be subjective, although this is not a view many from the discipline of phenomenology would support. We read of management research theories (as example of the theories about the social sciences more generally) that they range from one where:

*reality is perceived as a projection of human imagination, typified in phenomenology, to one where reality is perceived as a concrete structure, typified in behaviourism or social learning theory.* (Warner, 2001, p. 822, volume 3)

It is important to raise such epistemological matters in relation to management research. In the present article we approach management through a consideration of the phenomenological theorists that are available to us. Our topic of interest is union decision-making but we are going to approach it obliquely through a concern about phenomenological theory.

Looked at this way, there are three extant lines of enquiry into management (understood broadly) which derive from phenomenological research: they are represented in the present paper by the works of Searle, Shaw and Dreyfus. The first two are direct derivatives of Husserl and one of these trajectories of thought is considered in greater detail shortly. The work of Dreyfus is primarily an application of Heidegger.

John Searle maintains an active research programme which draws upon, and develops, several of Husserl's leading concepts (Searle, 1995, 2010). Prominent amongst them is the notion of intentionality (Searle, 1983). Husserl calls intentionality the fundamental property of consciousness

and the principle theme of phenomenology. In this work, Husserl draws upon Brentano's controversial thesis that only mental phenomena are intentional. As Husserl says in *Ideas I*:

*The hypothetical assumption of something real outside this [the mental] world is, of course, "logically" possible: obviously it involves no formal contradiction. But when we ask about the essential conditions on which its validity would be depend, about the mode of demonstration demanded by its sense, when we ask about the mode of demonstration taken universally essentially determined by the positing of something transcendent—no matter how we might legitimately universalize its essence—we recognize that something transcendent necessarily must be experienceable not merely by an Ego conceived as an empty logical possibility by any actual Ego as a demonstratable unity relative to its concatenations of experience. (Husserl, 1999, p. 81)*

Accordingly, the human mind is always "about" something which relates to the unity of the human being. Each and every something depends upon us. Searle's important advance on Husserl is capture in his phrase "collective intentionality". Whilst human beings are as Husserl maintains, they are also able to harmonise or unify their intentional states. Searle, rather convincingly, claims that to see the effect of collective intentionality you only have to observe birds flying in formation or wolves hunting as a pack. Collective intentionality is characteristic of consciousness and many conscious animals display this observable phenomenon. Union decision-making is thus to be understood as we would understand other collective behaviours.

### **DEMOCRACY IN UNIONS**

Insights into union decision-making may be achieved if we deploy Husserl's method, particularly the technique of the phenomenological reduction. This method has been of use in enquiries into the decision-making of local government entities. Studies have been conducted in the United States, England, Scotland, and New Zealand. The result of the phenomenological reflection has been insights into the centrality of voting and the actual effect of voting. The work has served to emphasise that rationality is not an essential part of decision-making in local government. The effect of the vote is to stop discussions and move the collective, the organisation, onwards. A plebiscite is in its essence a mechanical mechanism of decision-making. There is no necessary application of reasoning or even a need to attend to reasons. The circumstances of the vote are that those entitled to participate either raise a hand or in some other mechanical way record their decision on a specific motion. It is because the mechanism is mechanical in its essence that it works. It takes the community onwards in the sense of moving them from the current situation in time to another situation in time. There is no necessary requirement that the new situation be an improvement. Accordingly, it is important that we abandon our instincts that democracy generates good decisions, sound decisions or optimal decision. The decisions are not even necessarily compromise decisions. To see this, reflect on Shaw's findings regarding why people vote when they are on committees. The reasons when truly uncovered are not

the higher level expressions of decision which we may desire. Committee members often vote as their friends vote, or equally in opposition to others whom they oppose politically. It is common for individuals in political affiliations to vote as decided by others and without confidence in the decision they physically support. One can raise a hand to say “yes” and think “no” at the same time.

In the wide range of situations indicated above where democratic processes are used within unions we would expect many of the characteristics apparent in local government to be in evidence. The burden of the present paper is to urge that such research be undertaken.

There is an old adage that in a democracy special provisions must be made to protect the interests of minorities. This principle shows itself in many ways: in the New Zealand Parliament, for example, there are seats reserved for Māori.

### CONCLUSION

Empirical studies of union functioning routinely draw upon the quantitative methods of social science and thus seek to measure precisely defined objects. They specify their objects of enquiry in advance and then search for data that pertains to the objects defined (usually with simulative definitions). Thus, the researcher constructs a mirror image of one part of a complex, dynamic whole. The full complexity and dynamism of the situation is not captured by such methods.

There is potential for phenomenological enquires to provide us with access to the complexity and dynamism of union functioning. Already there are projects in research programmes in phenomenology which are relevant to this quest. Most prominent is the work of John Searle and Herbert Dreyfus. It has also been found that Husserl’s method is of use in enquires into business situations such as those of local government. The method of progressive phenomenological reductionism that Husserl inaugurates, and which is useful in several disciplines, may provide us with access to insights into unionism as it occurs. In management studies, particularly in enquires into local government, phenomenology indicates to us the importance of decision-making processes. Further, it enables us to discern the true nature of what occurs and how voting holds a crucial role in community advancement. Yet voting is not what it seems. There is a hidden power within voting that challenges our conception of democracy. We find these insights to be relevant to the situation of unions. If democracy in union practices plays the same role as it does in local government practices this is an important finding, which may enable us to re-conceive unionism. Unions will appear less as historical institutions designed to pursue Marxist ideals and more as natural community processes that by their nature are inclined to resolve issues. The “mere” resolution of issues is, however, the imperative – and not inspirational and optimal decision-making.

This paper seeks to stimulate research in phenomenology in relation to decision-making, and its leading example is union decision-making. There is an opportunity for business researchers to pioneer new methods and, we would hope, generate new insights into the human activities which have a critical importance in the lives of many people.



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