

WHAT ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES ARE *NOT*:

THE PROBLEMS OF EXPERIENCE

Teppo Felin, Ph.D.
Organizational Leadership and Strategy
Marriott School of Management
Brigham Young University
Provo, UT 84602
phone: (801) 422-3478
fax: (801) 422-0539
email: teppo.felin@byu.edu

ABSTRACT

There is general agreement that *experience* is the key antecedent to organizational learning and capabilities. In this article, we identify and discuss five theoretical problems associated with specifying experience as the antecedent to organizational capabilities, namely – (1) the problem of creativity and *new* knowledge, (2) the problem of extremes, (3) the problem of origins and causation, (4) the problem of intentionality, and (5) the problem of the environment. Specifically, we explicate the theoretical mechanisms and associated input (experience or stimulus)-output (organizational learning) relations of extant experiential models and show them to be underdetermined, with experience only as a proximate, rather than ultimate, causal antecedent to organizational learning. The problems discussed here relate, in part, to the epistemological debate between behavioral and rationalist approaches to knowledge, with extant organization theory taking strikingly strong sides with the former, behavioral tradition. In short, we argue that behavioral learning theory cannot answer the critical question: *What are the origins of heterogeneous experience?* We also develop a preliminary conceptual model of new knowledge creation (and the origins of organizational learning), which incorporates and links with the external, experiential environment – specifically its more limited triggering (though not causal) role in organizational learning. We introduce the notion of poverty of stimulus and contrast it with bounded rationality. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our theoretical arguments for organization theory.

KEY WORDS: *Organizational learning and capabilities, experience, behaviorism and rationalism, and epistemology*