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## Article

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Thomas Diefenbach, Rune Todnem By, Patricia Klarner\*

## **A Multi-dimensional Analysis of Managers' Power – Functional, Socio-political, Interpretive-discursive, and Socio-cultural Approaches\*\***

Managers' power within organisations has been analysed by several approaches: Orthodox management and organisation studies (*functional approach*), Critical Management Studies (*socio-political approaches*), interpretive, discourse-oriented and constructivist concepts (*interpretive-discursive approaches*), and anthropological, socio-psychological and sociological approaches (*socio-cultural approaches*). In organisational reality functional, socio-political, interpretive-discursive, and socio-cultural aspects are closely related and intertwined. However, because of division of intellectual labour, probably more because of different worldviews, researchers often make use of these approaches quite selectively. Such focussing has its advantages but also weaknesses. This paper therefore argues that it often helps to investigate complex phenomena such as managers' power in multi-dimensional ways.

Key words: **power, managers, management studies, organisation**

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## 1. Introduction

One of the constitutional principles of hierarchical organisations, perhaps of any social system, is *power*. Power forces people to do certain things in a particular way (or not to do certain things), it empowers and controls people and it is power which keeps many social institutions, structures and processes going. Since Lukes' 1974 radical view on power at the latest we know that power is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. However, because of a division of intellectual labour within academe as well as other reasons such as different worldviews, several approaches have been developed in order to interrogate the problem of (managerial) power. Managers' power within organisations has been analysed, explained and justified within several, quite different approaches:

*'Orthodox management and organisation studies'* (e.g. Donaldson 2003; Zaleznik 1989; Blau 1970; Lawrence/Lorsch 1967; Chandler 1962; Drucker 1954; Fayol 1949; Taylor 1911/1967). This approach claims to cope solely with the functional and technical aspects of organisations and management; it is predominantly about managers' tasks and responsibilities, strategic decision-making, structures and processes – all described and analysed in functional, (allegedly) value-free and objective ways with little mentioning of power at all.

*'Critical Management Studies'*, in contrast, concentrate explicitly on the identification, critique, and change of (dominant) ideologies, managerial power and oppressive social structures (e.g. Diefenbach 2009, 2007; Clegg et al. 2006; Brookfield 2005; Willmott 2003; Walsh/Weber 2002; Courpasson 2000; Willmott 1997; Alvesson/Willmott 1992a, 1992b; Pettigrew 1992; Willmott 1987; Hamilton 1987; Mintzberg 1985; Knights/Willmott 1985; Therborn 1980; Abercrombie et al. 1980; Burns 1961). It is about revealing interests behind systems of power and control, political behaviour (particularly of powerful actors), and to demonstrate that management overall is anything else but value-free and neutral (By et al. 2008).

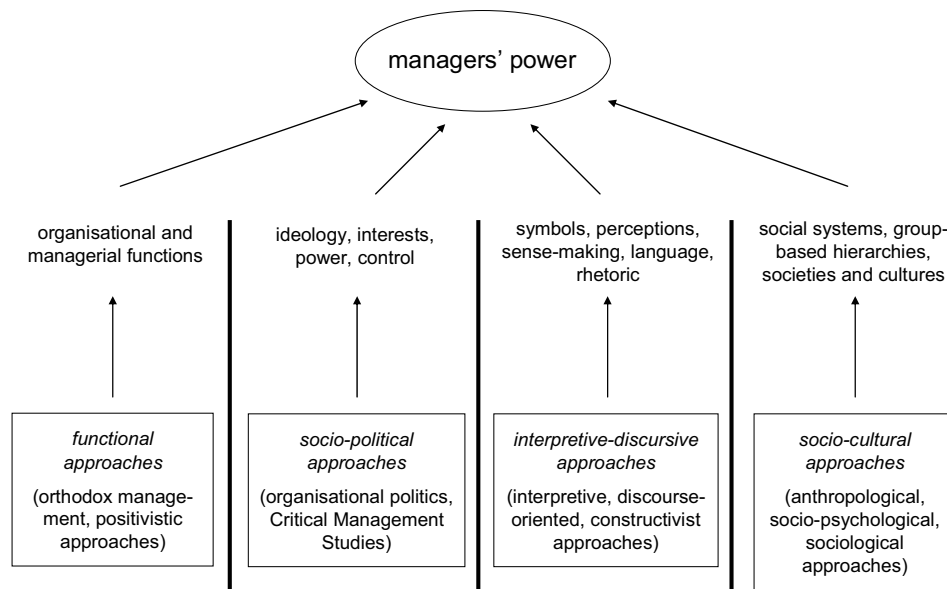
*'Interpretive, discourse-oriented and constructivist concepts'* cope with, and analyse symbols, language, narratives, texts, interpretations, sense-making, discourses, and story-telling (e.g. Sillince 2007, 1999; Vickers/Kouzman 2001; Alvesson/Kärreman 2000; Isabella 1990; Daft/Weick 1984; Berger/Luckmann 1966). Social reality (and, hence, phenomena such as managers' power) is largely seen as socially constructed and shaped by human perceptions and knowledge, discourses and rhetoric.

*'Anthropological, socio-psychological and sociological approaches'* (e.g. O'Brien/Crandall 2005; Sidanius et al. 2004; Sidanius/Pratto 1999; Scott 1990; Ashforth/Mael 1989; Giddens 1976, 1984; Foucault 1972, 1977) focus more on social relationships, human agency and institutions which can be identified in different (stratified) social systems and might occur in same, similar or different forms in different cultures.

Because of their prime foci one might call these four distinct approaches *'functional'*, *'socio-political'*, *'interpretative-discursive'*, and *'socio-cultural'*. The differentiation into those four approaches is not meant as a categorial system, i.e. a logically consistent and complete system. Since these approaches comprise many theories or models which have emerged over time, it can be better understood as a heuristic taxonomy which can help to cluster concepts in diverse fields. The following figure visualises

those four approaches and where each of them lays stress when it is used as a lens to look at managers' power within organisations.

**Figure 1: Different approaches towards managers' power.**



Despite their limits and weaknesses, all these approaches have contributed quite considerably to our understanding of a social phenomenon such as managers' power. However, researchers often make use only of a few concepts stemming from one or two of these approaches in order to interrogate (managers') power. Such focussing has got its advantages but at the same time weaknesses. For example, in the reality of organisations functional, political, discursive, and societal aspects are often very closely related and intertwined. When one wants to understand certain, very specific aspects of complex phenomena it helps, is almost paramount to use a very specific approach, if not to say theory. However, when it is about to gain an understanding of, and to analyse comprehensively complex phenomena such as managers' power, such focused approaches fall short to produce sufficient results. One is then reminded of the old Indian tale 'The blind men and the elephant' where these men, as researchers, only came up with a very partial understanding of the phenomenon they had investigated because each of them only touched a certain part of the elephant (cf. Westerlund/Sjöstrand 1979).

This paper, therefore, argues that using several approaches at the same within a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary framework (and having an open discussion about and between the approaches) is often more appropriate and produces more insights when one wants to investigate complex phenomena such as managers' power – or elephants.

In order to demonstrate this, the paper will first very briefly address key definitions of power, followed by more detailed descriptions of the four approaches. In the

third sections the approaches will be then applied to an organisational problem and it will be interrogated how managerial power is defined, analysed, explained and justified based on these approaches. Finally, the case will be made for a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach.

## **2. Managers' power – and how differently it is being analysed**

### ***2.1 General definitions of power and managers' power***

According to Max Weber's famous definition power means 'any ability to impose one's own will in a social relationship, even against opposition, regardless of what this ability is based on.' (Weber 1921/1980: 28, own translation). The 'ability to impose one's own will' is largely interpreted as the ability to control the actions and non-actions of others. In this sense, power is regarded as a relational construct. The so-called 'standard theory' of power (Turner 2005: 2), therefore, sees power primarily as a constitutive part of social relations (e.g. Spierenburg 2004: 627; Zeitlin 1974: 1090).

Although this understanding still constitutes the core of theories of power, multi-dimensional concepts have been developed (Diefenbach 2009; Clegg et al. 2006). In his widely referred to conceptual analysis of power, Lukes (1974: 11-25) has linked three different dimensions of power: one-dimensional view (behavioural, i.e. one person's power over another person), two-dimensional view (institutional, i.e. a person or group of people has managed to get their values and beliefs as the prevailing ones of a social system), and three-dimensional view (hegemonic, i.e. even lower ranked groups think that the prevailing norms and values reflect their interests). In a recently published comprehensive edition, Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips (2006) provide an even richer picture of very different dimensions of power within organisations. It is not only understood that managers "*have*" the power in organisations (Akella 2003; Burawoy 1982; Burnham 1941) and 'enjoy a monopoly over processes of decision-making' (Thomas 1998). In addition, managers are also *institutionally* empowered (Willmott 1984: 350) because of their embeddedness in hierarchical structures of organisational, social and economic relations which establish and support the legitimacy of their roles and positions (Finkelstein 1992: 508; Willmott 1987: 253) – if not to say the very idea of 'being a manager' (Akella 2003; Courpasson 2000; Casey 1999; Rosen 1984). Nonetheless, the question how managers' powerful positions and power should be analysed, explained, justified or criticised has triggered several responses.

### ***2.2 The functional approach for obfuscating managers' power***

Orthodox management and organisation studies have been developed in the tradition of positivism with Taylor's 'Scientific Management' (1911/1967) as one of its most famous early concepts. Proponents of this approach are of the opinion that their "explanations" of organisations provide a realistic picture and are "value-free" (e.g. Donaldson 2003: 42). In this sense, organisations are portrayed as almost 'power-free', rationally designed enterprises, functioning smoothly because of thought-through policies and procedures, structures and processes. Managers' positions and prerogatives as well as the whole hierarchical structure are justified in a functional way. Managers are given official responsibility for ensuring that the tasks undertaken in the organisation's name are done in a way which enables the organisation to continue into

the future. In this sense, managers allegedly are primarily concerned with organisational problems seen from a functional perspective, in particular: 1) to increase profitability and shareholder-value, 2) to outperform market criteria (such as competitiveness, customer satisfaction, or risk reduction), 3) to increase economic efficiency, cost-effectiveness, cost-benefit, and value-for-money, 4) to achieve improvement in functional rationality, technological efficiency, and productivity/quality, flexibility, and speed of technical processes, 5) to make managerial decisions as efficient as possible, 6) to ensure the smooth functioning staff, and 7) to neglect all other concerns (Kirkpatrick et al. 2005: 41, 74, 167; Haque 1999: 469; Hoggett 1996: 14; Abrahamson 1996: 262; Pollitt 1990: 60).

According to contingency theory (Lawrence/Lorsch 1967), and the theory of structural differentiation (Blau 1970), managers adapt organisations to their environments in the best way possible. Managers *must*, and will decide for the most effective option (Donaldson 2003: 46). Because of ‘quasi-natural objective forces’ (such as ‘the market’, ‘the environment’ or ‘technological imperatives’), managers do not really have a choice (Willmott 1984: 355). In this sense, managers do not have (much) power, only ‘the system’. ‘In its pure form management mystique is a denial of personal influence. At every level of the hierarchy power is impersonal. Thought and action are directed by some structure, system, or procedure, not an individual’ (Zaleznik 1989: 229).

On the other hand, however, managers, particular senior managers, are often portrayed as *powerful leaders* (e.g. Kanter 1989) who shape entire organisations and even whole industries at their will. According to leadership theory, managers are powerful (almost without limits) because of this special combination of hierarchical position (and responsibilities, influence and resources that come with such positions), personal skills, experience and ingenuity (e.g. Braynion 2004: 450; Finkelstein 1992: 508). In the spirit of Zaleznik’s 1989 ‘The Managerial Mystique – Restoring Leadership in Business’ managers’ power is only mentioned in a sense of awe and mystery.

Obviously, there is a strange, and fundamental, inconsistency within this approach; managers’ power is negated because of environmental/functional imperatives and managers’ power is elevated beyond any normality at the same time. However, both functional denial and mystical elevation of managerial power lead to the same result; managers’ power, in fact, is largely “defined out of functional analysis”. Despite (or perhaps because of) their inconsistencies orthodox management and organisation studies are more about avoiding than addressing the issues of managerial power.

### **2.3 Socio-political approaches for criticising managers’ power**

In sharp contrast to functional approaches, Critical Management Studies assumes that ‘references to functional imperatives’ (Willmott 1987: 254) cannot adequately explain organisations and management. In the tradition of organisational behaviour (Mintzberg 1979; Cyert/March 1963; March/Simon 1958) corporations, thus, are being regarded as ‘political organisations’ (Burns 1961: 258). From a critical perspective, organisations and management are seen to a large extent as the products of (clashing) values and beliefs, ideology and (open or hidden) ‘ideological conflict’ (Burns 1961: 275). Superiors’ and subordinates’ views, perceptions, actions and attitudes are largely

shaped by a set of 'ideas and values that reflects and supports the established order and that manifests itself in our everyday actions, decisions, and practices, ...' (Brookfield 2005: 67) – i.e. ideology, particularly by 'dominant ideology' (Abercrombie et al. 1980: 1-2).

In this sense, phenomena such as the power and dominance of managers are more seen within the context of social conflict. Managers' power reflects and extends societal inequalities, injustices and clashes between individuals and social groups, if not classes. The whole idea of hierarchical management is 'a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures ('rules of the game') that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others. Those who benefit are placed in a preferred position to defend and promote their vested interests. More often than not, the 'status quo defenders' are a minority or elite group within the population in question.' (Bachrach/Baratz 1970, cited in: Lukes 1974: 16).

Critical Management Studies, therefore, wants to examine organisations and management critically (Alvesson/Willmott 1992a: 8). It does not only want to reveal managerial power and control, but the ideologies which cover-up these oppressive mechanisms and the (individual and group) interests behind both the factual injustice and cover-up; critical thinking 'focuses on what's wrong with what currently exists, on illuminating omissions, distortions, and falsities in current thinking.' (Brookfield 2005: 207). It is about identifying and debating the motivations behind managerial decisions (e.g. is organisational change implemented for the 'right' or 'wrong' reasons?, By et al. 2008), and consequently changing ineffective, outdated, unfair and oppressive management practices, organisational structures and processes (e.g. Fournier/Grey 2000: 16). The ultimate idea is to overcome managerial power, exploitation and injustice and to establish better and more just organisations.

#### ***2.4 Interpretive-discursive approaches for re-constructing managers' power***

After the 'linguistic turn' (e.g. Alvesson/Kärreman 2000) social reality is largely seen as socially constructed (Berger/Luckmann 1966). According to this view, social phenomena such as organisations or managers' power are shaped to a great extent by human perceptions and interpretations, discourses and rhetoric (e.g. Sillince 2007, 2006, 1999; Giddens 1976, 1984; Foucault 1972, 1977). Such approaches cope primarily with, and analyse symbols, language, narratives, texts, interpretations, sense-making, discourses, and story-telling.

It is not possible to talk about 'a' interpretive-discursive approach towards organisations and management since there is 'theoretical fragmentation' in the field and 'a bewildering array of work only connected by the term 'discourse analysis' (Clegg et al. 2006: 292). However, in the most general sense organisational discourse analysis might be described with Clegg et al. (2006: 308) as 'the systematic study of the discourses and discursive practices that constitute organizations.' Organisations are seen as 'collections of people trying to make sense of what is happening around them' (Weick 2001: 5).

Interpretive-discursive approaches, hence, concentrate on managers' perceptions and sensemaking (e.g. Balogun/Johnson 2004: 524-525; Walsh 1995; Hambrick/

Mason 1984: 195), i.e. how they see and perceive their organisation, its environment, business and internal affairs. For this, symbols and rhetoric play important roles. Every hierarchical social system comes with, and is based on elaborated systems of symbols indicating social status, responsibilities, and, most importantly, differences. These systems develop over time so that they often reach ‘an almost pathological intensity’ (Thompson 1961: 496). Nonetheless, these systems of symbols, discourses and rhetoric create and shape not only the social interpretation and construction of reality but also social action, practices, and social institutions (Giddens 1984; Berger/Luckmann 1966).

Seen from a discourse analysis and interpretative perspective, managers’ power is largely seen as based on, and within systems of symbols, rhetoric, discourses, and communication of people within unequal hierarchical relationships. As Clegg et al. (2006: 300) explained: ‘Foucault’s perspective emphasizes the fact that an actor is powerful only within a particular discursive context as it is discourse that creates the categories of power within which actors act.’

The discursive interplay between action and structure takes on dialectical forms. For example, Tourish/Robson (2006) investigated communication processes within hierarchical organisations, particularly critical upward communication between superior(s) and subordinate(s). They revealed that communication is mainly top-down and that because of power imbalances subordinates largely opt for articulating supporting than dissenting voice – which is in turn reinforced, encouraged, and rewarded by superiors/managers whereas dissenting voices are being penalised. Managers often create communication systems and social structures which ensure that only certain information is brought to their attention. Managers’ perceptions, therefore, are distorted by this biased feedback (or they ignore warnings); they get more re-assuring feedback and the false impression that their views are more widely shared than it is actually the case. Dissent, then, is even more seen as something which has to be overcome, i.e. more hierarchical means of dominance and oppression are being introduced. Overall, a self-stabilising feedback-loop, if not to say vicious circle of symbols of power and distorted discourses which lead to further cementation of the hierarchical social order.

In this sense, discourse analysis and the interpretative perspective also attempts to reveal ideology, i.e. collectively held norms, values and beliefs which provide explanations and justifications of the natural and social world, the individual and its positions within social structures (Hamilton 1987: 38). However, interpretative and discourse-oriented approaches only analyse social phenomena (critically), but they do not, as socio-political approaches do, criticise social phenomena fundamentally and against categories such as class struggle, ideology, hegemony, social domination and exploitation and a search for ‘better’ alternatives.

## ***2.5 Socio-cultural approaches for explaining managers’ power***

Socio-cultural approaches (anthropological, socio-psychological and sociological) cope with all social systems and human agency in every societal respect and cultural context. In this sense, managers’ power is just another example for the dialectical relationship between individuals, or a group of individuals, and institutions (Giddens 1984, 1976), in this case managers and organisational structures and processes.



Such approaches also share the understanding that (almost all) human societies, social systems and organisations have been structured as group-based social hierarchies (e.g. Courpasson/Clegg 2006; Sidanius/Pratto 1999; Scott 1990; Mousnier 1973; Laumann et al. 1971). One way or another, most social systems are based on relationships of superiors and subordinates, master and servant, manager and employee – at least, so far. According to Sidanius/Pratto (1999: 31), Social Dominance Theory (and system justification theory, Jost/Hunyady 2005; Huddy 2004) ‘begins with the basic observation that all human societies tend to be structured as systems of group-based social hierarchies. At the very minimum, this hierarchical social structure consists of one or a small number of dominant and hegemonic groups at the top and one or a number of subordinate groups at the bottom. Among other things, the dominant group is characterized by its possession of a disproportionately large share of positive social value, or all those material and symbolic things for which people strive.’ There seems to be the same or similar psychological, social, cultural and institutional forces at work in almost every cultural and historical context mutually reinforcing each other towards the persistency of hierarchically organised social order (Sidanius/Pratto 1999: 304).

In this sense, managers' power is based on the same principles and continues according to the same mechanisms like other group-based dominance (e.g. priests, knights or capitalists). It is grounded primarily in established hierarchical relationships and unequal allocations of prerogatives and responsibilities which come with positions higher up the hierarchy. Within this framework of institutionalised social order and group-based dominance, managers' power is justified by ideology and corresponding behaviour of the actors involved, managers and employees alike. Ideology secures ‘the participation of subordinate classes in exploitative relations of production.’ (Stoddart 2007: 196; similarly Scott 1990: 74). Subordinates', i.e. employees', lower and middle managers' behaviour is mainly about fitting into this unequal hierarchical relationship. Managers' power in contemporary organisations and societies is largely hegemonic, i.e. employees have internalised managerial ideology to such an extent that they are ‘motivated to justify and rationalize the way things are, so that existing social, economic, and political arrangements tend to be perceived as fair and legitimate.’ (Jost/Hunyady 2005: 260). The way organisations are designed and managers' power works meets even employees' genuine psychological, or ideologically created, needs of uncertainty avoidance, intolerance of ambiguity; order, structure, and closure (Jost/Hunyady 2005: 261).

The socio-cultural approach, hence, tries to reveal not only how unequal distribution of social power, privileges and prerogatives in group-based social hierarchies happens but why and how it is so widespread and so persistent. In contrast to socio-political approaches, socio-cultural approaches primarily try not so much to criticise and to change, but to understand and to explain social phenomena on anthropological, socio-psychological and sociological grounds.

### **3. The centralisation of marketing – an example seen from different perspectives**

As explained in the introduction, the core thesis of this paper is that multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approaches are often more appropriate in order to investigate social

phenomena such as managers' power. This shall be demonstrated with the help of a little example digested from a managerial change initiative which happened between 2003 and 2004 (drawn from Diefenbach 2005):

A very large European higher education institution got a new Vice-Chancellor in 2002. She almost immediately initiated major strategic changes which were intended to make this organisation 'much more "business-like"'. Amongst the typical 'New Public Management-tools' were suggestions for internal re-structuring – particularly the centralisation of a larger function, marketing. Before this, most business units (faculties) had their own marketing department. The new strategy suggested to create a single central Marketing Unit responsible for all marketing activities throughout the whole university.

In the following we will see how the different approaches introduced above makes sense of this event with regard to managers' power.

### 3.1 Functional dimensions

Most senior managers supported the new Vice-Chancellor. Moreover, all proponents of the new change initiative were active ambassadors of the new type of managerial thinking which has conquered public sector organisations since the 1980ies all over the world, managerialism or New Public Management. Against this backdrop, they particularly interpreted and communicated, explained and defended the functional aspect of the centralisation of marketing. It was claimed that the centralisation would lead to gains in efficiency, elimination of duplicate work, economies-of-scale, standardisation, increased productivity, a stronger brand image, and cost savings. The organisational changes coming along with the centralisation of marketing (e.g. re-allocation of resources, financial contributions to the centre, support of faculties' initiatives, more centralised decision-making processes and at the same time a strengthening of the principle of subsidiarity with regard to operational matters) were equally analysed and explained within the logic of the functional approach.

The whole initiative was also justified and explained by references to changes in the external environment. In the face of an allegedly increased pressure and competition, a much more challenging business environment, proponents of the change initiative argued that the decision for the new strategy was not a choice (or *their* choice!) *but an unavoidable necessity*. The organisation *had* to adapt to changes and had to implement those latest managerial concepts. This line of argumentation reflected the idea of *isomorphism*, i.e. the fit of a system to the institutional rules of its environment which provide legitimacy (e.g. Suddaby/Greenwood 2005; Staw/Epstein 2000; DiMaggio/ Powell 1983). As Coopey/Burgoyne (2000: 873) have explained: 'To achieve legitimacy an organization needs to mirror the institutional patterning generated in the environment, often in a variety of social fields. These effects result not only from direct control mechanisms (e.g. as exercised by central government) but also through constitutive processes created by environmental meaning systems.' In line with this view, the centralisation of management fitted to management concepts which were en vogue at that time. Managerial fads and fashions (Abrahamson 1996) can be seen as forces for conformity, i.e. what Carson et al. 1999 called 'herd behaviour' or 'bandwagon-effect'. 'Jumping on the bandwagon, even at the later stages of a management fad, may be perceived as a form of innovation when it is contrasted

perceived as a form of innovation when it is contrasted with the more passive act of ignoring industry trends or the more active stance of rejecting them altogether.' (Staw/Epstein 2000: 528).

It is difficult to say whether or not those managers really believed their own claims – but they obviously followed the functional approach textbook-like; even they as managers did *not once* talk about managers' power or at least referred to it indirectly. Like for functionalistic researchers, power is officially simply not on the agenda.

### 3.2 Socio-political dimensions

Critical researchers would not spare much time on analysing by how many percentages efficiency would be increased or costs reduced through the centralisation of marketing. For them, such an event is mainly to be seen as part of power struggles between (managerial) elites within the organisation.

One can imagine that the idea to centralise marketing was anything else but unanimously welcomed. Quite a few senior managers strongly opposed this idea. Not surprisingly, the project, indeed, soon turned into a political issue – particularly between 'centre' (senior management around the VC) and 'periphery' (Deans of faculties). Senior managers in the centre knew that lower managers would 'fight' for their areas of responsibility and, hence, would oppose the idea of centralisation. At the same time, Deans knew that senior management's idea of a centralisation of marketing was actually a strive for centralisation of power and more centralised control over key strategic issues, policies and crucial functions. Both positions had their merits; the nature of social positions and responsibilities within hierarchical organisations and control over resources create almost automatically the tendency that role holders are keen to accumulate more and more power, responsibilities, and empire-building. In hierarchical organisations it is usually 'the centre' where most power sits. Hellawell/Hancock gave quite a telling description of such a 'power culture' (2001: 192, the citation in the citation stems from Handy 1976): "This culture depends on a central power source, with rays of power and influence spreading out from that central figure. They are connected by functional or specialist strings but the power rings are the centres of activity and influence.' ... The spider at the centre of the web of a power culture (...) is often keen not to 'micro-manage' so that the subordinates are allowed to have considerable degrees of autonomy. But the spider retains central control of the key threads (usually financial), which link the outer and inner circles of the web."

Power is like a magnet; power attracts more power. In this sense, most managerial strategies and change initiatives – which are being initiated by senior management – contribute to a further concentration and centralisation of power (Courpasson 2000: 157). Decentralisation happens mainly concerning operational issues and responsibilities (Courpasson 2000: 155; Hoggett 1996: 9, 18; Zaleznik 1989: 95). It is therefore the constant battle between the centre and periphery, which converts organisational change programmes soon into political issues (By et al. 2008; Diefenbach 2007, 2005).

This becomes even clearer when one looks at what (or who) is behind such claims. For example, both the new change initiative and centralisation of marketing were based on the implicit (functional) assumption that these fall within the responsi-

bility of senior management. Such an understanding underlines the ideology of leadership – especially *hierarchical* leadership (Kerr/Jermier 1978: 375). According to this position, management, and only management, can provide, generate and apply the knowledge which is allegedly so desperately needed to run our organisations, business, even the whole economy and society. It is the leaders, and only the leaders, who see the wider picture, have the knowledge and abilities, and therefore know what is best for all of us (e.g. Stewart/Kringas, 2003: 676; Samra-Fredericks 2000: 249); the destiny of the organisation is in their power. The centralisation of marketing, hence, can be seen as part of an ideology of management which defines and justifies particularly managers' positions and responsibilities within organisational hierarchy, and it guarantees and secures their privileges, authority and power (Whittington 1992: 708). It is about the justification of managers' prerogatives concerning decision-making, budget and resource responsibilities, their tasks of leading and controlling and how social systems such as organisations should be run and organised accordingly (e.g. Chiapello/Fairclough 2002: 186; Schwenk 1988: 179).

### 3.3 *Interpretive-discursive dimensions*

The change initiative was accompanied by a lot of rhetoric highlighting its advantages and justifying its existence. For example, Walsh (1995: 290; similar Humphrey 2005: 229) draws the attention to the fact 'that the struggle for power in an organization is often a struggle to impose and legitimate a self-serving construction of meaning for others.' Concerning the centralisation of marketing managers on both sides wanted to get 'their' version through, their interpretation of how the outside world "is" and what the organisation should be doing. Rhetoric about (increased) 'efficiency' and 'productivity', 'market- and customer-orientation', and 'leadership' – as well as rhetoric about 'flexibility', 'decentralisation', 'subsidiarity', and 'empowerment' were meant to not only set the agenda, types and legitimacy of discourses but to constitute the social reality of the organisation. 'Justifications' of the "need" to either centralise marketing or keep it in the operational units became more and more rhetorical, discourses about and within the whole strategic change initiative turned more and more into strategic argumentation in order to 'win the war over words'.

In this sense, the language of management can be seen as a new, quite sophisticated form of 'panoptic power' since it not only aims at controlling organisational reality but it attempts to define it according to managers' views. Organisational change is a socially constructed reality with negotiated meaning as outcomes of power relationships and struggles for supremacy; 'whoever is in a position of power is able to create knowledge supporting that power relationship.' (Brookfield 2005: 137). Like other ruling elites, managers are therefore keen to shape and control the discourses and rhetoric since this has implications for their power, i.e. their social roles and responsibilities, their positions and influence, interests and privileges. For example, Levy et al. (2001: 9) explained that 'strategy talk is not innocent. It is a powerful rhetorical device. It frames issues in particular ways and augments instrumental reason; it bestows expertise and rewards upon those who are 'strategists'; and its military connotations reinforces a patriarchal orientation to the organization of work. In doing so, strategy demonstrates managerial rationality and legitimizes the exercise of power.'

In this sense, the whole process of the centralisation of marketing was described as an initiative of the Vice-Chancellor, as a 'pro-active' approach which demonstrates true and inspired leadership. Most of the usual rhetoric of leadership, which can be found in any airport bookstall management guide, was used. Often, even business leaders are being described in almost religious modes, as 'inexplicable mysteries and wonders in a sea of the very mundane, of rational laws and order of daily business' (Friedman et al. 2005: 26). And they explained further (ibid.): 'From the spiritual perspective, order, causal explanation, and instrumental concerns are not an end but rather a starting point from which to engage and experience deeper mysteries. The desired state of affairs for a spiritual consciousness is awe and wonder.' According to Fournier/Grey (2000: 12) 'the manager has been depicted as a mythical figure requiring a rare blend of charismatic flair which cannot be routinized and codified in rules transferred through scientific training. This aura of mystification and glory with which managers (of the right kind) have been sanctified by the popular literature has served to increase the potential power and status of management ...'. It is both a conscious and unconscious mystification of people higher up organisational or societal hierarchies and class-systems simply because they are higher up the hierarchy – there is no other reason. 'Incumbents of high office are held in awe because they are in touch with the mysteries and magic of such office; ... Since one knows less and less about the activities of superordinates the farther away on the hierarchy they are, the more the awe in which he holds them and consequently the greater their prestige or status.' (Thompson 1961: 493). The centralisation of marketing, and how it was portrayed by its proponents, demonstrated 'true leadership'; this was the core argument – and most rhetoric at meetings, in internal newsletters or e-mails explicitly or implicitly orbited around this theme.

### ***3.4 Socio-cultural dimensions***

From a socio-cultural perspective the re-configuration of hierarchical power-relationships via the centralisation of marketing is nothing exceptional. The battle between 'centre' and 'periphery' is quite typical for hierarchical groups and organisations as well as for whole stratified societies. In hierarchically structured social systems privileges and prerogatives, rights and duties are either formally ascribed to roles or come along with roles informally, for example: to define and identify problems, set the agenda and objectives, to make decisions and/or influence decision-making processes, communicate, evaluate and appraise performance, to promote, reward and sanction (Braynion 2004: 449; Jost/Elsbach 2001: 182; Jacques 1996: 120) – as well as material and immaterial advantages.

The issue of centralising marketing was for a period of time the central mechanism to re-establish social positions of dominance and subordination, to re-allocate power and influence and to decide which group would come out of this battle as the prevailing one. Meetings and reports reminded more of archaic rituals where powerful groups brought forward their claims for leadership and supremacy. Through this process and its outcomes, roles and social positions of superiors and subordinates would be redefined as well as power-relations institutionalised (Thompson 1961: 486).

In every group and society those functions are carried out by the centre/by people with the highest status who are deemed to be the most important ones at a certain time. The centralisation of marketing reflected the very self-image of senior management that they are responsible for the 'important' functions – and only they. With initiating a 'strategic' discourse about the importance of the centralisation of marketing, senior management demonstrated not only its hierarchically defined right to set the agenda; it wanted to reiterate its dominance as a group for the whole organisation. The Deans, on the other hand, wanted to underline and strengthen their importance for the whole system by keeping this allegedly so important function within their own fiefdoms. Both groups had legitimate reasons to follow their course. And although superiors' and subordinates' status and social positions, their power and ideologies, interests and social actions differed to quite some extent, it was exactly this strange relationship and interaction which not only produced a 'solution' to the problem (marketing was centralised and the old Marketing Director was sacked and replaced by a new one) but produces persistent social order over time.

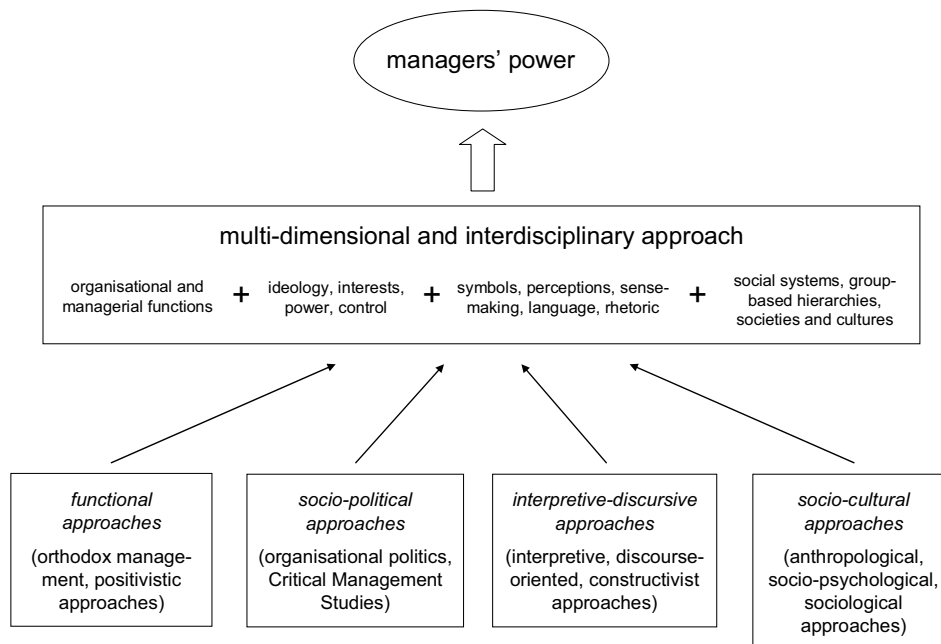
From a socio-cultural perspective the outcomes of such social struggles are not so important as such, but as societal phenomena which need explanation.

#### **4. Multi-dimensionality in the analysis of managers' power**

As the analysis above has demonstrated, managers' power (with regard to a strategic change initiative) can be analysed quite convincingly by using functional, socio-political, interpretive-discursive *or* socio-cultural approaches.

It might make sense to focus on particular aspects of a complex phenomenon – and that's what individual approaches are good for and good at. However, for complex social issues such as managers' power (within organisations) one approach is not enough if we want to understand the phenomenon in its complexity. As the example of the strategic change initiative and its analysis has shown, such events or processes are not mere functional changes, but upset the political order, lasting social relationships and are, hence, justified and challenged by various discourses about legitimacy and moral justification (e.g. Diefenbach 2007; By 2005; Akella 2003; Fincham 1992) *at the same time*.

The analysis has shown how functional, socio-political, interpretive-discursive and socio-cultural dimensions of managerial power (or other organisational or societal phenomena) are linked and relate to each other in social practice. We should acknowledge this also in our theoretical approaches. Social events and processes such as managers' power are multi-dimensional *in principle* and it is therefore not enough to try to gain an understanding of them by using only one or two approaches. We therefore argue that we should try to analyse a social phenomenon such as managers' power by using several different approaches *consciously and explicitly within the same framework of reasoning*, i.e. via *a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach*. For this, we do not need to forego any of the approaches, on the contrary. We may, even shall use each, being fully aware of its strengths and limitations, for what it is good and what it can't do, and bring the findings together at a higher level as shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2: Multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach towards managers' power.**

With such a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach it does not only become clear(er) 'that the work of managers is widely (mis-) represented and idealized as a technical, politically neutral activity' (Willmott 1984: 350). We are being reminded that many aspects are closely intertwined when it is about socio-productive systems such as organisations and that we can fare better if we try to overcome the isolation between approaches and schools of thought. We would be able to see (again) the elephant.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper first demonstrated that different approaches within management and organisation studies concentrate on very different aspects of organisational phenomena (e.g. managers' power) and, hence, define and interpret, explain and justify them differently. However, left on their own they are not enough to sufficiently understand complex issues such as managers' power. Instead, all approaches are needed, i.e.

- *functional approaches* in order to understand the importance and relevance of organisational structures and processes;
- *socio-political approaches* for seeing power, ideology and interests behind and within these functional aspect;
- *interpretive-discursive approaches* in order to understand how phenomena are being perceived differently and explained, communicated and justified by rhetoric, language and symbols; and

- *socio-cultural approaches* to better comprehend the anthropological and sociological meanings and mechanisms which ensure the persistence (and sometimes the end) of the phenomena investigated.

With such an explicitly broadly designed concept it will be easier to demonstrate that management is not (only) a set of organisational functions but that managers' dominance is based on a *multidimensional system* of power, authority, and control (Willmott 1987: 254). Such a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach would also help to investigate managerial power in more (so-called) anti-hierarchical forms of organisations, i.e. new, modern, or even post-bureaucratic forms of power and control. For example, Foucault had identified "gentle" ways in control and punishment (Jacques 1996: 112) which are increasingly used in organisations. Even the most "anti-hierarchical" forms of work organisation – such as the concepts of team-work, empowerment, emancipation and personal skills development – are quite to some extent managerial rhetoric which is primarily meant to obscure new and more intense forms of (indirect) power and control (Jermier 1998: 249). Kärreman/Alvesson (2004: 151) rightly drew attention to the fact that new forms of power and control rarely substitute but complement existing forms and systems. Even when new forms of work organisation are being introduced managers' previous rights and responsibilities largely remain intact. But why is that so? One approach would be hardly enough to provide sufficient and convincing explanations. What the example of centralisation of marketing has highlighted is that in the light of multi-dimensional social phenomena it simply doesn't make sense to keep different approaches apart or even ignore their combined analytical and explanatory potential.

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