A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE FORMULATION OF
CONSTRUCTION BEST PRACTICE

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Abstract
The case is made for a critical research agenda in construction management. Construction best practice is too often limited to the domain of instrumental rationality with little attention to the underlying processes of social construction. The formulation of best practice is analysed from a critical perspective. Industry feedback is reported from previous papers and seminars that sought to deconstruct accepted notions of best practice. Many practitioners have been found to be highly appreciative of the development of an alternative perspective.

Introduction
Recent years have seen a significant growth of critical perspectives within mainstream management research (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott 1992, 1996; Beale, 1994; Deetz, 1994). Such sources draw from the traditions of critical theory (Habermas, 1978; Held, 1980) to challenge the accepted conformity as advocated and imposed by powerful vested interests. Many critical management researchers are influenced by postmodernist organisational writers who argue that reality is shaped by language (Hassard and Parker, 1993; Grant et al 1998). Critical research is characterised by a tendency to consider management issues in a wider cultural, economic and political context. For example, Legge (1995) emphasises the need for a wider contextual understanding of human resource management (HRM). Linkages are made to the rhetoric of the enterprise culture and the global marketplace. Notions of 'customer sovereignty' and 'quality' are seen to shape employees' self-conceptualisations and therefore the reality of the workplace. Critical sources are further characterised by a tendency to place management in a historical context. For example, Hampson et al (1994) consider the role of the United States occupying forces in formulating Japan's 'consensus model' of post-war industrial relations. Such critical contributions have enriched the business school environment and serve to make academics much less accepting of prescriptive improvement recipes propagated by management gurus. They also emphasise that management ideas are embedded in the ideologies that reflect and shape modern society.

Construction best practice
There is little evidence of critical research within the construction management community. This is especially true within the context of 'best practice', as advocated by bodies such as the Construction Best Practice Programme and the Construction Industry Board. Improvement recipes are invariably assumed to be neutral whilst progressing the allegedly common cause of improving efficiency. Construction industry practitioners are repeatedly cast in the role of recalcitrants who maintain an 'adversarial culture' in the face of supposedly shining examples from other industries. Everything would be so much better if only the construction industry would implement improvement recipes such as lean production, partnering and business process engineering. Industry leaders have seemingly already decided that such
recipes are advantageous. The task of researchers is increasingly limited to confirming what industry already knows. Public-funding agencies support the dominant industry world-view by insisting on outputs that are 'relevant to the needs of industry'. The result is an inevitable conservatism whereby the only research that is valued is that which preserves the status quo. Far too much research starts with the assumption that the advocated improvement recipe has already been successful in other industries and the only issue of concern is how they can be applied to construction. The fact that the construction industry is embedded within the same society as other supposedly 'less-adversarial' industries is rarely acknowledged.

Despite significant public funding for bodies such as the Construction Best Practice Programme, the concept of 'best practice' is problematic and defies simple definition. Notions of transferability between industries and countries are even more problematic. Rarely is the need for critical self-reflection and an ability to challenge the accepted conformity given explicit recognition. Best practice is more often conceptualised in terms of an uncritical application of prescriptive management techniques. Such prescriptions rarely stray from the domain of instrumental rationality in that they are invariably concerned with the most efficient means of achieving a given end. Economic externalities such as traffic congestion, pollution and the human cost of regressive management regimes consistently fall outside the adopted frame of reference. Best practice is shaped (and judged) by the rhetoric of the marketplace.

A critical interpretation of best practice formulation

Morgan (1986) advocated that different insights into organisations can be gained through the use of different metaphors. The dominant metaphor that lies behind best practice is that of the machine. Organisations are assumed to be goal-seeking 'black boxes' which consist of reproducible and interchangeable parts. By extension, the industry's problems are seen in terms of impediments to machine efficiency. An alternative model of organisations is provided by the political metaphor (Clegg, 1989; Pfeffer, 1981). From this perspective, organisations are characterised by vested interests jockeying for power and rewards. The extension of this metaphor to the industry level emphasises the role of vested interests in shaping the best practice agenda.

Researchers informed by a political perspective would accentuate different aspects of reality to those normally considered. They would acknowledge the possibility that subtle processes are at work across the numerous committees that shape the best practice agenda. Whilst such committees may not act deliberately to further their own corporate goals, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they avoid making recommendations that threaten their vested interests. This analysis serves to explain why prescriptions of performance improvement rarely stray beyond the domain of instrumental rationality. 'Best practice' would inevitably be conservative and would be judged by the extent to which it served the interests of the technocratic elite. From this perspective, current industry leaders would be unlikely to challenge the status quo. Far better to impose a regime of management-by-stress whereby employees are constantly under pressure to meet ever-increasing efficiency targets. The rhetoric of best practice is frequently heavy in the machine metaphor whilst exhorting others to be more efficient. Even supposedly enlightened practices such as teamworking, partnering and total quality management are ultimately judged in terms of their contribution to cost efficiency. Advocated best practice therefore reinforces the
dominant way of thinking whilst protecting the interests of the managerial elite. Critical researchers would seek to expose the role of such vested interests in shaping the industry's dominant discourse, and hence the reality of managerial practice in the construction industry.

**Reflections on dissemination**

The author has to date published critical perspectives on three aspects of the construction best practice programme in the UK:

- Process improvement (Green, 1998).
- Lean construction (Green, 1999a and 1999b).
- Partnering (Green, 1999c).

Each paper self-consciously adopts a critical perspective and deliberately sets out to challenge the accepted conformity. In each case, the argument is made that improvement recipes commonly accepted as 'best practice' are regressive in nature whilst serving powerful vested interests. These same perspectives have been disseminated to industrial audiences and postgraduate students at the University of Reading. An invited seminar to the UK's Construction Industry Council (CIC) also resulted in significant coverage in the construction press.

Despite dire warnings from colleagues at Reading and elsewhere, the experience to date has been wholly positive. Industrialists and students have been found equally receptive and appreciative of an alternative point of view. In both cases, particular care was taken to emphasise that the author was self-conscious of the adopted critical position and that he claimed no monopoly on the truth. The habit was also developed of ending each seminar with the caveat: "But whatever you do, don't believe what I tell you". In the author's view, emphasis should always be placed on empowering the audience to make up their own minds. It is important that critical researchers remain self-conscious of their adopted theoretical position and the associated assumptions.

**Conclusion**

In contrast to mainstream management, there is a noticeable absence of critical research in construction management. Government and industry leaders too often dictate agendas for change in the absence of any critical analysis. It is continuously emphasised that research must be 'relevant to the needs of industry'. In other words, research must reflect and continually reinforce the established worldview of industry leaders. An ongoing critical research agenda would enrich the field of construction management and serve to create a climate that is more accepting of innovation and change. A persuasive case can be made that 'best practice' is primarily shaped and propagated by power-based rhetoric. This rhetoric creates a managerial reality that is too often unquestioned in terms of its historical and social construction. Critical research aims to disrupt this ongoing process of reality construction, thereby serving to open the debate to other possibilities.

**References**
