

## REBUTTAL

# FROM APES TO ACADEMICS: A BRIDGE UNDER CONSTRUCTION

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While expressing some hesitation at taking on the role of "Pfefferian pruner" in the garden of organizational science, Usher still appears to feel that socioevolutionary theory should be "nipped in the bud." This avulsionary zeal reminds us of bonsai gardeners. Although the form created by these "master pruners" is often beautiful, particularly to the gardener's eye, the artificial creations they produce stand alone—stunted and unconnected. Such could be the outcome for the organizational sciences. To avoid this fate, organizational theorists need to be open to "consilience," an idea recently introduced by Wilson (1998). It is all about making connections. Wilson believes that

most of the issues that vex humanity daily . . . cannot be solved without integrating knowledge from the natural sciences with that of the social sciences and humanities. Only fluency across boundaries will provide a clear view of the world as it really is (1998: 13).

In replying to Usher's response within the limited space available, we have tried to identify and address his most substantive and far-reaching concerns. We wish to respond to three points: (1) his criticism that the development of socioevolutionary theory has not been phenomenon driven; (2) his concern over the deterministic undertones of this program of research and, thus, its value for practicing managers; and (3) his concluding remarks that, in its current form, socioevolutionary theory's contribution is limited because it only fits "theory to existing outcomes."

Our work seeks to understand the pervasive organizational phenomenon of social structure. There is a defined phenomenon of interest. But we acknowledge that our theory development is not phenomenon driven as Usher suggests it should be. More specifically, Usher (citing Pfef-

fer) seems to be criticizing our choice of deductive rather than inductive theory development. Although inductive reasoning through immersion in a phenomenon can be a powerful approach when appropriately applied, it is not the only and, in many instances, not the best way to develop theory. Burns and Stalker (1961) immersed themselves in the phenomenon and identified and described different patterns of organizational behavior. Chance (1963) took a similar approach with the social behavior of primate groups. But that immersion and the closeness of the observer(s) and the observed may have limited the researchers' ability to develop deep theoretical explanations for their findings. Reinterpreting these findings with a new, deductively developed theoretical lens is fully appropriate epistemology. Indeed, the theoretical insights generated by socioevolutionary theory are so deeply embedded within the phenomenon being investigated that this approach is required. Socioevolutionary theory can be criticized for its content but not its epistemological origins.<sup>1</sup>

Usher suggests the apparent deterministic nature of socioevolutionary theory positions it with population ecology—a theory that he maintains is criticized for being unhelpful to practicing managers. Readers may be tempted to lump socioevolutionary theory with population ecology, since both call upon an evolutionary process. However, population ecology looks to biological

<sup>1</sup> As an aside, Usher uses Burns and Stalker's work in a novel way to challenge our proposition relating resource context to social structure. Usher associates slack resources with "organic structures" and "lean and mean" resource-scarce situations with "mechanistic structures." On rereading *The Management of Innovation*, we were unable to find any evidence or arguments presented by Burns and Stalker to support these associations.

evolution for a theoretical metaphor, whereas socioevolutionary theory uses evolution for its theoretical explanation. Furthermore, socioevolutionary theory has the potential to explain at a level that can be useful to managers. Proponents of socioevolutionary theory assert that some of our behaviors are responsive to perceived cues. Understanding the relationship between behaviors and cues can help managers. They can configure the cues or affect the perception of cues to evoke desired behaviors. Biology does matter. Seeking to understand how and why it matters can contribute to what Usher identifies as managers' desire for "mastery and control."

Usher states that socioevolutionary theory does not generate unique predictions, different from established theories; indeed, the theory may predict outcomes similar to other established theories. However, the explanations for these predictions are different. This difference in explanation is important not only for academic reasons but also because it provides different implications for managerial action. Further, socioevolutionary theory does not necessarily preclude or replace existing theories. It often complements them, since it can provide more fundamental underpinnings for existing theories. Using the lens developed by socioevolutionary theory offers a perspective that enables researchers to establish deeper explanations for a variety of organizational phenomena.

Our work is an initial attempt at consilience, where we begin to forge connections between

the natural and organizational sciences by proposing a link between evolutionary biology and (social) behaviors. We believe there is a great opportunity to advance the organizational sciences by opening the gate to the adjacent field of evolutionary theory, rather than building fences to arbitrarily define and defend our existing patch. As Cannella and Paetzold state in their rejoinder to Pfeffer, "The evolution of knowledge requires fuzzy boundaries and a tolerance for . . . a plurality of paradigms" (1994: 332).

We hope our work and Usher's response will begin a dialogue and stimulate research that will determine socioevolutionary theory's applicability to the organizational sciences, and we thank Professor Usher for his considered response.

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