

Second Colloquium on Philosophy and Organization Studies (PHILOS)

Thematic Track: Pragmatism and Organization Studies

Proposal

The Metaphysical Club re-imag(in)ed: A Pragmatist–Feminist Action Inquiry

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PHILOS as a ‘living laboratory’ for re-imag(in)ing the Metaphysical Club

This proposal is written in a spirit of robust rebellion that draws on Pragmatism as a living philosophy re-imag(in)ed through critical Feminist contributions. We take our initial inspiration from the ‘Metaphysical Club’, a short-lived affair that has come to be accepted as the cradle of Pragmatist philosophy. The club’s membership included Charles Peirce, William James, Oliver Holmes, Chauncey Wright, and in the amusingly disparaging words of Henry James (1872, 273) ‘various other long-headed youths’. Their interest was in drawing practical meaning from the profound uncertainties they had all experienced in the years following the American Civil War. To this end, they began to invent a new philosophy that is exploratory, experimental and dedicated to social transformation through pluralism, community-building, and participative democracy (Dewey, 1927).

In the Call for Papers for PHILOS2022, the conveners suggest our current times, although undoubtedly different from 1870s USA, are no less turbulent and uncertain, prompting us to revisit and renew the progressive pathway mapped out by the early Pragmatists. Our response is a re-imag(in)ing of PHILOS as a living laboratory where Pragmatism may be experienced in diverse ways as a philosophy of practising (Simpson, 2009, 2018). We propose to engage participants in living experiments in the form of a series of pop-up events scattered around and through the Colloquium’s informal program.

We will collaborate with participants to co-construct warranted assertions (Dewey, 1938 [1986]), which reframe academic conferences, such as PHILOS, within a democratic ethos that is em-mind/bodied¹, situated and relational (Lake & Whipps, 2021), while also remaining strongly focused on progress and community growth (Ansell, 2009, Frega, 2019, Morlacchi, 2021). Dewey saw presciently the dangers of a ‘class of experts’ being ‘so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge’ (Shields, 2003, 529). Our inquiry is motivated, therefore, by a desire for organization studies to become more than a mere spectator discipline, embracing its potential for activism.

A chasm separates, in our view, the daily, dirty, dynamic, goings-on in flesh–and–blood organizations, and discipline-bound research in (ivory-tower) universities (Beavan, 2021). It is this chaotic everydayness that Pragmatism addresses, especially in the work of Pragmatist activists such as Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett. However, the contributions of women to the early development of Pragmatism have been grievously overlooked, perhaps even actively suppressed (Seigfried, 1996), in the mainstream literature. Part of our agenda is to restore these absent voices, and to explore the many parallels between Pragmatist and Feminist thinking in developing radically inclusive ways of working with practical problems. Our experimental interventions then, will explicitly adopt a Pragmatist-Feminist action orientation to expand participants’ toolboxes beyond the hegemony of classical (masculinist) Pragmatism.

Pragmatist-Feminism as a practical philosophy

Jane Addams and Mary Parker Follett - as well as John Dewey and George Mead - are credited for directly addressing issues of power, inequality, and inclusion in their socially progressive ‘feminist ethics’ (Gross, 2009, Leffers, 1993, Seigfried, 1999, Shields, 2006, Whipps, 2014). Follett though, was dismissed as an idealist (Whipps, 2014), her ideas ‘obscured’ because of her ordinary phraseology and interest in human relations (Fox, 1968). But her action-oriented theorizing and concept-making were in fact deeply relational, recursive, forward-looking, and open-ended (Morlacchi, 2021, 1878). Addams,

¹ We adopt this neologism in an attempt to overcome the dualism implied by the word ‘embodied’ and, following Dewey, to signify a transactive happening (Seigfried, 2002).

the first woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, a prolific writer, and a community organizer, contributed to critical social reform efforts in the US during the first half of the twentieth century (Lake, 2021). Her social ethics - combining empathy and action – has much to offer contemporary understandings of human relations and care theories in organizations and organizing (Hamington, 2009, Ladkin, 2020).

The boundary-spanning philosophical activism of Follett and Addams deserves to be recovered and investigated further (Kaag, 2008). Maurice Hamington offers one possible explanation for their absence: “Women pragmatists were usually involved in advocating social change, and, given the historical penchant for affixing dualistic labels, activists are not theorists” (2009, 9). Pragmatism and Feminism share a practical view of philosophy that emphasizes pluralism, experience, and public engagement, addressing the complexities of lived experience across diverse spaces (Kaag, 2011, Lake & Whipps, 2021) by valuing the em-mind/bodied and relational nature of personal and social change. Pragmatist-Feminist scholars have already redeployed Pragmatist philosophy in various ways to explore its ethical and social implications in dealing with global challenges (e.g. Clara Fisher on emotions and embodiment, but also nationalism; Erin McKenna on animals and us), but there is still more work to be done.

As contemporary Pragmatist scholars, we (Anne, Barbara, Katie, and Piera) share an interest in the consequential and emancipatory potential of everyday lived experience - asking questions of and seeking transformation in, democracy, participation, and representation. Inspired by the participatory research practices of Follett and Addams – such as storytelling, active listening, sympathetic knowledge, creative difference, collaborative mapping, participatory decision-making and leadership, commitment to process, and a spirit of inquiry - this proposal is for a ‘community building’ experiment that attends to both process and content, and their mutuality.

A collaborative experiment of community-building in the here and now through Pragmatist-Feminist action inquiry and digital storytelling

Should our proposal be accepted, we request that our presentation be scheduled towards the end of the Colloquium to maximise the time available for experimentation and engaged dialogue. We hope to involve everyone who wishes to take part in this process

of collective experimentation, bringing a rich diversity of participants working together as community. We will work with the conveners to appropriately schedule various pop-up events.

These interventions will include online and in-person participation through storytelling and other improvised activities. We will experiment with practices such as co-creation and uploading of texts, photos, and videos, collective gatherings, flashmobs, and photography sessions everywhere from the beach to the BBQ, sharing stories with strangers while queuing for meals, and creating spaces for participants to explore their experiences as Pragmatist scholars. We are interested in understanding how the interplay and bundles of online and offline practices contribute to the ongoing creation of our scholarly community and different forms of associations that might emerge.

The experiment will culminate during our presentation by viewing and discussing together the emerging narrative. We will invite the community to listen mindfully to different stories and reflections and then engage in co-creating warranted assertions from this collaborative experiment, as hunches for application and continuous experimentation in future colloquia (Dewey & Bentley, 1949[1991]). Re-imag(in)ing the organizing and experimenting with the lived experiences of participation at the PHILOS 2022 Colloquium will contribute to our current understanding of Pragmatist practising in the here and now in a way that makes a positive difference for us as individual scholars, as a community, and for society at large.

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