

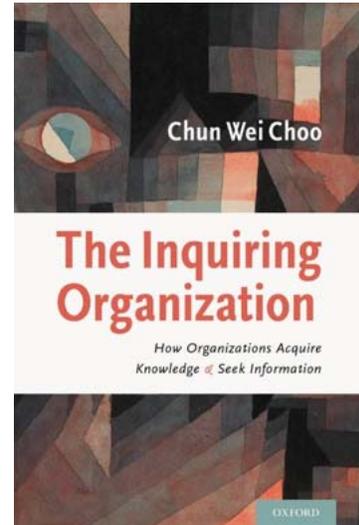
Chun Wei Choo, **The Inquiring Organization: How Organizations Acquire Knowledge and Seek Information**, 2016, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 232 pp., \$55.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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Eighteen years ago, Chun Wei Choo (1998) published the current book's prequel, *The Knowing Organization*, in which Choo provides a holistic account of how organizations use information, engage in sense-making activities, create knowledge, and make decisions. In the current book, the "knowing" narrative is intentionally substituted by its more active counterpart. *The Inquiring Organization: How Organizations Acquire Knowledge and Seek Information* shows Choo's latest effort in moving toward a normative view of organizational learning as motivational, social, and epistemically rational. The book draws on extensive documentation on pragmatism, social epistemology, and virtue epistemology, which buttresses the theorization of organizational information behavior, coupled with an incisive analysis of the epistemic consequences resulted from the contemporary landscape of new media. Through Choo's copious citation of authoritative literature, careful alignment of different typologies, as well as lucid and smooth writing style, the value of the book is manifest to a wide array of readers.



With the exception of the first chapter, which gives a synopsis of each chapter's content, the book is divided in two parts of almost equal length. Part I, "Organizational Epistemology," consists of chapters 2 through 5; Part II, "Organizational Information Behavior," includes chapters 6 through 9. Notwithstanding the seeming independence, the two parts are tightly connected. While Part I introduces classical theories of knowledge, Part II concretizes the abstract by contextualizing the theories in specific organizational settings. Choo's endeavor in seamlessly interweaving the two parts is effective, making the theories and examples go hand in hand without sacrificing a clear structure.

Chapter 2 begins with defining knowledge as "justified true belief" (p. 27). Choo employs three metaphors to explain the three corresponding theories of belief justification. "The pyramid" metaphor refers to foundationalism, in which basic and self-justifying beliefs support derivative beliefs. Hence, the stability and security of the foundational and taken-for-granted beliefs do not depend on the derivative beliefs. The perspective is seen in research traditions such as leadership cultures, theory of action, and dominant logic. In contrast, "the raft" is comparable to coherentism. Our body of knowledge is thus likened to a free-floating raft, each plank of which is a belief that is coherent with others and keeps them in place. A hybrid of the pyramid and the raft, "foundherentism" ("the crossword puzzle"), takes seriously the evidence of experience—the clue for each space in the puzzle—and preserves the system of beliefs—the filled part of the puzzle. Foundationalism, coherentism, and foundherentism specify a set of premises of organizational learning.

Unlike chapter 2, which views knowledge as end-state, justified, true belief, chapter 3 shows knowledge as an ongoing process of inquiry. Based on the work of pragmatist philosophers including Peirce, James, and Dewey, Choo maintains that knowledge is fallible, provisional, open-ended, and communal. Therefore, inquiry should be a community activity that adopts "the method of science with its capacity to correct errors and to converge on which is real or true" (p. 52). The examples of the Hull-House Settlement and the World Health Organization's Intensified Smallpox Eradication Program nicely demonstrate the community of inquiry, as well as the epistemic agency of humans and human organizations united by a common goal.

Chapter 4 extends chapter 3 by casting light on the social aspects of epistemology. Testimonial knowledge, learning from experts, peer disagreement, and collective agents and beliefs play an important role in organizational learning, as exemplified by the Eureka project at Xerox. Choo explicates the dynamics of knowledge management by focusing on the social character that the projects incorporated. With the examples, it also becomes clear how organizational learning occurs across multiple levels and how different levels are linked by cognitive and social processes.

Departing from pragmatism and social epistemology, chapter 5 looks through another lens of knowledge: virtue epistemology, "a group of diverse approaches to understanding knowledge acquisition based on the traits and faculties of the agent" (p. 91). Choo contends that the intellectual and epistemic virtues of individuals—including open-mindedness, courage, and autonomy, to name a few—can be cultivated and can function automatically without requiring conscious decisions to enable them. Likewise, these individual traits, seen as the "virtues," can also be extended to describe characteristics of an organization, whereas their lack or the development of the opposite (known as the "vices," including close-mindedness, dogmatism, and attributional bias) is detrimental to organizational learning. The virtues/vices dichotomy suggests a cultural approach—in contrast to the structural approach—toward establishing norms and practices that corroborate knowledge acquisition.

Part II of the book starts with chapter 6, which is an overview of theoretical models of human information behavior. Discussed models include Kuhlthau's Information Search Process model, Dervin's Sense-Making Metaphor, and Wilson's Information Behavior model. What should be specially appreciated is Choo's effort in juxtaposing the models with their philosophical origins introduced in Part I. The models are thus pinpointed historically in the long line of research on epistemology, connecting concrete organizational information behavior with abstract but fundamental theoretical underpinnings that are neglected in some recent studies.

Chapter 7 enriches the somewhat context-free models in the previous chapter by unfolding information behavior in organizations. Choo develops a hierarchical, integrative model of organizational information behavior, flowing progressively from information needs to information seeking that ultimately leads to information use. In each "conceptual prism," however, the internal interplay and tensions among the theoretical elements discussed previously are also presented, making the model a panorama of the variables, alternatives, and constraints in organizational information behavior. The model possesses both outstanding explanatory power and normative significance.

As a recent publication, the book meets the reader's expectations by using an entire chapter to tackle opportunities and challenges provided by the dramatically changing media landscape. Specifically, chapter 8 elaborates on the epistemic consequences of search engines, Wikipedia, blogs, and Big Data, all of which are questioned while reconstructing the assumptions and established frameworks of human and organizational knowledge acquisition. Facing unprecedentedly rich information with dubiety about the reliability and trustworthiness of Internet content, organizations should "inoculate norms of information and epistemic behavior that would provide for a greater degree of epistemic resilience and vigilance" (p. 189).

In chapter 9, Choo closes the book by reiterating the main themes—the epistemic features that describe an inquiring organization. The chapter discusses how an organization creates knowledge and its capacity to acquire valid knowledge. Choo states that more research on organizational information behavior is needed to present a more complete view of how organizations governed by epistemic norms and practices acquire knowledge and seek information.

The Inquiring Organization is an impressive and well-written artifact that predicates the art of seamlessly weaving concepts and theories and of crafting strong arguments within a wide range of interdisciplinary evidence. As a tradition in Choo's books, the "synthesis" and "coda" at the end of each chapter do not simply summarize the content; rather, they are the joints connecting a great span of material and, together, reveal the backbone of the fundamental argument. The index, which contains hundreds of concepts and names, also eases information searches.

The contributions of the book are manifold. The volume extends Choo's previous book, *The Knowing Organization*, by tracing back to the philosophical and epistemological roots that nurture modern organizational studies. Moreover, the discussion unfolds at a historical point where classical theories meet new media; thus, it is recommended not only to researchers but also to organizational development practitioners who want to have an up-to-date and deepening grasp of organizational information management and behavior. Nevertheless, as the book is dedicated to depicting a normative view of the inquiring organization, the relative undersupply of real-life examples might not satiate those who are used to learning through plenty of case studies and getting specific tips regarding the "dos and don'ts" in bestseller-type publications. Meanwhile, the selection of abundant definitions of key concepts, despite their subtle interrelations and nuances, might be confusing to neophytes such as undergraduate students. Be that as it may, the book is a remarkable achievement and enjoyable reading for scholars in organizational communication, knowledge management, information systems, and organizational behavior.

Reference

Choo, C. W. (1998). *The knowing organization: How organizations use information to construct meaning, create knowledge, and make decisions*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.