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Reuven Shapira

Transforming Kibbutz Research: Trust and Moral Leadership in the Rise and Decline of Democratic Cultures

New World Publishing: Cleveland, OH, 2008. 397pp + vi.
ISBN: 0–9776818–1-5. \$21.95 (hb)

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Reuven Shapira attempts to provide new directions and clarity to the essential aspects of the kibbutz. His recent book, *Transforming Kibbutz Research*, a provocative thesis of classic and new ideas, reveals much of the research and observation throughout his career. The book arrives at critical times when economic crisis faces ideology and political conflicts. The 18 chapters included in this book address these issues from a variety of perspectives such as history, environmental uncertainty, politics, trust, and leadership. Specifically, the book contributes a great deal to the theoretical development of kibbutz research so that researchers and practitioners understand how trust and moral leadership influence the rise and decline of democratic cultures.

Growing interest on organizational survival in complex environments has encouraged researchers and practitioners to find ways to cope with the situation. At first sight, the kibbutz is a rather specific topic, however, the author provides throughout the book organizational examples which help the reader to understand and appreciate the idea behind it in a broader environment. This book should be read by historians, sociologists, behavioural scientists, and managers because it helps us to understand the organizational flow as part of its historical norms and legacy from several points of view accomplished with anthropological case analysis.

The amount of detail and knowledge in this book is both confusing and appealing. It is confusing because it seriously complicates the task of integrating this information into a coherent framework for thought and analysis. However, it is appealing because it almost ensures that the reader will find something of interest, regardless of his or her area of research. Beginning from both criticisms on precedent view and historical perspective, several chapters examine the lack of a good kibbutz theory and the missing concepts that bridge the gap. Integrating social theories with a rich story and historical details enables the author to achieve this ambitious attempt to examine the effect of explicit and implicit characteristics of democratic culture in the current crisis of the kibbutzim. For example, Professor Shapira focuses on “Rotatzia” (transliteration

for rotation, see page 8 for more concrete example) as a counterfeit concept for “kibbutz democracy egalitarianism” (p. 29). Shapira observes that a variety of political and social factors, including injustice, power, talent motivation, and patronage, are “encouraged anti-democratic rule by unelected patrons” (p. 29). He further argues that reciprocity integrated with Iron Law continuity makes the “Rotatzia” norm an immense constraint for egalitarianism and a difference between kibbutz -owned firms and other larger firms.

From my point of view, the 18 chapters are divided into three sections. In the first five chapters, the author quickly and clearly introduces the idea that most of the kibbutz studies misunderstood essential aspects of the kibbutz. In this section Shapira integrates specific kibbutz organizational terminology with principles and theories (i.e. Michel’s *Iron Law*; Hirschman’s *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*; Gouldner’s *Norm of Reciprocity*). The author confronts different concepts in the organizational life of kibbutzim. The second section, chapter 6 through to chapter 12, where the author contends to demonstrate that the kibbutz federative organizations, operating in a broader social and political environment of power, leadership, trust, and morality, is a unique example for developing his framework. In the third section, chapter 13 through to chapter 17, the author presents anthropological field work connecting these examples to his proposed framework. The primary conclusions of these case studies are presented in chapter 18.

Trust also plays an important role throughout the book. This raises a number of potential questions about trust conceptualization as well as the term organizational trust. I was disappointed that Shapira neither attempts to reveal what he means by trust nor explains a different meaning of organizational trust. These issues are particularly interesting as they play a key role in the book. Taking sociology and social psychology perspectives, researchers use expectations for defining trust (Coleman, 1990; Tzafirir & Dolan, 2004; Zucker, 1986). Others have noted that trust is based on the qualities one expects the other person to possess. Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998) defined trust “in terms of confident positive expectations regarding another’s conduct” (p. 439). Seeking a rationale for the rise and decline of democratic culture, Shapira’s book explores how the idea of expectations and vulnerability in kibbutz relationship could play out. He does not differentiate between the behavioural versus economical view of trust (Dietz & Den Hartog, 2006), however he does pay attention to several categories of trust such as deterrence-based trust, knowledge-based trust and identification-based trust, depending on both the leaders’ and followers’ actions.

In Shapira’s view, organizational trust contains a self-reinforcing mechanism that is crucial in determining the level of trust that exists within the organization. Indeed, the case of “Tnuva” and their public denial of illicit use of silicon in milk-processing is a fine example. Nevertheless, to really understand the term organizational trust, we must wipe complexity away from it. The concept of organizational trust is rooted in long term debates within the management literature concerning the question to what degree the upper echelons of the organization reflect the organization in general (see, for example, Hambrick & Mason’s [1984] argument about the importance of top management characteristics). The view taken in this book is that top management philosophy, action, etc., reflect the organization. Thus, top management decisions are received by the employees as organizational decisions, since the organization is represented

by its top management. Hence, we can treat trust in the organization and trust in top management as the same type of trust.

This line of reasoning reflects Nyhan & Marlowe's (1997) argument that "employees carry images of the organization based on the decisions and actions of the executive group" (p. 618), thus, top managers' behaviors and actions are perceived as reflecting their organization. As Shapira notes, "leading by trust is especially problematic in large organizations where participants rarely meet the leaders personally and may scarcely judge whose aims he is serving" (p. 155). These behaviours and actions are perceived by organizational members as systematic organizational process and behaviour. Nevertheless, while I agree that perceptions of top management are not necessarily equivalent to the perceptions of the organization, I do believe that top management behaviours are perceived by organizational members as indicators of organizational behaviour. This is also the way that relevant research literature has operationalized the construct of organizational trust so far, explicitly or/and implicitly. For example, Kickul et al., (2005) asked employees to rate the degree to which they perceived that the organization has fulfilled its promise to give them trust and respect (p.211); simultaneously, those researchers have mentioned that "Actions taken by the leader...; these actions are observed by the followers who then make inferences about the trust perspectives." (p. 208). That is to say that top management behaviours and actions create an organizational image which is mirrored in the eyes of the beholders, the organizational members. Taken this point of view in a unique kibbutz culture with two operational systems, the organization on the one hand and the kibbutz on the other hand, readers could understand the positive and negative effects of high and low levels of trust.

In this book, Shapira tried to carefully integrate leadership, trust, and other social theories with kibbutz culture. However, in doing this, the book failed to incorporate the social and political aspects of the kibbutz and individual aspects. By crossing disciplines the book offers rich perspective on the one hand but is unsuccessful in differentiating, for example, between behavioural and economic views of trust on the other hand.

Despite these limitations, I recommend the book as a wonderful triangular source of historical, sociological, and anthropological work that addresses the evolution of broad processes within the Israeli communal settlements. By moving beyond the glass ceiling this book presents unique perspective for explaining the rise and decline of organizational democracy. Those who are familiar with kibbutz literature will debate its assumptions. Those who are new to the field will find this book as a non-biased guideline for kibbutz development. As a final point, this book leaves you with the notion that there is no need to look for outside magic when the magic is inside us. The experiences that Shapira shares with us have significant potential value to organizational researchers, managers, and students. For researchers, Shapira's wide-ranging description and academic lens on "Rotatzia" makes an important empirical contribution to the democratic culture debate. For managers, the differentiation between strategy of low versus high trust within different contexts, using examples for success and failure, makes life easier. Finally, for students, this book sheds some light on the historical development of the kibbutz from a different perspective. By moving beyond the commonly-held notions, students can have a more precise view of the phenomenon.

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