At this year’s Academy of Management Meeting in Boston, the OMT community paid homage to Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, who were named the Joanne Martin Trailblazer Award Winner’s for 2014. This prestigious award recognizes their leadership role in opening up new lines of thinking and inquiry in the field of OMT. Gibson and Gareth coauthored the now classic text Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis which pushed scholars to confront the hidden assumptions in the field’s dominant paradigms and revealed how these paradigms influenced the ways in which we interpret organizational actions and develop theory. Beyond this both Gareth and Gibson have shaped the field with their own work. Gareth Morgan’s work on metaphors, diversity and paradigmatic issues such as his seminal book Images of Organization and Gibson Burrell's work on space, postmodernism, power and materiality. They are currently writing the much anticipated new release of Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis. This interview was conducted by Madeline Toubiana with Gareth Morgan to speak about their collective accomplishment.

Congratulations Gareth on receiving the OMT Joanne Martin Trail Blazer Award with Gibson. What does it feel like to be a trail blazer?

[Laughs]. Well. The interesting thing is that it is obviously feels very good. It's an affirmation of what we were always trying to do. The whole point of what we sought to do was to push boundaries and make a transformation within the field.

What gave you the inspiration and courage to take the risks necessary to write a groundbreaking work that went against the dominant paradigm of the time?

Our quest was first to understand the field and then to present it back in a way that presented opportunity for new development. Academics are always wondering (or should be wondering…) what is the nature of the field? The purpose of our work was to sort this out for ourselves and to share it with others.

In terms of process, though, I think you always know when you are working on a transformative
idea because a) it usually takes a hell of a lot of work; and b) it takes a MAJOR commitment to what you are doing. If you didn’t believe you were really on to something you just wouldn’t go along this path. In many ways, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy …. you have what you feel are powerful ideas and they attract energy that help to make those ideas a reality. The important thing is that you also have to be able to write and present them in a way that is intelligible to others, because you can’t rely on third party translation. If you can present your ideas in a way that is intelligible they stand a much better chance of attracting the attention they deserve. It seems like stating the obvious, but the communication element is so important.

Furthermore, my belief is that if you have really good ideas and you believe in them, work at them! When it comes to my academic work risk has NEVER entered my vocabulary. And this was certainly the case with Sociological Paradigms. It was never a question of taking a risk … it was just a question of doing something that seemed worthwhile…something that had to be done.

You have not only been trailblazer’s collectively but also individually. Did your collaborative work help you with your own research projects and vice-versa? In what ways?

My collaboration with Gibson was crucial. Neither one of us could have written our book without the other, and it has provided an important platform for our ongoing work even though we have pursued different directions. In my case, for example, the relationship between Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis, 1979 (collaborative) and Images of Organizations 1986 (sole authored) was absolutely crucial. The one built directly on the other. But there was a lot of thinking and development work in between on how to take the issues further and create new value.

For example, the Sociological Paradigms book was an attempt to map out social and organization theory, and it raised a question for me: How is that theory created? … i.e. It was not just there! It had to come from somewhere! This is the issue that really compelled me to understand the role of metaphor in social theory which became the driving idea leading to Images of Organization. This basically reproduced the paradigm framework through the medium of metaphor. But there were “in-between” works that were really important. For example, the 1980 ASQ “Paradigms, Metaphors and Puzzle Solving” paper I wrote was absolutely crucial in helping to drive “Sociological Paradigms” into the heart of organizational theory as opposed to standing on the periphery. Then my book Beyond Method helped to drive it into the center of the research methodology debates. The whole relationship between ontology, epistemology and method as core issues in social research were introduced in Sociological Paradigms and elaborated in Beyond Method and in another article with Linda Smircich in AMR on “The Case
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for Qualitative Research”. It is gratifying to see how these concepts, and the key relationships between them, are now routinely recognized in most standard research methodology textbooks and how Sociological Paradigms and the other works were key drivers here.

So the in-between work was crucial, helping to drive the continuing interest in the original work and in pushing my thinking further. I don’t write a book and then just write another book. It is the continuity of thinking that is important…. The other missing pieces (in the above) are Riding the Waves of Change (1987) and Imaginzation (1993) – all part of the holistic process of working the implications of metaphor and taking the process of challenging our thinking about organization into the domain of everyday management, helping me to attract a practitioner audience. So the whole process, it seems to me, is about having a solid foundation and then working the implications – in my case in exploring the synergy between theory, method and practice.

My work with Gibson has now come full circle as we are collaborating again on a new release of Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis and the current challenges facing the field.

Did you imagine when you both first wrote Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis it would make such waves, and that it would continue to be relevant over 35 years later? To what do you attribute to your success?

I can truly say that we felt that the book had the potential to become a classic. You just don’t do that kind of work unless you believe in it. We knew we had something really important on our hands because the work and ideas truly transformed our thinking. Sociological Paradigms completely changed our way of seeing social theory and organization theory. The writing of it was a process of discovery, and we both dropped all our other projects so that we could focus on this. You know!… You know when you’ve got something. When you have real resonance with the ideas there is an energy to the process that carries you through the barriers that everyday work throws at you.

Also, it is important if you can find ways of getting the ideas out there and exciting others. If you can keep a good idea alive in public space long enough, the tipping point phenomenon can then take over. That’s been the case for both Sociological Paradigms book and Images of Organization. The key seems to be able to present ideas that resonate with the field - so that other people start to pick them up…
Could you share a little bit of the process of undertaking such grand theoretical works like those you have produced collectively and individually? In times where scholarship is focused on papers rather than books do you think we do enough (or good enough) theory-building?

Both Gibson and I wrote in an era when there was much more openness. What we see now is that young researchers are being told what to do, rather than being encouraged to discover what they could or should do. This manifests itself most clearly in the idea of “filling a gap” in the field. When you rush to fill a gap, you don’t usually change a field. I have always been committed to the latter. That said and done I don’t think it applies to everyone…

As far as theory building is concerned, I think that is the end result of your work, not the starting point. The important thing is to do good work on important rather than trivial issues and to get beyond mastery of method and technique so that you are always connecting with the bigger issues. As I shared in my recent AOM address I think the field of organization studies is far too reductive; holistic understandings of phenomena tend to get lost and I think the dominance of short papers as opposed to longer pieces is all part of this. However, I think the growing dominance of digital media is going to help all this in a way that will radically change academia and its role in the production of knowledge and the publication of research.

If you could say one thing to all those young people desiring to be trail blazers, what would it be?

Take time to understand the nature of the whole field and its possibility. Start by getting educated rather than rushing to produce. When you know where you, personally, are located, and where your current thinking stands against where you could or need to be, all kinds of unexpected things can happen. If you lock yourself into an academic or research “box” too early it is extremely difficult to get out. So take advantage of being a relative newcomer with fairly open eyes– the chance does not often come again.
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(Gibson left, Gareth right)