

Remembering Barbara, learning from Professor Czarniawska

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Abstract

Through a reflective dialogue between two Polish women academics living and working in the United Kingdom, this article explores the intellectual legacy of Professor Barbara Czarniawska. The dialogue focuses, on the one hand, on Barbara's role as a mentor and champion of women in academia, particularly those navigating higher education systems in countries in which they are foreigners. On the other, it highlights Professor Barbara Czarniawska's outstanding contribution to the field of management and organisation studies (MOS), emphasising her methodological and theoretical innovations, as well as her interdisciplinary approach to studying and building knowledge about organisations. We also draw attention to the importance of Professor Barbara Czarniawska's legacy as a source of inspiration for future generations of students, educators, and researchers, encouraging them to follow Barbara as a role model for all those who wish to approach the study of organisations with curiosity, creativity and commitment to making a meaningful contribution to society.

1. A difficult beginning of conversation

To any Polish woman academic in the field of management and organisation studies – and especially to any Polish woman academic living and working somewhere where she is a foreigner – Barbara Czarniawska has for many years been an inspiration and a role model. On a February evening, we're meeting online for the first in a series of conversations about our own encounters with Barbara and her ideas, and to reflect on how her intellectual legacy can fertilise the future of organisational research. We are convinced that although Barbara is no longer with us, there is no doubt that she will continue to inspire future generations of students and academics. It is fair to say that to both of us, Barbara's work has been much more than an academic resource; it has been, for many years, a source of personal inspiration. We are approaching writing this article guided by one of Barbara's (Czarniawska, 2011) definitions of successful research: an endeavour conducted by kindred spirits on a topic they find fascinating and relevant.

It has been less than a year since Barbara's passing. We both feel a sense of sadness and loss that fills the atmosphere as we begin our conversation. It is not easy to talk about Barbara in the past tense. At the time of our online meeting, Martyna happens to be in Gothenburg, where

she is staying for a month as a Visiting Professor, invited by colleagues from the Faculty of Business, Economics and Law – the very organisation that used to be Barbara’s academic home for nearly 30 years, since 1996 until her death in April 2024. Just six months before Barbara passed away, in October 2023, Martyna visited her in her apartment, and they were chatting over a cup of tea: a mixture of light-hearted gossip and some more serious ‘catching up’ about life and work. Barbara was always interested in what was happening in the academic community, always happy to share her opinion and advice, and always spot-on with her insights and views on situations and decisions. That afternoon, Barbara was not feeling very well but, as usual, did not want to talk much about her health. She just said that it had made more sense to stay at home instead of going out and exposing oneself to the autumnal viruses which were already circulating in the autumnal air from one person to the next.

How do we acknowledge this sadness and the difficulty of speaking about someone whose presence is so strongly felt, and who cannot be there to take part in our conversation? Unsurprisingly, it becomes clear to both of us that it will be helpful to open our dialogue with bringing to the surface some of Martyna’s memories of her encounters with Barbara whom she knew for nearly 18 years. Dorota is genuinely interested in finding out more about what it was like to know Barbara in person and to spend time with her. She also intuitively feels that the ability to pause in order to think and talk about her experiences of meeting and interacting with Barbara is something that Martyna needs and is going to appreciate.

2. Remembering Barbara

And so it seems natural for Dorota to ask:

Dorota: Tell me, how did the two of you meet?

Martyna: I first met Barbara when I was co-organising, with Chris Land, the conference ‘The Novel and Organisation’ at the University of Essex in May 2007. We invited Barbara to be our keynote speaker and she kindly agreed to come. In preparing the conference, we built upon Barbara’s ideas about the relevance of literary fiction to the study of management and organisations (Czarniawska, 1999; Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994). Later on, we edited a Special Issue of the *Journal of Organizational Change Management* (Land and Śliwa, 2009), to which Barbara (2009) contributed an article on ‘distant readings’ of novels, based on her keynote. She proposed that we should engage in ‘distant readings’ and, in doing this, approach novels as quasi-ethnographies of organisations and the processes of organising described by the novelist with reference to ‘distant’ times and places. I remember feeling star-struck when I first met her as she arrived at the University of Essex campus ahead of the conference, and I was showing her around the place. Up until then, I had only known Barbara through her work and through the anecdotes which Professor Heather Höpfl, a long-term friend of Barbara’s and another inspirational scholar as well as my Head of Group at Essex, used to tell about her. And there she was: very clearly, not just a ‘legend’ but a ‘real’ person, speaking to me in Polish and happy to chat about everyday matters.

Dorota: Exactly, what was Barbara like as a ‘real’ person?

Martyna: Barbara had an exceptional mind. As soon as one spoke with her, one would immediately recognise that she was outstandingly intelligent and erudite. She read a lot: philosophy, theory, literary fiction, magazines with reviews of literary work, daily newspapers... She also loved and appreciated art, cinema and theatre. She never got bored of

ideas, was always open to reading and listening about what others were working on, and to letting her own thinking develop in new directions. Barbara was also interested in people and in relationships, and would draw on her knowledge of psychology to explain why and how, in her view, people might behave in different situations. When asked for advice, she would always try to help through thoughtful suggestions, be it with regard to personal or professional matters.

Dorota: It sounds like that first encounter with Barbara was important to you in more ways than one...

Martyna: It certainly was. In years to come, Barbara became someone I not only looked up to professionally but was also able to count on for wise counsel. Her views mattered to me a lot and I also valued the opportunities to spend time with her. I enjoyed coming to visit Barbara in Gothenburg and joining her in her daily routines, even if only for a few days at a time: in the morning – sitting in the kitchen and chatting over a coffee; in the afternoon – going out for a walk in the park together; in the evening – having a glass of prosecco and eating dinner with her, then watching a movie, in the comfort of the sofa in her living room. And in between: reading, thinking and writing. Barbara was a writer both passionate and disciplined; it was as if research ideas were forming in her mind all the time, and she was dedicating her life to enthusiastically and dutifully putting them into words. Having had the privilege of witnessing, at least to a small extent, Barbara's approach to working, left me in no doubt as to how she managed to remain so prolific as a scholar. Academic research was her calling; she had great respect for the work itself and she also appreciated the support she received, over the years, from university leadership for the ability to pursue her ideas and projects... I could talk for hours about my encounters with and memories of Barbara but let's now speak about the traces she has left on you, even if you did not get to meet her in person.

3. Learning from Professor Czarniawska

Dorota: Although I never had the privilege of meeting Professor Barbara Czarniawska in person, her work has profoundly influenced my academic journey, reshaping both my research and teaching approaches. Discovering her writings was a transformative experience for me, not only as a scholar but also as a Polish woman. Professor Czarniawska became one of my role models, someone whose achievements I deeply admire. Her story is one of intellectual brilliance and determination, and it resonates with me on a deeply personal level. As a woman with Polish roots navigating the Western academic world, she became an incredible example of how, against the backdrop of her upbringing in a system that often stifled individual ambition and creativity, she achieved so much. Growing up in communist Poland myself, I understand the unique struggles and limitations that come with such a background, but what struck me about Professor Czarniawska was her ability to see opportunities where most would see only obstacles. For her to rise above these constraints and establish herself as a leading, globally renowned figure in the management and organisation studies community, is nothing short of extraordinary.

One of the key reasons why I consider Professor Barbara Czarniawska a true academic icon is her commitment to championing women in academia. In a field dominated by men, not only did she carve out a distinguished space for herself but also actively worked to uplift and empower other women. I find this admirable characteristic interwoven in the stories I read

and hear from women academics who personally knew her – including the stories you shared with me – but also evident in her published academic work.

A particularly compelling example of her impactful work is her article discussing the trajectories of foreign women professors, which includes the stories of two remarkable Polish scientists. This study (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2008) resonated with me deeply for numerous reasons. Not only does she challenge the assumption that being a woman and a foreigner in academia constitutes a cumulative disadvantage, but she also presents a nuanced argument that “strangeness” can allow women academics to achieve a level of success that might even surpass that of their native counterparts. By referring to these examples, she achieves something genuinely inspirational – through these stories of redefining obstacles into potential advantages, her work offers a much-needed sense of encouragement and hope for women in and beyond the world of academia. What made this article even more relatable for me was her inclusion of the life stories of two Polish women professors. As I read their biographies, I could not help but feel that her own life story should have been included as well. To me, she herself embodies the very qualities of resilience and determination that she highlights in the Polish women professors she writes about. Her journey serves as an example of the principles she explores in her work.

Martyna: How interesting that the first example of Barbara’s work that you mention is her and Guje Sevón’s (2008) article ‘The thin end of the wedge: Foreign women professors as double strangers in academia!’ This was exactly the piece that inspired Marjana Johansson’s and my research into the experiences of foreign business school academics in the United Kingdom. Marjana and I were intrigued and fascinated by that article – which Barbara and Guje published in *Gender, Work & Organization* – and we also enjoyed reading the responses to it which were written by other amazing women scholars from Barbara’s and Guje’s generation: Jo Acker (2008), Lotte Bailyn (2008) and Marta Calás (2008). When those four articles were first published, I was six years into full-time employment in UK higher education and two years after completing my own PhD. I was no longer ‘new’ to British academia and I was beginning to realise that there might have been differences between my experiences at work, and the way in which colleagues, superiors and students related to me, and the experiences that my male colleagues, especially British men, had at work. Back then, I had little knowledge of phenomena such as conscious and unconscious bias or gender-based prejudice or discrimination in organisational contexts. Reading those four articles felt as if someone had opened for me a window to a world in which some of the things I was observing around me and experiencing first-hand were actually named, eloquently described and analysed by others, with references to concepts and terms that I might not have heard about before but that resonated with me. Just as you pointed out, Barbara’s and Guje’s (2008) article had an empowering, inspiring effect: these two women professors – one of whom was a foreigner in the country in which she was living and working – were arguing, in a scientifically convincing manner, that two types of disadvantage in academia, being a woman and being a foreigner, cancel out each other. Of course, this was the kind of message that I welcomed and was relieved to hear, especially at that point in my academic career. And yet, the three commentators – Acker, Bailyn and Calás – through into question the idea of disadvantages cancelling out each other, and through raising a range of nuanced points in their response articles, made me want to think more deeply about these issues, to understand better how the academic organisation operates, and to explore the experiences of foreign women academics, in contemporary times, in greater depth. Jo Acker’s (2008) response points to the gendered

nature of the academic institution and the assumptions on which it is built, and the ways in which it is set up to promote traditionally masculine traits and behaviours associated with power, competition and dedication to career unhindered by domestic responsibilities. It also highlights the disadvantages associated with foreignness, as well as drawing attention to the importance of support that women receive from other women and from men. By contrast to Jo Acker (2008), Lotte Bailyn (2008), by and large, agrees with the thesis that the 'double strangeness' of foreign women academics can constitute an advantage for them as far as career progression is concerned. However, she also suggests that there is a high price to pay for foreign women in return for professional success in that they can only ever be either liked or respected, but never both; in other words, they can never fully belong. This was an important, if rather challenging to accept, observation, and it strengthened my determination to learn more about the experiences of present-day foreign women academics. Added to the commentaries by Jo Acker and Lotte Bailyn, Marta Calás's (2008) response challenges Barbara and Guje's use of the concept of the stranger, highlighting that it was developed by a male author, Georg Simmel (1950), and was underpinned by a set of gendered assumptions implying that the 'stranger' is a descriptor to be used in relation to a man rather than a woman. As an alternative, she proposes the conceptualisation of the stranger introduced by the feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva (1991). Brought together, these four papers, all written by women academics, gave me a substantial amount of food for thought!

Marjana and I then decided to explore, through a study, the issues raised by the authors. We conducted professional life history interviews with 31 women academics employed in 14 business schools in the UK. Later on, we also included interviews with foreign men academics in the sample. The interviews allowed us to generate a rich body of fieldwork material which we analyse and discuss in a series of articles. Unsurprisingly, the first of these, based, exclusively, on the interviews we conducted with women academics, was submitted to *Gender, Work & Organization* (Johansson and Śliwa, 2014). That study has been highly significant to me for several reasons. First, I have learned a lot through listening to other foreign academics' professional life histories. Second, the scholarly interest in intersectionality and the effects of the intersections of different aspects of diversity on individuals' experiences at work as well as their careers has stayed with me to this day. Third, the articles which Marjana and I have published based on that study have contributed to the development of our own careers. There is no doubt that my gratitude for providing the inspiration to conduct that piece of research goes to Barbara and also to the other women authors: Guje, Joan, Lotte and Marta.

Dorota: It really is fascinating to reflect on how much Professor Czarniawska has done for women academics through her work: writing about them, inspiring other women's academic work, and directly supporting women academics. Indeed, her championing of women in academia is visible in most of her work. I am now reminded of another revelatory piece by Barbara Czarniawska and Guje Sevón (2018). In that article, Professor Czarniawska reflects on the process of translating Karl Weick's (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations* into Polish, and how this led her to uncovering an issue she found troubling: the fact that the use of initials in the lists of references at the end of academic publications conceals the contributions of women, masking their presence and impact on the field. More importantly, the analysis presented in the paper reveals the shocking scale of male dominance in academia and in doing so, the authors highlight the systemic gender biases embedded in academic practices. This brings to mind another thought-provoking article co-authored by Professor Czarniawska (Czarniawska et al., 2013), in which the authors urge us to reconsider the role of popular culture, particularly

soap operas, in conveying unintended messages that reinforce traditional stereotypes about women and work. As a woman, I find her encouragement to question and dismantle the narratives that limit women's opportunities particularly inspirational.

Of course, I am only drawing here on a couple of examples that moved me personally, but these underscore Professor Czarniawska's ability to blend rigorous academic approach with deeply personal and relatable narratives. While there is no shortage of publications by women academics that I find intellectually stimulating, Professor Czarniawska's work adds another layer, as it resonates me with on the emotional level. It matters to me greatly that her scholarship is transformative and that she shows us the possibilities of using one's platform to uplift others. Her championing of women in academia is a legacy that I think many of her mentees, colleagues and friend carry forward. You may not want me to say this, but I know that this matters to you, too, and I have seen you do exactly that over the years; supporting other women (Polish or not) in the world of academia.

Martyna: Thank you for saying this, Dorota, it's very kind of you and I didn't expect to hear this now... I think we all learn from our 'elders' in academia, don't we, and one of the things we learn – sometimes consciously and sometimes less so – is how to act in our relationships with others. Barbara certainly served as a great role model from whom to learn about how to support other women academics both directly – through mentoring, practical advice or co-authoring of publications with women – and through calling out the systemic gendered inequalities in academia which she observed, just as she did in the case of that article where she reflects on the process of translating Weick's (1995) work into Polish. I never had the privilege of writing together with Barbara, but, on several occasions, I asked her for advice in relation to career-related matters and she generously gave it to me. For example, I once spoke to her about an upcoming job interview. While I was apprehensive about it, Barbara seemed confident that I would get a job offer. She emphasised to me the need to think about how I would react when offered the job, and instructed me that I shouldn't say 'yes' immediately when I receive a phone call from the Dean of the business school offering me employment. She insisted that, instead, I should say 'thank you very much for the offer. I'm really pleased to receive it'. This, as she explained to me, would create the space for me to negotiate the starting salary with the new employer. I followed Barbara's advice and, indeed, it worked! It was obvious that my response during that important phone call surprised my prospective boss – who immediately asked: 'what do you mean?' – although I might have been even more surprised than him at my own unexpected performance of assertiveness. Barbara was very perceptive as she imagined that – as a woman brought up in Poland – I was likely to give a spontaneous response that conveyed nothing but a sense of gratitude and agreement to the first offer that was being put on the table.

Dorota: This sounds like an excellent piece of advice, given to you at the right time! The point you have just made about being a woman from Poland leads me to another reason why I find Professor Czarniawska's work so profoundly inspirational: her Polish roots, which are subtly yet unmistakably woven into her scholarship, adding a layer of cultural richness that feels deeply relatable to me. Reading her work often feels like participating in her personal journey while being able to connect to my own, as though she is speaking directly to my experiences, my identity, and my heritage. One of her articles, in particular, resonates with me on a deeply personal level—when she references the identity label of the "Polish mother" (Czarniawska, 2013). By writing about it she reminded me how strongly this concept is imprinted in my psyche, forcing me to reflect on how this identity label has persisted for over two hundred

years and what makes it so enduringly relevant. I consider this to be more than just an academic observation; it is a lived reality, a cultural archetype that has shaped my understanding of family, resilience, and sacrifice.

What makes her work even more compelling is how frequently she draws on cultural and historical contexts that feel familiar to me. For example, as we mentioned earlier, she references iconic Polish female figures, such as Marie Curie-Skłodowska, exploring the intersection of gender and cultural identity in ways that illuminate the struggles and triumphs of women in academia and beyond. She also engages with classic Polish literary works, such as the novel *Lalka* (*The Doll*), by Bolesław Prus which for many generations has been part of the Polish literary canon. It is hard to describe the joy and sense of connection I felt when I came across her chapter titled 'Don Quixote and Capitalism in Poland' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994) in her edited book which I credit for transforming my approach to research and teaching. On one level, there was the intellectual satisfaction of discovering the power of a novel in portraying the development of mature capitalism in Poland. But on another, there was a deeply nostalgic and emotional dimension to it. At the time, I was navigating the personal and professional challenges of building a new life in the UK, and in the midst of that struggle, finding Professor Czarniawska's work felt like stumbling upon a piece of home. Reading about a tale I had known and loved since my school days: the rise and fall of Wokulski, the entrepreneurial protagonist of *Lalka*, brought a sense of comfort and familiarity: something I desperately needed at the time. These, I assume, unintended consequences of Professor Czarniawska's work are important to me and remain a source of strength and inspiration, and for that, I am endlessly grateful.

But my story of the profound impact Professor Barbara Czarniawska's work has had on me as an academic would not be complete without a brief – I promise! – reflection on the transformative effect of her book *Writing Management: Organization Theory as a Literary Genre* (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1999). Reading it marked a turning point in my academic journey. Coming from an academic context that favoured statistical and econometric methods, my thinking about doing research used to be strictly positivistic. It was Professor Czarniawska's work that opened my eyes to a whole new way of seeing methodologies, one that embraced shadowing, narratives, storytelling, and the richness of qualitative inquiry.

For someone like me, whose academic training had been dominated by numbers and equations, this was nothing short of revolutionary. Her writing helped me realise the limitations of relying solely on quantitative methods to understand complex organisational phenomena. It was liberating, to say the least. I always had a keen interest in the humanities, but it was a side interest, something separate from my so-called "serious" academic work. Engaging with Professor Czarniawska's writings allowed me to see that my passion for literature, storytelling, and even art could be not only relevant but also incredibly powerful in the study of organisations. Her ideas gave me permission to think differently, to explore creatively, and to embrace methodologies that felt more aligned with what I truly enjoyed. As such, the influence of Professor Czarniawska's work did not stop at reshaping my research approach; it also profoundly changed the way I teach. I must admit, I may be overestimating my own role here, but it was her ideas that encouraged me to see my work with students in a more imaginative way. I began to integrate stories, fiction, and films into my lectures, moving beyond the traditional focus on models and definitions. And when, years later, my students tell me that it is these stories, these creative explorations, that they remember most vividly –

far more than any equation or theoretical framework – I know exactly who should receive their thanks.

Martyna: Since we have been talking about the influence of Barbara’s work on our pedagogic practice, it feels like the right place for us to look into the future, and to suggest the ways in which we believe Barbara’s ideas can and should be drawn on to shape the future of organisational research, and how the next generations of students can learn from her work....

4. Taking Barbara Czarniawska’s legacy into the future

An attempt to encapsulate the legacy of Professor Barbara Czarniawska feels inherently reductive, no matter how much time we were to spend discussing it. How could we summarise the contributions of such a prolific, interdisciplinary scholar whose work has inspired countless researchers across a multitude of academic disciplines? With over 120 scholarly articles and more than 50 books to her name, the body of Professor Barbara Czarniawska’s intellectual work is immensely rich. Among her many achievements, her methodological contributions to organisational research are the most enduring legacy. For example, her work on narrative inquiry, shadowing, observant participation, and her recent advocacy for “mobile ethnology” to study modern organising practices have become the cornerstones of contemporary organisational research.

While her methodological innovations are widely celebrated and applied, it is equally important to highlight her cautionary advice to students of organising. Her warning to scholars to avoid methods rooted in the reification of organisations as static entities remains important not only to those who aspire to draw on a processual worldview, but to all researchers seeking to move beyond imposing their own temporal and conceptual frameworks onto the organising processes they study. Professor Czarniawska’s championing of a non-essentialist approach, emphasising the fluid, processual nature of organisational phenomena reminds scholars of the limitations they set themselves by focusing on “organisations” rather than “organising”. Crucially, her contribution does not stop at offering a word of caution to scholars in relation to what to avoid. In proposing a concept of “action nets” (Czarniawska, 2004), she purs forward a different way of thinking and researching, one that does not start with predefined entities – such as places, people, or issues – but considers the dynamic networks of actions that constitute organising. By treating entities as products rather than starting points, Czarniawska’s concept of “action nets” enables researchers to capture the emergent and relational nature of organising.

Beyond her methodological contributions, Professor Barbara Czarniawska’s work serves as an abundant source of inspiration for embracing interdisciplinary research. While few scholars’ academic background is likely to be as diverse as hers, her example encourages us to transcend disciplinary boundaries. Driven by intellectual curiosity, she explored a wide array of phenomena, some of which lay at the periphery of organisational studies. Her work, whilst enriching organisational research, demonstrates the value of integrating insights from the humanities in general as well as art, literature, and even popular culture more specifically, into organisational research. For students and researchers, Professor Czarniawska’s work issues a call to remain open to unconventional approaches and to seek inspiration beyond the confines of one’s own discipline, method, or medium. We all should follow her example and embrace

diversity in our intellectual pursuits. Who knows? Maybe just like Barbara, we could uncover hidden insights and develop new perspectives that lie in plain sight?

Her championing of creativity, imagination, and beauty could not be more relevant in today's world, increasingly characterised by antagonism, inequalities and conflict. When she urged us to develop the craft of writing (Czarniawska, 1998), seeing beauty in writing as more than an aesthetic, she shared her belief, which resonates with us so strongly: 'the written word has power to heal and comfort, and the more beautiful, the better' (Czarniawska, 2001: 19). Barbara knew that we could all do with more beauty in our written words, our work and in our lives...

Carrying forward Professor Czarniawska's legacy requires students and academics alike to continually reflect on our role as researchers. Her call for researchers to remember that, whilst keeping our voices heard, we must avoid assuming we have the authority to speak for the field, should be taken seriously. This aligns with her concerns about the moral aspects of theory making. Barbara Czarniawska's legacy, therefore, extends beyond a collection of methodological and theoretical insights. It is a call to intellectual curiosity, interdisciplinary exploration, reflection, and the pursuit of beauty in both thought and writing. To take her legacy seriously is to embrace organisational research with creativity, curiosity, and a commitment to making a meaningful contribution to society. We therefore conclude by bringing in Barbara's voice, and letting her leave us to reflect on whether we, as management and organisation studies scholars, are doing enough in this regard:

'Things have gone rather well for business and management sciences, which means that we are now in the position to afford some reflection upon what we are doing and why. If we are a practical subject devoid of intellectual ambition, then it is time to stop wasting society's funds: back to schools of commerce and to two-month correspondence courses in accounting and business techniques. If we are an academic discipline however, we must ask ourselves what could be our contribution to the general debate concerning the desired shape of our society in the twenty-first century' (Czarniawska-Joerges 1999: 4).

Keywords

Barbara Czarniawska, intellectual legacy, interdisciplinary research, narrative inquiry, organisational research, women in academia

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