

MARY DOUGLAS

1921 – 2007

Considered a follower of Émile Durkheim and a proponent of structuralist analysis, with a strong interest in comparative religion and a focus on rule systems and social categories, Douglas was educated at the University of Oxford (St Anne's College, 1939-1943, then 1946 and into the early 1950s for the Doctorate) and worked for 25 years on faculty at University College London. In 1989 she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy and in 1992 she became a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) before being appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in the Queen's New Year's Honours List in 2006.

Most famous for:

- Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966)
 - Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (1970)
 - The World of Goods (1979) with Baron Isherwood
 - Evans-Pritchard (Fontana Modern Masters, 1980)
 - Risk and Culture (1980) with Aaron Wildavsky
 - How Institutions Think (1986)
- Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory (London: Routledge, 1992).
 - Jacob's Tears: The Priestly Work of Reconciliation (2004)



Relevance for Management and Organization Theory

Douglas's works have been broadly influential in the social sciences, especially in studies of the social organization of community, linked to forms of action, in comparative religion, and in the study of risk cultures. A large community of scholars interested in policy and policy analysis has developed around her work in what they would call 'Cultural Theory'. She pioneered a compelling style of comparative analysis.

Her work has been less broadly engaged in organization theory and management studies.

Purity and Danger is an analysis of the concepts of ritual purity and pollution in different societies and times, and is considered a key text in social anthropology. It offers a powerful conception of how categories situate and organize everyday social life. **Natural Symbols** provides a succinct approach that links a theory of micro process and a powerful account of how modern societies 'naturalize' distinctions by recourse to apparently timeless symbols and cultural recipes. Douglas introduced the interrelated concepts of "group" (how clearly defined an individual's social position is as inside or outside a bounded social group) and "grid" (how clearly defined an individual's social role is within networks of social privileges, claims and obligations). The group-grid pattern was to be refined and redeployed in laying the foundations of Cultural Theory.

Her works on **Risk and Culture** and on **Risk and Blame** foreground a fresh, analytically provoking view of conceptions of risk, situated in broader rule systems. Finally, her book **How Institutions Think** may be the most recently cited work among organization and institutional theorists. This work, a series of lectures, offers a critique of rational choice arguments in the idiom of contending grid and group identities, then establishes a case for 'how institutions think' through recourse to the importance of categories and rule systems for naming and allocation value.

Here we quote Ian Hacking's review at some length, because of its completeness and elegance in using direct quotes from **How Institutions Think** to suggest why the work of Mary Douglas is current for us: 'Half of our task is to demonstrate [the] cognitive process at the foundation of the social order. The other half of our task is to demonstrate that the individual's most elementary cognitive process depends on social institutions,' says Douglas. That is the agenda for Chapter Four (eight pages!), but also, when generalised a little, for the book as a whole. The earlier books were also about why and how people band together and are bonded into social units. The explanations tended to be in terms of practices or rituals of enforced separation, where outsiders are made out as dirty or as dirt, to be counteracted by cleansing.

Hacking goes on to say: 'The core of her methodological ingenuity (instead of merely choosing an interesting topic) lies in her comparative method: "In the first place we shall not expect to understand religion if we confine ourselves to considering belief in spiritual beings, however the formula may be refined... Rather than stopping to chop definitions, we should try to compare peoples' views about man's destiny and place in the universe. In the second place we shall not expect to understand other people's ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own."' (35).

By looking into the everyday (her first method of comparison), her meditation walks us from the mundane to the sacred and demonstrates how religion/cosmology and social order emerge from daily life and how such perceived order in turn governs one's lived experience. By reflecting upon one's own views (her second method of comparison), she weights both one's own and the other's views on the same footing. The danger of explanatory mode of scholarship lies NOT in trying to explain the Other per se but in holding oneself ABOVE the explanatory system and hence imposing one's unexamined standards upon the Other. This mutual comparison (meaning comparison with self-reflection and subjecting oneself to the same standard as the subject being explained) reveals that understanding and explaining are co-constitutive and mutually illuminating.'