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Organisationspsychologie als Dialog

Inquiring Social Constructionist
Possibilities in Organizational Life

Mit Beiträgen von:

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Relational Organizing – A New Paradigm in Organization Theory?

Johannes Rüegg-Stürm

To write an article is a discursive effort which is based on the available discursive resources of the chosen language and language community. However, language is not just a tool or a medium but a generative context to express ideas and arguments. To write an article in a foreign language therefore limits the discursive resources to form one's own ideas and arguments. In that sense, the following text is a "handicapped" trial. I hope that it nevertheless can be understood in a meaningful way and may supplement the valuable discourses we all share with Peter Dachler.

1. Introduction

It is not particularly modest to argue for a new paradigm. Why should we need a new paradigm in organization theory? What kind of *progress* could be expected by such a novel perspective? Indeed, there is no clear reason for such a claim apart from the experience that some existing practices and its theoretical explanations may be contradictory, controversial or at least not very helpful. Furthermore, it is evident that in general any status quo has its hidden unexploited opportunities.

In that sense, Peter Dachler has started in the eighties (e.g. Dachler, 1985) to radically rethink predominant, as valid and meaningful conceived, and therefore hardly questioned *epistemological assumptions* in leadership research and organization theory. This endeavour was neither motivated by a

heroic progress ethos nor by the wish to develop some new management recipes. It was not directed to a "revolutionary" substitution of existing perspectives by a new paradigm but driven by the attitude to *add* innovative, theoretically inspiring and practically helpful insights in order to better understand prevailing but also muted discourses about organizations and about organizational practices. Nevertheless, the consequences of such an effort are far-reaching and quite fundamental, as in my eyes Peter Dachler seems to be one of the first management scholars who takes the *epistemological dimension* of management research and practice seriously into account.

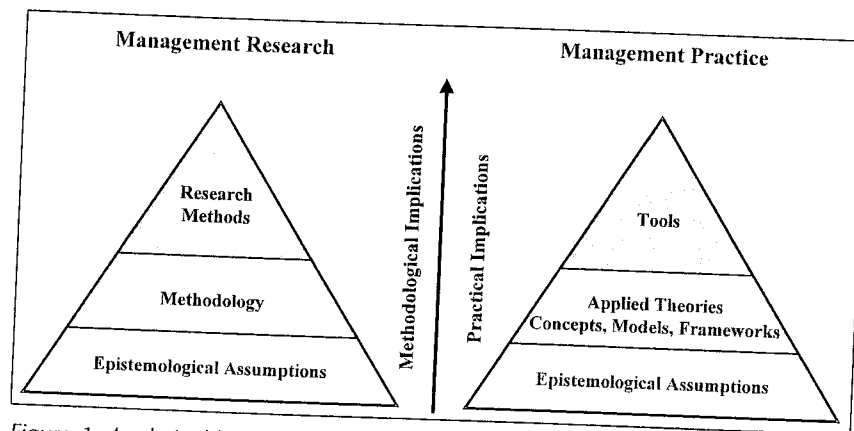


Figure 1: Analytical levels of management research and management practice

If we look at management research and management practice (see figure 1) we have a strong dominance of discussions on *research methods* and *management tools* and to a certain extent on methodological issues. Efforts for scientific and practical innovation are focussing on the first two layers whereas the third, very fundamental layer is largely neglected and obviously represents our blind spot. We have hardly ever led a discussion on the basics of our thinking and acting, i.e. on the underlying "*epistemological root distinctions*" (von Krogh, Roos & Slocum, 1994).

Strange to say, but we might have completely inverted and in that sense inadequate priorities. Instead of first exploring and reflecting the hidden assumptions and taken-for-granted of our research and management practice with far-reaching effects on the realities created by our practices we take huge efforts to develop even better and better research methods and management

tools. This observation may have led to a deep concern of Peter Dachler and originated his efforts towards a paradigmatic reflection and innovative exploration of existing management and leadership approaches. This reflective effort undertaken with colleagues as Dian-Marie Hosking or Kenneth Gergen has finally resulted in so-called *relational alternatives* (Hosking, Dachler & Gergen, 1995) to the predominant and non-questioned management paradigm which is still based on a strong methodological individualism. I would summarize these alternative theoretical perspectives which are based on a *social-constructionist, relational epistemology* with the notion of *Relational Organizing*.

As clearly stated in *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism* (Hosking, Dachler & Gergen, 1995), Relational Organizing is not just a new concept or a novel fashionable approach to organization and organizing. It represents an equally demanding and attractive paradigmatic shift in the sense of Thomas Kuhn (1962) with tremendous implications for theory building, management practice and last but not least research methodologies.

Therefore, in a first step, based on and inspired by the very interesting contribution of René Bouwen in this book, I characterize two conceptual "cornerstones" of Relational Organizing whereby I renounce a description of the foundations of a social-constructionist, relational epistemology which are impressively illustrated in Dachler (1992), Dachler & Hosking (1995), Burr (1995) and Gergen (1994). In a second step, for each cornerstone a few methodological and practical implications are derived. In a third step I try to outline some directions of further theoretical development of Relational Organizing. All this does not represent any "solutions" but the starting point for new questions, new perspectives and new options to act which, in my eyes, seem worth reflecting and discussing.

2. Cornerstones of Relational Organizing

2.1 Radical Process Orientation

In many predominant discourses an organization is conceived as a given entity which can be managed, i.e. controlled and improved and – in a scientific context – objectively investigated. In such a perspective an organization is mainly treated as a collection of unrelated, autonomous elements (e.g. collection of people) with specific and more or less given characteristics. If any ele-

ment of such an organization is not doing well it has to be changed (by any superior force) or replaced. Such a perspective, which is based on a methodological individualism, can be described as *a-contextual*, *a-historical*, *a-processual* and in this sense also *a-relational*, and it were Karl Weick (1979, 1995) in general, and Andrew Pettigrew (1985, 1987) in the context of organizational change, who have clearly indicated the problematic consequences of such a reductionist, trivializing theoretical approach. Basically, this way of looking at organizational phenomena (structures, culture, people, leadership etc.) reflects an idea of organizations as "*trivial machines*" (von Foerster, 1984).

From an alternative social constructionist (or systemic) perspective the *relationships* and even more the *processes of relating* represent the *constitutive elements* of any kind of organizing and organization. It is assumed that organizations emerge from an *ongoing discursive enactment process* by a multitude of different organizational "communities of practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991) who themselves are formed in discursive processes. Consequently, organizations are conceived as being continuously *in-the-making*. In this ongoing enactment process a *fabric of relationships* is created, continuously developed and reproduced.

The notion of relationship does yet not only refer to the social architecture of an organization, i.e. to personal relationships, but to the *relevant context* in general. This context (comparable to the different concurrent background stories of a theatre) consists of historical events, current developments and trends, expected events, of physical and immaterial "things", of stories and myths.

However, all that is only existing in discourse (in the sense of Burr, 1995) and in discursive practices. Only what gets access to and is processed in *discourse* can unfold any social and therefore organizational relevance (cf. Luhmann, 1984). Therefore, by "relating" we basically mean the *discursive creation of a fabric of discourses* which are mobilized and interwoven to make sense of the world.

2.1.1 Methodological Implications

These premises lead to the following methodological implications:

1. Not *what is* should be in the core of our research interest but *how something is becoming*. Therefore, only a careful (longitudinal) *processual analysis* which is *context-sensitive* has the potential to adequately describe *what* happens in an organization and to explain *why* it happens in the way we

can observe it by participating into selected discourses of that organization.

2. If the core of research is focusing on *how* something is becoming, then we do not have to concentrate on any "given" qualities, attributes, social "laws" etc. but on *differences* and on patterns *how* differences are enacted and dealt with in organizations, i.e. on historically emerged and more or less idiosyncratic "construction principles" of that which is understood as the valid organizational reality.

However, these strong arguments for context-sensitive organizational research lead to the question of generalizability. What about the *generalizability* of "management knowledge" in a world of organizations which are all continuously *in-the-making* and have developed their idiosyncratic reality constructions?

2.1.2 Practical Implications

If we assume for instance that the definition of any kind of organizational performance indicators – by creating some more or less complex relationships between distinctive observations – represents a *contingent (but not at all arbitrary) social construction* and if there consequently is no absolute objective measure to evaluate any kind of organizational performance, it is – particularly in the context of organizational change – not very helpful to find out what (or even who) *is* good or *is* bad. We should rather focus on all that which *makes* a *positive difference*, i.e. on *potential improvements in relation to the discursively enacted concerns, needs and values of key stakeholders*. In order to know what is better we do not need to know what is good.

This might sound trivial. But it makes a huge difference in terms of creativity, of mobilizing resources and talents, of motivational effects, of commitment and therefore of innovative power whether people routinely tend to look for (past) failures and problems, for (given) causes of these problems and finally for (defective) people who are accountable for these problems or whether people – in an attitude of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2001) – routinely try to explore any kind of differences in relation to the ongoing practices which have the potential to create *improvements* for the stakeholders of an organization.

If we understand an organization as *hologram* of similar, widely dispersed and routinized discursive practices (Morgan, 1997, p. 100), this kind of *attitude* and *discursive micro-routines* is probably of huge importance. In that

sense, the routinized discursive practices, primarily of top management teams, which usually are precisely observed and imitated by many people, may play a crucial role.

2.2 Two Dimensions of Discursive Practice

Although Watzlawick and his colleagues have already published their famous book "Pragmatics of Human Communication" in 1967, the basic *communicative nature* of leading and organizing has not yet been seriously taken into consideration by management science. If we look at dominant approaches and concepts of today's management science, the implications of the contributions by Watzlawick and his colleagues are not reflected at all.

First, communication is often technically treated as a more or less trivial transportation problem of any messages, data and information – as if all these were objectively given entities. Second, the cultural-relational dimension of any kind of social interaction, i.e. identity, exclusion and inclusion, power, conflict or micro-politics are largely neglected or treated just as disturbing side effects of management.

By considering this prevailing trivializing understanding of communication it may not surprise, that still rational-technical and cognitive-individualistic approaches of management and organization do dominate our field.

But unfortunately, managers (and scholars) are not sufficiently aware that process is not always equal to process. In that case, our language may be imprecise with fatal consequences. For in the ongoing discursive practice, i.e. in the daily management and business processes of organizations, two quite *different effects or results are enacted*: on the one hand the goods, products and services (cars, beverages and food, sports equipment, insurance contracts and payments etc.). This reflects the *analytical-technical dimension* of organizational value creation for the stakeholders. "Analytical-technical" means that the activities and the data, material and money flows can be more or less objectively described, analyzed and mapped on a process plan, for example.

Equally important and *inseparably interwoven* is, on the other hand, the enactment of a multitude of *relations*, e.g. relations between employees, between employees and departments, between corporate centers and divisions, between company, sales force and customers, between products and customers (brand management), between past, presence and future, between daily observations and their representation in the control and incentive system etc. These highly complex effects can hardly be described by analytical methods or

everyday language. This however does not mean not to care about the cultural-relational dimension of management practices.

2.2.1 Methodological Implications

The assumption that *discursive processes are the key formative element of organizing* and that each discourse can be characterized by an inseparably interwoven analytical-technical and cultural-relational dimension led to the following methodological implication: the relationship between researcher and researched enacted in the research discourse is not a trivial one (in the sense of von Foerster, 1984). Data collection should no longer be understood as a kind of *transmission or transfer of knowledge* but as a process of two-dimensional co-creation of meaning. One dimension, the task dimension, refers to the making of meaning and scientific knowledge in analytical-technical terms, and the other dimension, the cultural-relational, refers to a mutual negotiation of relationships and identities which build the *context* in which new knowledge can be created in a process of co-generative learning (Elden & Levin, 1991). This needs to be carefully reflected and documented in each research process.

2.2.2 Practical Implications

The emphasis on processes is not new in management science. Since integrated business software packages have been developed at the end of the eighties, business process reengineering efforts are quite prominent in the business world. However, we need to notify that more than 70 percents of these initiatives do fail. They do by far not meet the expectations defined at the beginning of such an effort although the aspired business models and change plans are convincing and sound from an analytical perspective. Why that? In general, as indicated in the word *engineering*, the "objects" of this kind of initiatives are conceptualized as "trivial machines" (von Foerster, 1984). In other words, the cultural-relational dimension of such efforts, all the implications of the ongoing enactment of organizational change on the identities, affiliations, and the social architecture in general, are badly neglected. However, these "unplanned side effects" on the *identity, affiliation and status*, etc. of all involved actors (people, departments, divisions, suppliers and customers, etc.) may have more or less dramatic consequences for the quality, effectiveness

and efficiency of intra-organizational collaboration and inter-organizational cooperation.

Whenever a strategic initiative with major change impact is initiated the relational processes are heavily affected and subjected to critical investigation and renewal. In other words, the cultural-relational dimension of organizational processes has a huge impact on the strategic and financial performance and the strategic opportunities of organizations. This is primarily valid for service industries.

The processes of organizational change themselves can again be analyzed and designed from an analytical-technical perspective and from a cultural-relational perspective. It may come as no surprise that the quality of change processes, evaluated by those who are involved and affected by a strategic initiative is to a great extent dependent on whether systematic efforts are undertaken to understand the inseparably interwoven analytical-technical and cultural-relational nature of organizational change processes.

3. A Critical Reflection

If there is a lot of evidence for relational alternatives, why are the more traditional entitative approaches still so dominant?

Of course, all traditional theoretical approaches have some *important advantages* for the scholars and the practitioners: they preserve the myth of feasibility and hence convey the illusion of controllability and nearly unlimited generalizability of knowledge (and "recipes") as it is the case in natural sciences. In management science, not few scholars still believe that it is possible to precisely map organizational reality by using clearly defined constructs and rigorous research methods and then to derive generalizable management knowledge as a given transferable entity. Similarly in practice, many managers believe that it is possible to control their companies by rigorously applying analytical management tools as for instance sophisticated planning methods, balanced scorecards or situational leadership styles.

However, this routinized practice of *reducing* management issues to analytical-technical tools, and the prevailing tendency to more or less neglect the inseparable cultural-relational (contextual) dimension of any management activities hides important opportunities to find better ways for understanding certain behavioural patterns and for adequately dealing with these patterns.

In that sense, resistance in change processes is for instance not just an irrational "reaction" of those who might suffer from any inconveniences but the

enactment of a discourse by those change protagonists which are confronted with effects and behavioural processes they do not expect based on their (more or less exclusively) analytical-technically grounded change plans and anticipation of the organizational future (Ford, Ford & McNamara, 2002).

Despite this critical juxtaposition of the traditional entitative and the new relational paradigm, there is no clear "cost-benefit-analysis" for dealing with these two fundamentally different approaches of management and organization theory. This leads to the question: What do we win and what do we lose if we try to radically (from the root-distinctions) reconceptualize traditional approaches and concepts of management and organization from a *relational-discursive* perspective?

Summing up, relational organizing from a practitioner's point of view means to carefully and simultaneously address the analytical-technical and the cultural-relational dimension of organizational processes (management processes, business processes and change processes). Of course, the analytical-technical dimension is much easier comprehensible than the cultural-relational dimension. Or as a practitioner stated: "The hard stuff is easy, but the soft stuff is hard". Indeed, the complex ongoing relational processes in organizations should lead us to the conclusion to conceive of organizations as non-trivial systems (von Foerster, 1984). This does not mean that organizations are not at all calculable or reliable. It may imply to approach organizations according to a fuzzy, context-sensitive logic to better understand their idiosyncratic behavioural patterns.

4. Space for Further Development

As a management scholar I argue for an open-minded, explorative, but nevertheless disciplined use of theories, concepts and arguments which have been developed in social sciences. By doing so however, a basic condition must be fulfilled: these rich literature sources need to be *epistemologically compatible*, and if not, the resulting implications have to be carefully reflected. In that sense, I will argue in the following to better exploit two epistemologically compatible "meta-discourses" which represent a rich and complementing potential of practically helpful arguments and insights.

First, Relational Organizing emphasizes the processual dimension of organization and organizing. However, the essence of organizations are not only the processes as such but the *patterns* of these processes, i.e. the *regularities* which make some events and relations more probable than other ones.

Whereas processes represent the *temporal and irreversible dimension* of organizational life, the patterns of processes indicate what has a *certain stability over time*. In that sense the patterns depict the reversible and in that sense structural dimension of organizational practices.

Therefore, the theoretical conception and the *interplay* between relational processes and structures play a crucial role. I suppose that the *Theory of Structuration* developed by Anthony Giddens is an inspiring and valuable "discourse" to clarify the relation ("duality") between structures (structure) and processes (action).

Second, management means to deal with complexity in discursive or communicative processes. Systems theory and second-order cybernetics (e.g. Luhmann, 1984; or von Foerster, 1984) therefore may be very helpful to understand organizations in their internal and external relatedness to a more and more complex environment.

Both of these "meta-discourses" (see Rüegg-Stürm, 2001) seem to acknowledge the contingent and always context-dependent "constructedness" of our social and organizational world. Although they are based on different root distinctions (structure-action versus system-environment, cf. Reckwitz, 1997), they are compatible to a large extent.

Finally, Gibbons et al. (1994) have demonstrated that new knowledge, new options, new practices emerge at the borders of disciplines and practice worlds. This may be an additional argument for an open-minded reception of additional discourses.

Let me close with the thesis that Relational Organizing, due to its innovative perspectives and practically relevant heuristic potential, deserves much more attention in the ongoing debates on organization theory and organizational change. In the words of René Bouwen: We need *more moments of transition* in the discourse of organization theory. Of course, all those who work for new options and new ways of organizing and managing, create considerable instability, uncertainty, and possibly even confusion.

Therefore, we need to develop ways which allow to effectively disturb the dominant discourses in our field in such a way that a healthy, non-threatening balance between familiarity and stability on the one hand and newness and insecurity on the other hand can be achieved.

For that reason, it seems to be very important to mobilize familiar discourses which have the potential to *create an attractive bridge* between traditional theoretical and innovative theoretical approaches to organization and management (in German "theoretische und praktische Anschlussfähigkeit", i.e. theoretical and practical connectivity or compatibility). As already illustrated,

attractive candidates worth discussing are in my eyes the modern System Theory and the Theory of Structuration.

Let me finally thank for the invaluable insights and new perspectives I could gain out of the many discussions with Peter. It was not only his outstanding intellectual creativity and disciplined thinking but particularly the context of warm friendship which will be unforgettable for me. His always acknowledging and appreciative way of exploring and criticizing new ideas are worth imitating for all of us. Relationality in that sense makes life richer and deeper.

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8

Introduction: Every Day Practice of Social Constructionist Ideas in Organizational Life

As Vivian Burr writes, social constructionist approaches are often rendered counter-intuitive to every day perceptions of life, and thus are often perceived as rather theoretical (Burr, 1995). One explanation for seeing the areas as separate might be that theory is seen as abstract whereas the logic of practice very much entails that it is concrete and thus situated in time and place (Czarniawska, 2001). As research and practice grounded in a constructionist epistemology is always seen as making sense in connection to its context, would this distinction still make sense?

Thus the theme of the following section is very much on how constructionist approaches *do* connect to areas besides academic writing. How do they contribute and connect to every day life of organizing? Which are areas and ideas where they are part of every life and folklore of organizations? Some exploration of these questions focuses on how ideas relating to a social constructionist epistemology are connected to organizational life.

The proposal is that ideas related to (social) constructionism are these days put very much into practice. Though sometimes they are not referred to as "constructionist" but rather as "systemic" approaches on organizing. Under this label many authors are referred to which constructionism would claim as their "roots".

Just to name some people which are often quoted as fathers and grandfathers of systemic approaches and which have equally informed social constructionism: The focus on systems rather than entities is very much related to Luhmann's systems theory. The so called Palo Alto group around Watzlawick related very much to Gregory Bateson. Radical Constructivism of Maturana and Varela as well as cybernetics of von Foerster contributed to the variety of sources that expands into the language games of Wittgenstein. Some publications on systemic approaches would subsume even social constructionism as just another variety of the systemic label (von Schlippe & Schweitzer, 2002).