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Editorial

Putting process through its paces

Introduction

In the pantheon of conceptual dyads, structure/agency has been replaced by its currently more hip cousin: process/permanence. But whereas the old battle between those who liked the agent as the alpha and the omega, and those who supported the security of structure did represent a genuine case of opposites, one might well wonder exactly what the “processual approach” represents. One could perhaps claim that “process” has simply become a conceptual pile upon which we heap such morally worthy items as sensitivity to change, temporal awareness, ethnographic sensibility, or humility before complexities of the social world. Alternatively, “process” could be regarded as just one more position in the trench warfare of methodology, a place from which we can lob conceptual grenades on to those not fully attuned to the thousand plateaus of social life, or as something we can use to enhance our identity as researchers. But whereas it has always been easy to find at least some people who were prepared to fight for structure or for agency, it is not altogether easy to find anyone prepared to stand tall and defend the position of permanence against that of process.

In management and organization studies a similar conceptual dyad has long prevailed, namely that between change and stability. Inspired to a great extent by the work of Karl Weick (1979), Scandinavian researchers have been drawn towards the “change” pole, and the virtue of sensitivity to organizational change has thus been duly acclaimed. For instance, in its Scandinavian version the institutional approach has—unlike its American counterpart—emphasized change rather than stability as the norm (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996). A noticeable effect of this emphasis is the growing tendency among Scandinavian scholars to use verbs rather than nouns: managing rather than management, organizing rather than organization.

However, although the agency/structure and stability/change relationships have been widely discussed, processual approaches have received less attention. Due partly to the fact that “process” is regarded as an a priori good thing, much of what has been written about it has merely affirmed the important benefits of the processual approach, without delving into the related problems. If we want to advance the discussion on processual approaches, we must find new ways of engaging with the concept of process itself. This special issue of *The Scandinavian Journal of Management* has been specifically planned with such a purpose in mind.

In this, the present editors are by no means pioneers. Exactly 10 years ago, in 1997, the journal ran a special issue entitled “Reflections on Conducting Processual Research on

Management and Organizations”, edited by Ropo, Eriksson, and Hunt (1997). A present-day reader of that issue cannot but be struck by several things. One is the upbeat optimism that was still reigning in management and organization theory at the time, whereby “process” came to stand for a great sea change, for the promise of better times ahead. Another is the way in which the idea of process was approached, i.e. more as a technique than as a theoretical issue. Now, 10 years later, a slight shift in direction can be discerned. The papers in the present issue are still struggling with the same methodological challenges and are still intent on exploring what “process” is all about. But, in addition, processes are now being examined for the light they can throw on the very existence of “organization”.

Further, a common thread seems to run through several of the following contributions. The authors address the issues of process and permanence, but without adopting the more conventional bi-polar position of process versus permanence. Rather, what characterizes these contributions is their exploration of the complex dynamic relations involved. The papers below should thus not be seen as offering ways for “closing the books” on the processual turn in management and organization studies. We have chosen to see them as individual attempts to engage with process and with the different theoretical openings of a field-in-the-making. They approach “the processual” from many different angles, which are sometimes in direct conflict with one another. This is something that we see as a strength rather than a problem, since in order to develop contemporary management and organization studies we consider consensualism and commensurability to be less productive than creative disagreement. We have also sought to look at several different fields, including (but not limited to) the study of leadership, projects, infrastructure and complex systems, and welcomed both empirical and theoretical pieces. Our first call for submissions produced around some twenty pieces, most of which were of very high quality. The process (*sic*) of whittling these down to the six papers presented here took some time, and involved difficult choices as well as the occasional argument. We would like to thank the reviewers concerned for their hard work and constructive comments, as well as all those who submitted articles for the issue and who made it possible. The issue as it now appears took shape as the result of a gradual process (double *sic*), and is rather different (and probably much better) than the one we originally envisioned.

The process of (the) articles

The first article in this issue, “Process Theory and Research: Exploring the Dialectic Tension” by Christian de Cock and Robert J. Sharp, contends that the main problem of process theory tends to be that it merely declares its allegiance to the notion of process, but fails to be genuinely processual in the research that is actually undertaken. By presenting “vignettes” of their own attempts to realize processual research, they demonstrate both the problems and the possibilities of such an approach. They suggest that at the heart of most research claiming to be “processual”, there remains the dialectical tension involved in seeking to solidify the research process into “facts” and fixed meanings, and that the key issue in the context of processual research becomes how to resolve this.

Our second article, “Organization as Process: Drawing the Line Between Endogenous and Exogenous Views” by Tor Hernes and Elke Weik, adopts a somewhat different approach. The authors point out the need for greater clarity about the different ways in which the relevant concepts have been used, and they offer a typology for the purpose. Employing the neologism “entification”, referring to the way in which entities are

conceptualized, they suggest that there is a fundamental difference between regarding processes as unfolding in relatively stable contexts and regarding the process itself as the prime analytic order. In other words, they suggest that we need to be clearer regarding what we are talking about when we talk about process, rather than just regarding “process” as a general, generic label.

In “Rites of Passage: Organization as an Excess of Flows”, a team consisting of Hannah Knox, Damian O’Doherty, Theo Vurdubakis and Chris Westrup sets out a radical challenge to our accustomed ways of understanding both organizations and organization theory. Their study of an airport as an excess of flows, material and immaterial, suggests that organization can be understood as a very tentative process of snatching order out of the jaws of chaos, an ambiguous process where the establishment of precarious orders creates an “overflowing” organization in which there is always “too much process”. The authors further suggest that no organization exists without overflow (an excess of flows) and that organization/ordering is a precarious achievement at best. Rather than falling back on the trivial point of “it’s all a process”, they describe the studied airport as “a range of different modes, projects, technologies, and practices of ordering that coexist, supplement and interfere with one another”, thus taking the processual approach into stranger and more alien territories.

Our fourth article, “The Processual Nature of Leadership Discourses” by Niina Koivunen, takes us into the realm of leadership. Koivunen argues that processuality can be fruitfully studied with the help of discourse analysis, and she shows us how a number of discursive structures work and interact with one another to create the notion of leadership in a symphony orchestra, and how a processual approach can be used to inquire into the potential for change in leadership models. She reminds us that one of the more interesting dilemmas of research concerns how to reconcile the idea of process as change with the sometimes surprising permanence of actual social phenomena, for instance how even undesirable leadership discourses manage to survive as long as they do. Koivunen’s article ends with a discussion of the possibilities for working *through* and *with* permanence, while also maintaining a processual mode.

In an article under the intriguing title “A *Mise-en-sens* Process—Sensegiving and Wind Power Development”, Hervé Corvellec and Anette Risberg challenge us to look at another kind of process, namely sensemaking/sensegiving. Starting from a study of the Swedish wind power industry, Corvellec and Risberg discuss a peculiar process of managing meaning and elocutionary direction that they call “*mise-en-sens*”. This combination of stage-setting (“*mise-en-scène*”) and “setting” *sens* (in French = either meaning or direction) is used to describe how people in a loosely coupled network can affect decision-making and sense-making processes by pointing subtly to specific alternatives, or by otherwise affecting the parameters that create meaning around a phenomenon. Sense giving, in the authors’ interpretation, is a particular (material and textual) form of sense making, albeit one that can be so subtle as to remain invisible even to those engaging in it. In the context of the present issue, the article is an important reminder of the role of sense giving as a condition for sense making, i.e., the techniques and materials needed to maintain and drive processes, and what is required of those who engage in and study these phenomena.

Our final article is “Relational Interaction Processes in Project Networks: The Consent and Negotiation Perspectives” by Mia Larson and Ewa Wikström, which presents a case study of four project networks and the problems involved in maintaining such systems.

The authors show how consent and relationships are managed across complex organizations, and how this is affected by such dimensions as time and legitimacy. This article sets out to show how processes of interaction create the legitimacy and commitment needed if networks are to survive, and how a processual approach can help us to understand a specific kind of stability over time, thus further softening the division between process and permanence.

Taken together these articles thus offer different ways of looking at the processes of organization and management, not in order to reduce them to solvable problems but in order to marvel at them and pry into the issues they raise. The authors demonstrate the subtleties and paradoxes, the topological knots and thousand plateaus, the manifold nature and unsolvable strangeness of it all. They reveal the processual approach as one of humility in face of organizational abundance.

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