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What is This?

Time and Reflexivity in Organization Studies: An Introduction

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Abstract

The theme of this collection of essays arose from the broader theme of the American Academy of Management 2000 Conference in Toronto on 'A New Time'. The five short papers included here, plus one by Christopher Grey (University of Cambridge) were presented at a special (All Academy) symposium, under the title 'Organization Studies: It's Time for Reflection', organized by Elena Antonacopoulou. Following on from the discussion that ensued at the symposium and the comments made by the guest editors, five out of the initial six presenters revised their contributions and the symposium theme evolved into the present 'Time and Reflexivity in Organization Studies'.

Descriptors: time, reflexivity, theoria, praxis, incompleteness, scientific research

An Introduction

Questions of time and reflexivity have been increasingly prominent in the social sciences in general, and in organization studies in particular (Steier 1991; Woolgar 1988). There has been a growing realization that social phenomena occur in time, evolve in time, and are shaped by humans whose perceptions, experiences, and interactions are formed in time (Bateson 1979; Adams 1995). Moreover, as well as human action yielding particular outcomes at a certain point in time, viewed over a sufficiently long time-span, it is shaped by the manner in which actors reflect on those outcomes and on the process of obtaining them in order to carry on acting. Reflexivity, the turning of thought back on itself (Mead 1934), is an intrinsic trait of human beings. Time and reflexivity are connected, although opinions vary as to how exactly they do.

Schön (1991), for example, has argued that, in professional work, reflexivity occurs in the midst of, or concurrently with, action — reflecting-in-action. Practitioners make on-the-spot adjustments to their action; they think about doing something while doing it (Schön 1991: 54; Argyris 1982). For others, however, reflexivity, is temporarily suspended in action; it is something that can occur — indeed, should occur — only *ex post facto,* otherwise it risks paralyzing action (Polanyi 1962). Action is possible to the extent that the actor remains a being-in-the-world, unaware of what makes action possible (Heidegger 1962).

In his historically informed philosophical research, Toulmin (1982) pointed out that from the 1650s onwards, the world of action came to be seen as separate from the world of reflection; *vita activa*, the world of practitioners, was thought to be rather different from *vita contemplativa*, the world of thinkers and scientists. According to this view, practitioners act while thinkers reflect. Although this view grew to dominance along with the rise of the modern world, its origins can be traced back to the classical Greek concept of *theoria*. As Toulmin (1982: 239) explains, in classical Greece, the word *theoros* was mainly used to indicate the official delegate who was dispatched from the city-state to attend intercity athletic games, especially the Olympic games. He was not meant to take part in those games, only to observe them. Gradually, the term was used in a more generic sense to refer to any spectator of the games, official or unofficial. 'Correspondingly', Toulmin (1982: 239) remarks, 'the abstract noun *theoria* begun by denoting the activity of spectating, onlooking, or observing any activity or process, by contrast with intervening, participating, or being an agent in it. As the final step, the word achieved its familiar Aristotelian status: *theoria* came to refer to the detached intellectual posture, activity, and product associated with the philosopher's study, observation, and reflection about the world, by contrast with the *praxis* of the carpenter, the farmer or the fisherman.'

The dichotomy between *theoria* and *praxis* has often been challenged philosophically, but it was only after the mid-twentieth century that its problems became widely recognized. One of the most important achievements of the post-Second World War history and sociology of science was to have shown us the falseness of that distinction: even theoretical thinking of the kind generated by science is a form of action, in the sense that it involves people, money, and technology organized in a systematic fashion in the context of broader institutional constraints and requirements (Kuhn 1962; Latour 1987; Whitley 2000). Likewise, several studies have shown how even the most mundane forms of action involve reflection and the exercise of considerable cognitive skills (Bateson 1979; Polanyi 1962; Wenger 1998). Far from being separate, thinking and acting, theory and practice are mutually constituted.

For Toulmin, what marks the end of 'modern science' is precisely the successful challenge to the spectator view of knowledge. If the world is not a mere object to be described with an allegedly objective language, then our descriptions of it reveal as much about ourselves as about the world. The observer is part of the system of description; his/her language is one among several possible others (von Foerster 1981). Accordingly, a 'post-modern science' is a science that is aware of the contingency of its terms and categories (Rorty 1989); conscious of the partiality and historicity of its descriptions and assumptions; mindful of the inherent incompleteness of its explanations.

That is why the notion of reflexivity is so important, at least in the context of a 'post-modern science'. If we are aware of the partiality of our accounts, then we need to find out in what ways we are partial, how our accounts incor-

porate assumptions of which we are not ordinarily aware — we need, in other words, to reflect on our reflections; we need to be reflexive. Moreover, if it is accepted that the observer is not detached from the system observed, then the observer should indeed get as close to the system as possible, for, only in that way, will its internal life and development be properly understood. An engaged (as opposed to detached) observer is one who takes the *temporal* existence of the world (him-/herself included) seriously. Such an observer is not only conscious of the historicity of his/her language, but is also aware of the arrow of time and the essential flux of the world, the crucial role of human agency in shaping that flux, and the possibility of 'radical novelty' in the world (Castoriadis 1991; Prigogine 1997: 5).

How can time be incorporated in organization studies (OS)? Most authors in this collection agree that this is possible only if we move away from chronological time (clock time) and adopt the notion of subjective time — time as experienced by consciousness — in our inquiries. To do that we need to get 'inside' the objects we study. For Chia, taking his cues from Bergson, lived time — *durée* — is the only real time; chronological time is a mere convention. What really matters is how time is experienced, and human experience of time is indivisible and flow-like. In that sense, change is an intrinsic feature of reality and we need to find new ways in which change may be studied and reported.

For Hatch, it is crucial that we understand time through experiencing movement. We can do that by looking at organizing processes from within, 'by being drawn into that which is to be described'. What is important, remarks Hatch, is not only to capture the dynamics of real-life organizing processes, but also to reflect those dynamics into our own theorizing by making it more dynamic. That kind of theorizing does not invite practitioners to use theoretical models unreflectively to get things done, but rather it asks them to move around the model, to draw on their own experiences and use a model in such a way as to derive personal insights about the situations facing them. As Hatch remarks, 'to use my models, you need to put yourself into the space depicted in them, to move around the pathways they describe'.

Similarly, Calori reminds us of the difference (originally proposed by William James) between 'knowledge of acquaintance' (or in Hatch's terms, the knowledge from within) and 'knowledge about' (propositional knowledge or the synoptic knowledge of a disengaged observer). Although he does not dismiss 'knowledge about' (quite the contrary: this type of knowledge is what, ultimately, organizational theorizing should be aiming at), Calori places emphasis on how organizational researchers can gain 'knowledge of acquaintance'. He suggests that they should strive to immerse themselves in the lifeworlds of the people they study. Going even further, Calori argues for fusing action and reflection by having researchers and practitioners 'walk the path together' — by researchers becoming quasi-practitioners and practitioners quasi-researchers.

In his contribution, Hassard reflexively reminds us that our conceptions of time are necessarily time-dependent and historically conditioned. It is no

accident at all that a chronological-cum-linear conception of time has dominated modern thinking for so long. The mechanization and commodification of the world that came along with modernity, especially capitalism, reinforced a strongly chronological conception of time, since clock time became a crucial instrument of standardization, planning and control. In a similar fashion, postmodernity today involves the widespread use of information and communication technologies leading to the compression of time and space, and the emergence of instantaneous time. Such a world of instant feedback loops makes it easier for us to see time in cyclical terms and, ironically, reconnect with pre-modern notions of cyclical time (as Hatch proposes).

Without dismissing calls for fusing action and reflection, Weick puts forward here an intriguing plea for a 'disciplined reflexivity'. Extending his earlier work on this concept, Weick points out the danger of reflexivity, if it is not properly understood. The danger mainly lies in that reflexivity can easily degenerate into narcissism, into us, organizational researchers, falling in love with our own voices, while neglecting the voices of those we study. Adopting an essentially Heideggerian perspective, Weick argues that there is always something tacit, opaque, and indeterminate in human action. Actors become aware of these not during action *per se*, but only *after* they have taken some distance from action, by looking at it backwards. Action is necessarily opaque; greater awareness comes about when we reflect on the way we reflect. This is as true of those we observe (the practitioners), as it is of ourselves, the observers (the academics). As professional thinkers, inquiry is our form of action, our *praxis*. When we change the level of analysis and detach ourselves from the situation that was the object of our initial inquiry to study the assumptions and the approach we adopted in our inquiry, we become aware of our biases, of the contingency of our descriptions and of the assumptions we tacitly espouse in our inquiries.

A reflexive academic community is one which is concerned about the likely threats to the validity of its knowledge claims, and so seeks to limit them as far as possible. Weick takes his analysis one step further by reflecting on the institutional conditions that may strengthen or weaken academic reflexivity. As he points out, reflexivity is more likely to be strengthened when the institutional pressures are low for researchers to be goal-oriented, secretive, paradigm-conforming, and funds-seeking. Although Weick's suggestions on this are tentative, they form a very interesting avenue for future research on the sociology of organizational knowledge.

Notice, however, that Weick is not a naïve idealist, but a pragmatic satisficer. He does not believe that biases can be excised forever from academic inquiries; rather, his plea is that they may be limited. Like all forms of action, academic research is necessarily based on historically situated taken-for-granted assumptions; it is the contingent product of institutional arrangements and, in that sense, it is always somewhat opaque. Weick's view of reflexivity retains traces of the classical notion of *theoria* as 'detached observation'. This detachedness, however, is not a requirement for getting to the true nature of the object of study (as the spectator theory

of knowledge would have it), but is a necessary condition for seeing more clearly, more perspicuously, than before. The reason why reflexivity is so important comes precisely from the recognition that our accounts are partial, contingent, and somewhat inadequate, and from our desire to see more clearly and more broadly; to elucidate our own biases, to bring up for discussion the things that we take for granted (Taylor 1985: Chapt. 3). Of course, this is an interminable process.

The beauty of (social) scientific research, especially in the way it has been practiced in the Western world since the 1950s (Toulmin 1990), is precisely its inherent incompleteness and revisability — the recognition that what we know, at any point in time, is inherently inadequate and that, as a result, we should always be careful to submit our assumptions and perspectives to scrutiny. Such a scrutiny should not lead, however, to paralysis, but only to greater awareness, so that we can conduct our inquiries from a better position next time — and the time after that, and so on. In the words of T.S. Eliot:

'We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploration
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'

It is our hope, that this collection of essays on time and reflexivity will encourage us to take *time out* in order to take *time in*, both in our thinking and acting, researching and theorizing in the study of Organizations, organization and the process of organizing.

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