

Resources for process thinking in organization studies



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Everything flows and nothing abides

- “Abstract time” vs. “Concrete time”, (*Bergson, Creative Evolution, p. 14*)
- “Everywhere where something lives, there is, open somewhere, an inscription of time”, *H. Bergson, Creative Evolution, p. 11*
- Time is what “prevents everything from being given at once”, (Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, p.110)

Everything flows and nothing abides

- “Nothing is less present than the present [...]”, (Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p.291)
- “Our duration is not merely one instant replacing the other. If it were, there would never be anything but the present – no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances”, H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, p.3

How should we think about process? A process (Whiteheadian) vocabulary

- Reality is a *relational* process: the world is composed of dynamic interrelated processes
- *Relational ontology*: everything that is has no existence apart from its relation to other things.
- A process orientation prioritizes activity over product, change over persistence, novelty over stasis, open-endedness over determination, events over substances.
- A process view treats organizational phenomena not as *faits accomplis* but as (re)created through interacting agents embedded in sociomaterial practices, whose actions are mediated by institutional, linguistic and objectual artifacts

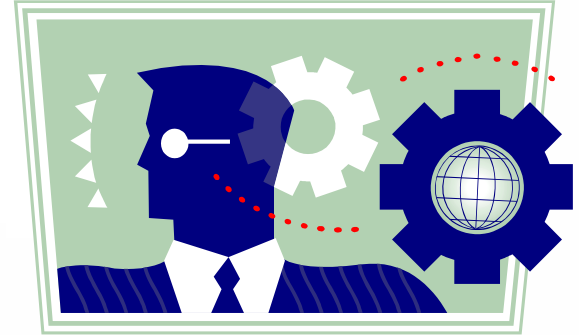
A process perspective does not deny the existence of states or entities, but insists on unpacking them to reveal the complex processes - sequences of activities and transactions - that are involved in, and contribute to, their constitution.

“The idea of discrete “events” dissolves into a manifold of processes which themselves dissolve into further processes”

N. Rescher, Process Philosophy



Substance thinking: change is an epiphenomenon; the world consists of substances.



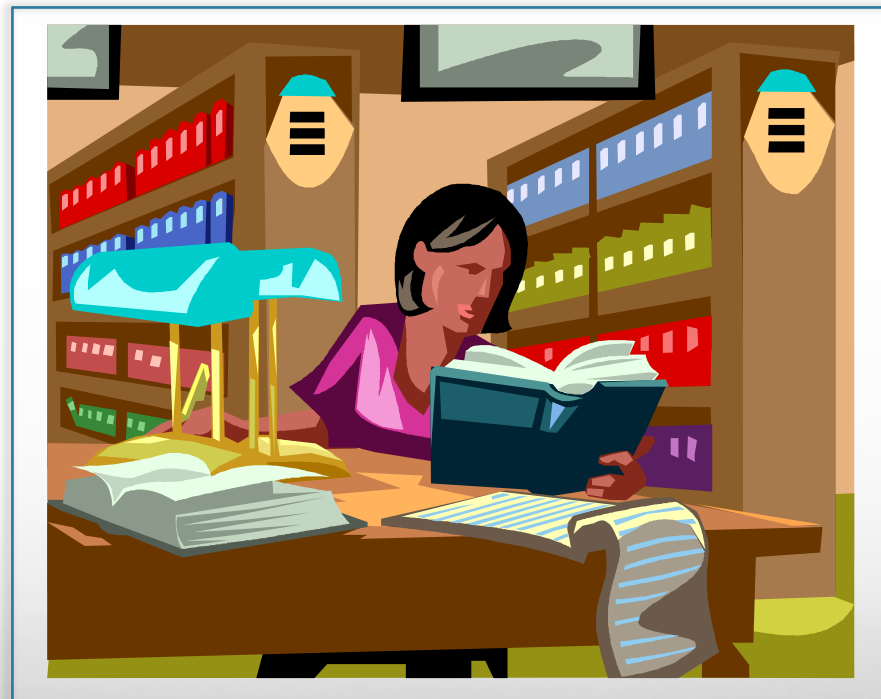
Substances:

- a) exist independently of other substances,
- b) stand under (sub-stance) their qualities and endure unchanged even when their qualities change
(*R. Mesle, Process-Relational Philosophy*)

“By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist”
R. Descartes, Philosophical Works of Rene Descartes

Substance thinking recognizes the occurrence of events but it explains them in terms of substances – i.e. events happen to substances

e.g.: “The student is reading” [the event (“reading”) happens to the substantial entity (“the student”)]



Process thinking recognizes the existence of enduring entities, but it explains them in terms of recurring interactions of events

Events are constituted by sociomaterial interactions unfolding in time

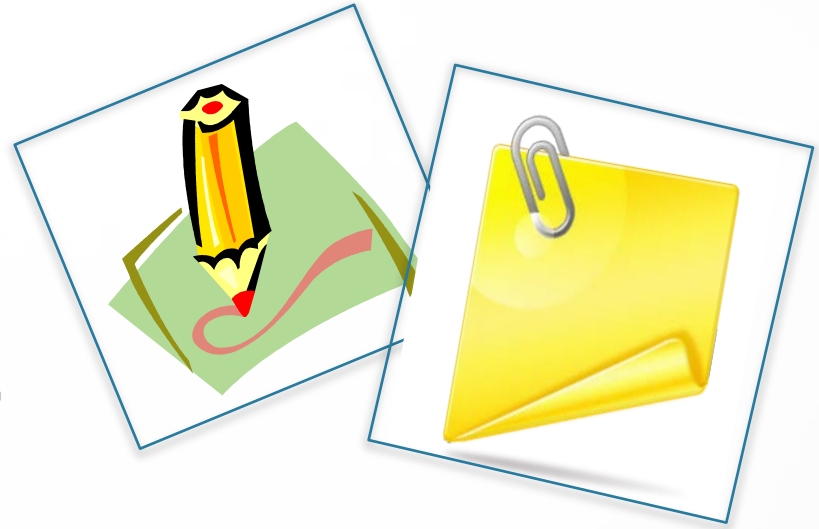
e.g.: The student is constituted by her experiences – “reading” is one of the events that constitute the student.

“Reading” can be further analyzed in terms of further *events* such as visual perception, memory, etc.

(R. L. Farmer, Beyond the Impasse: The Promise of a Process Hermeneutic, pp.64-65)

There is a close connection between the substance view of reality and the subject-predicate structure of language (Mesle, op. cit)

e.g. “The wax is white”
“The pencil is”
“3M is an innovative company”



Any qualities/predicates may change but the substance (the wax, the pencil, 3M) remains unchanged

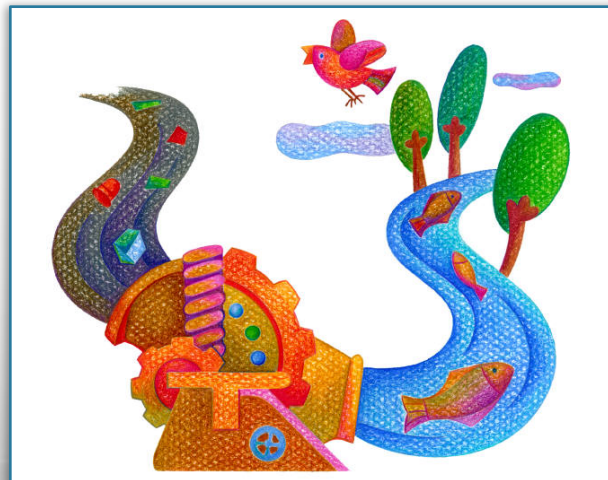
From a *process* view, the subject term is a shorthand for all the predicates; every time the predicates change, the subject term changes too

From a process perspective, agents are not unchanging mental substances but bundles of qualities.

The mental self

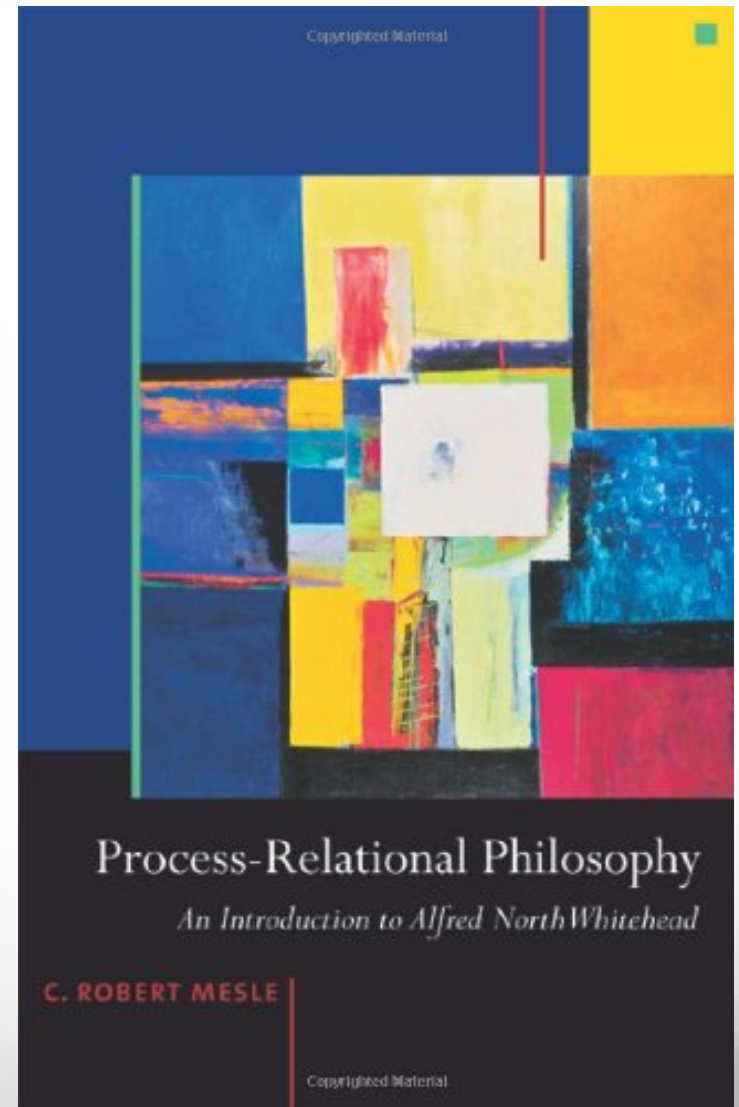
Is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement”

D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature



“You *are* the flow of your experience. Your mind, your soul, your psyche is that flow. Your sense of identity in that flow comes from memory and anticipation. There is a chain of experience out of which you arise, in each moment, more directly than anyone else. [..] You arise out of your past, out of your relationships with the whole world, and enjoy a momentary present that includes anticipation of future experiences. That moment becomes and perishes and gives birth to a new moment, which recreates you, with both continuity and novelty”

R. Mesle, op.cit., pp.48-49



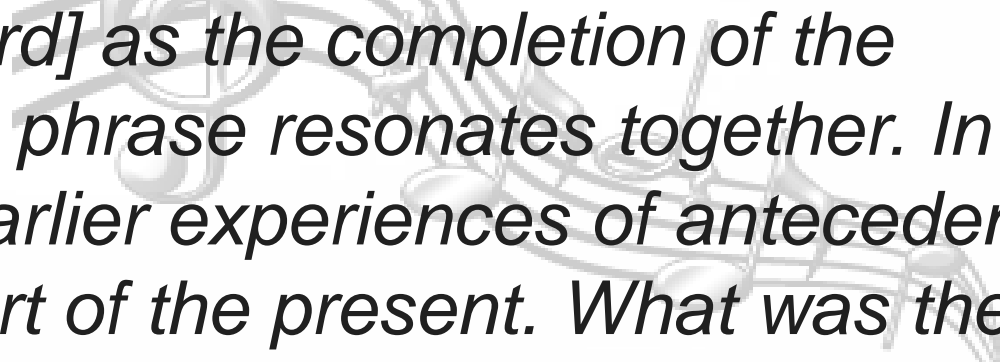
Human experience is “all that is going on within the envelope of the organism at any given moment which is potentially available to awareness” (C.R. Rogers, *A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in client-centered framework*, 1959, p.197)

Experience is :

- potentially available to awareness (what is experienced vs. what is symbolized in awareness)
- in the moment (past or future events can be part of our experience insomuch as they are manifested in the here-and-now)
- subjective
- bodily (is what we create within us through our sense modalities) – “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1962)
- process-like (flow)

(see Cooper et al, *Handbook of Person-Centred Psychotherapy and Counseling*)

Example: listening to the final chord of a musical phrase



“You hear [the chord] as the completion of the phrase. The whole phrase resonates together. In other words, the earlier experiences of antecedent chords are also part of the present. What was there-then is included in what is here-now. Whitehead says that, in the present moment, I prehend not only what is happening in my ears but also the earlier experiences” (Cobb, 2007:570)

The past does not determine the present; there is always some self-determination on every occasion.

- An event is completed when a “decision” is reached - all possibilities but one are cut off.
- The final “decision” is determined by the many tiny, nonconscious “decisions” along the way. There is no consciousness of making those micro-“decisions”; only later one is conscious of having made them.

Whitehead discerns in every occasion of human experience subtle, nonconscious “decisions”

“According to the process worldview, the “many” occasions of the past are unified in the “one” becoming part of a new “many” which requires unification in a succeeding occasion. The dynamic rhythm of the many and the one is the continuing rhythm of process”

(Farmer, 1997:74)

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“The actual world is a process, and the process is the becoming of actual entities” (Whitehead, op. cit., p.22)

Actual entities/occasions/events: “[...] the final real things of which the world is made up. [...] drops of experience, complex and interdependent” (Whitehead, op.cit., p.p.27, 28)

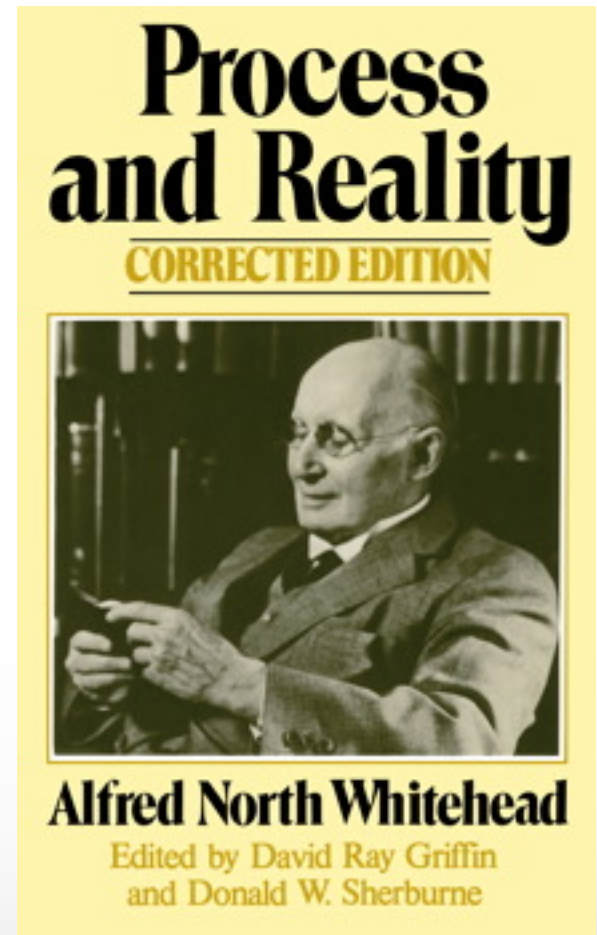
An actual entity must create itself out of past actualities; it reaches out, apprehends, and draws them in, creating itself out of them.

Eternal object: “pure potential” (Whitehead, op.cit., p.23)



Prehensions: an actual entity creating itself (apprehending, grasping) out of past actual entities

“Prehensions are the vehicles by which one actual entity becomes objectified in another [...]. [They] are ‘vectors’; for they feel what is there and transform it into what is here” (Whitehead, op. cit., p.133)



In a *prehension* what was there-then becomes here-now; the way a momentary experience incorporates (apprehends) its predecessor.

[the past flows into the present; an element moves from the objectivity of a past actual occasion (there-then) to the subjective immediacy of the becoming actual occasion. How the element is prehended constitutes the *subjective form*].

Physical prehension: apprehending a past actual entity –

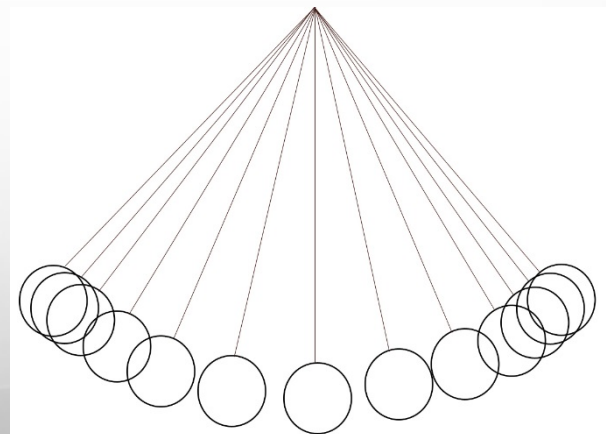
Conceptual prehension: apprehending an eternal object – a possibility

Positive prehension: actively apprehending a past actual entity; takes into oneself the experience of the past as material for self-creativity

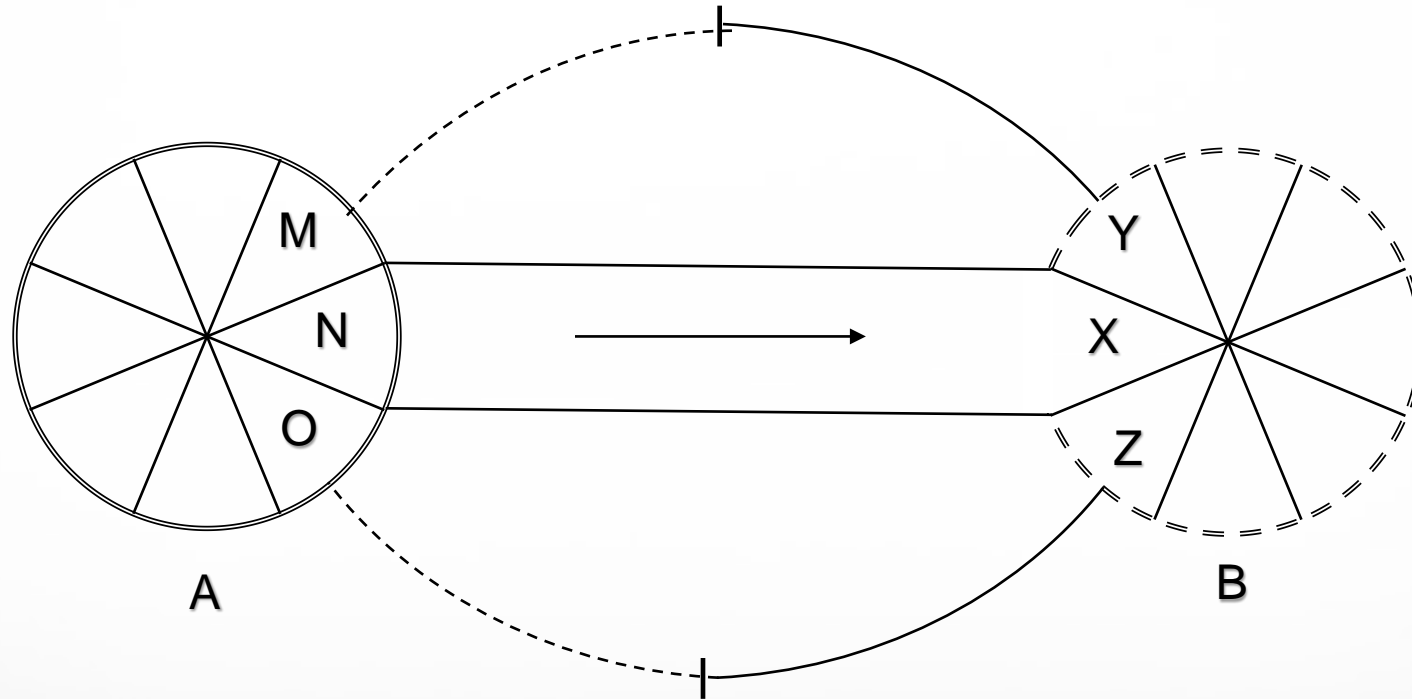
Negative prehension: blocks out the those elements of past actual entities that will not be incorporated into the present moment

Concrescence is an actual entity's process of becoming concrete; it is the growing together of a many into the unity of one

Creativity is the dynamic rhythm between the *many* and the *one*. There is continual advance from the universe disjunctively (the “many”) to the universe conjunctively (the “one”). The universe expands through unifications of itself in novel actual entities; each new actual entity offers itself as a member of a new multiplicity in need of unification: “The many become one, and are increased by one” (Whitehead, op.cit., p.21; Farmer, op.cit., p.206)



The process of concrescence



Source: D.W. Sherburne, *A key to Whitehead's Process and Reality*, 1966
p. 10

- Actors are embedded in practices concerned with carrying out tasks in particular situations. Each time they enact their practical concerns they slightly reconfigure them.

“You need to restore the past to its own present with all its incoherence, complications, and “might-have-beens””

Weick (2007:17)



Examples

Weick's studies of sensemaking;
Langley et al (1995); Shotter (2005,
2006); Orlikowski (2007); Gehman et al
(2013); Luscher & Lewis (2013),
Schultz and Hernes (2013), MacKay
and Chia (2013), etc

“[...] decision making processes are
driven by the emotion, imagination, and
memories of the decision makers and
are punctuated by sudden
crystallizations of thought”
Langley et al (1995:261)

Examples from process organization studies:

Gehman, J., Trevino, L.K., Garud, R. (2013), Values work: A process study of the emergence and performance of organizational values practices, Academy of Management Journal, 56, pp.84-112

- Focus: the development of an honor code within a large US Business School
- “[...] our primary focus was on *events* [...] (Gehman et al, 2013:89)
- “As actors emerge and interact, spillovers are likely to occur; that is, the practices of one group of actors can easily produce concerns for otherwise uninvolved actors, prompting them to become involved”
Gehman et al (2013:92)

“The honor code emerged and was performed through entanglement: concerned stakeholders were catalyzed by precipitating events, becoming spokespersons for specific values practices, and associating with each other”
(*Gehman et al, 2013*)

“Boundaries begun shifting as members who were once unconnected became involved, bring in their wake additional issues from other actor networks to which they belonged. Such as the case with the advisory board members who brought with them values practices from other organizations, such as their own companies or their children’s universities” (*Gehman et al, 2013: 103*)

Howard-Grenville, J., Metzger, M.L. & Meyer, A.D. (2013), Rekindling the flame: Processes of identity resurrection, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:113-136

Focus: the resurrection of identity in a community

“our model captures the interactions between tangible and intangible resources and lived experiences; identity inheres and is propelled by these interactions” (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013:121)

“*orchestrated experiences*” generated by community leaders.

“Responses to those orchestrated experiences rely also on other experiences that enable observers to interpret their meanings, imbue them with significance, and ultimately generate the intangible symbolic and relational resources that proper the identity forward in time” (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013: 121)

“*ongoing experiences*” are generated from the bottom up by, primarily, identity custodians who draw on symbolic resources that “capture past expressions of the identity” (Howard-Grenville et al, 2013: 121)

Maguire, S. and Hardy, C. (2013) Organizing processes and the construction of risk: A discursive approach, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:231-255

Focus: the organizing processes through which chemical products become risky

Through “*normalizing*” and “*problematizing*” practices risk is constructed. Such practices “are collectively enacted and unfold over time and, in so doing, bring the past to bear on the present in specific ways”

(Maguire and Hardy, 2013: 247)

Luscher L.S. and Lewis, M.W. (2008), Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox, *Academy of Management Journal*, 51, pp. 221-240

Focus: studying production managers in the midst of extensive restructuring at Lego Company, through action research

Helping managers to makes sense of, and act upon, changing demands: “sparring sessions” and “review sessions”

“As the managers’ roles “morphed”, blurred, and multiplied, paradoxes of performing arose from conflicting managerial demands”

Luscher and Lewis, op.cit., p. 230

“As a manager you are used to being the guy who can handle it on his own. You are supposed to have all the answers, be the best technician and be very sure of yourself...Now we should be people-oriented; and we are supposed to reveal our own uncertainty and still be in charge”

(transcript of an interview, May 1999; source Luscher and Lewis, op.cit., p.230)



Mackay, B.R. and Chia, R. (2013), Coice, change, and unintended consequences in strategic change: A process understanding of the rise and fall of Northco Automotive, *Academy of Management Journal*, 56:208-230

Focus: a five-year longitudinal study of the top management team at NorthCo Automotive and their undertaking of intended actions, which, interacting with chance environmental circumstances, resulted in changes that produced unintended consequences that, in turn, shaped decisively the fortunes of the company

“owned process theories”: processes are construed as the “doings” of/to otherwise stable social entities; they are the causal determinants of outcomes

“unowned process theories”: change happens “of its own volition”, without need for an identifiable agent of change; every choice managers make and every deliberate action taken are necessarily partial, generating unintended consequences.

“In any set of circumstances latent possibilities are always present, but that these possibilities may never be realized simply because they were never noticed or because of the choices not taken”
(MacKay and Chia, 2013: 211)

“Actors make decisions and take actions, but every choice made and action taken contain the seeds of both latent possibilities and unintended consequences that remain as potentialities as a specific moment in time; “ignorance and knowledge coexist””
(*Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005:412*) (MacKay and Chia, 2013: 211)

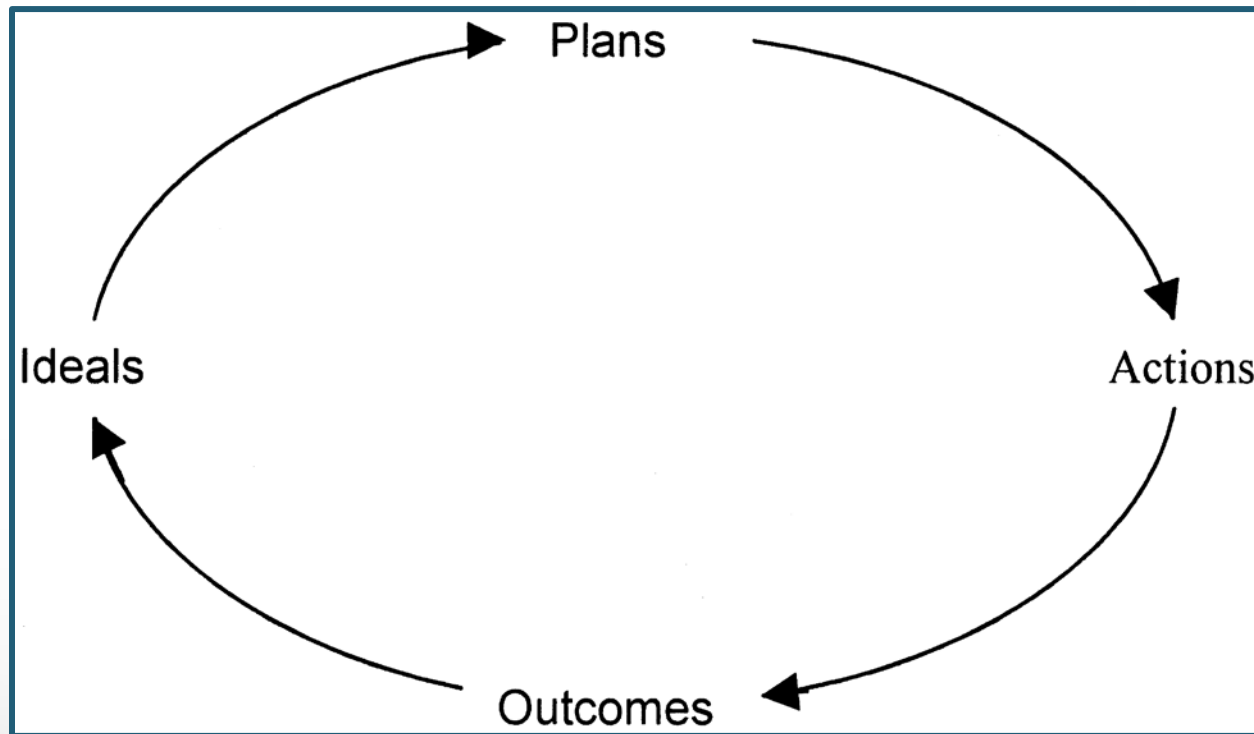
“While Napoleon thought he was in control of events, the Russian general Kutuzov knew that neither of them were, and so made fewer mistakes”
Leon Tolstoy (1869/1993, War and Peace, cited in MacKay and Chia, 2013:208)

Feldman, M. (2000) Organizational routines as a source of continuous change, *Organization Science* (11:611-629)

A performative model of organizational routines:

“Plans and actions produce outcomes that influence in conjunction with ideals or values what makes sense to do next. Outcomes at the “end” of each “round” can be compared with ideals as well as with previous plans and can feed into the plans for the next iteration of the routine. Outcomes also influence ideals or values when they change what people see as the possibilities. The interactions between the elements in the performative model as well as the cyclical quality of the model support the actions of *repairing*, *expanding* and *striving* that change routines” (Feldman, 2000: 623)

A performative model of organizational routines:



Source: Feldman, 2000:623

An entitative approach to routines

“We use “routine” in a highly flexible way, much as “program” (or, indeed “routine”) is used in discussion of computer programming. It may refer to a *repetitive* pattern of activity in an entire organization, to an individual skill, or, as an adjective, to the *smooth uneventful* effectiveness of such an organizational or individual performance” (emphasis added)

Nelson & Winter (1982: 97)

Question: What do these illustrations have in common?

Focus on:

experience, interaction, potentiality, processes unfolding in time, bringing the past to bear on the present

Objective:

to develop a coherent ontological-epistemological framework that will both enable us to appreciate the novelty of hitherto process studies *and* deepen our understanding of process thinking for the purpose of developing robust process theories