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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper presented at *Nordic Academy of Management, NFF, Aug 21-23, 2013, Iceland.*

Citation for the original published paper:

Hallin, A., Crevani, L., Lychnell, L. (2013)

Introducing the multi-spatial study: Taking process ontology seriously in organization studies.

In: *Proceedings of the 22nd Nordic Academy of Management Conference (NFF) 21-23 August, 2013, Reykjavik, Iceland*

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mdh:diva-24249>

Introducing the multi-spatial study – taking process ontology seriously in organization studies

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Abstract

This research note argues for a new method in organization studies: the multi-spatial study. Intended as a way to take the call for new methods in a fluid world seriously (Law, 2004), the multi-spatial study is a way of taking process ontology seriously by studying multiple trajectories (Massey, 2005). Methodologically, the multi-spatial study may be described as the involvement of a large number of researchers who study an organizational phenomenon from various perspectives at different places, but at the same point in time. By focusing the research efforts into a single point in time, directing attention to everything that happens in relation to the organization/al phenomenon/, a deeper understanding may be developed of how various trajectories that take form at the same time but at different physical places are related. This paper describes the rationale for the multi-spatial study as an alternative to the traditional, representational and linear ways of studying organization.

Keywords

Process ontology, performative, space, multi-spatial, ethnography, trajectory

Introduction

Within organization studies, several scholars have developed the idea that organization is to be understood as process, rather than as static entities (see Hernes, 2008 for an overview). Karl Weick is only one of those who has written on the subject, and the ideas have gained further strength through postmodernist writers pointing to the necessity of focusing on organizational becoming, rather than the being of organizations (eg Chia, 1995) as well as through “the practice turn of social theory” (Whittington & Melin, 2003).

The shift from “organization” to “organizing” is however not simply shift in words, but in ontology, from the ostensive view on the organization to the performative view (cf Latour, 1986), since it emphasizes activity and movement rather than substance and entities (Chia, 1997) According to the performative view, organizations do not exist per se (as in ‘being’), but are rather in perpetual accomplishment through action (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Hernes, 2008). Hence, organizations are what people continuously make and re-make them to (Czarniawska, 2008).

The shift towards performativity is also a shift in epistemology, and as John Law has pointed out in his seminal “After method” (2004), the shift should also be accompanied by a change in

methodology. Several examples of a methodological advancement in the direction of taking process ontology and performativity seriously have emerged; ranging from language focused methods, to methods focusing on observable actions.

Even though this is not necessarily the intention, the implications of these methodologies however do not acknowledge the ontological underpinnings of performativity. The language-based methods imply a representational view on reality, where the written or spoken text is seen to represent that which the analysis shows, and they also, just as the observable actions-methods, imply a temporal approach to that which is studied where that which is studied (language, observable actions) is seen to proceed something – this being envisaged as the result of its performative “power”. Hence, language, as well as actions, is related in a linear and sequential way, according to a cause-and-effect logic.

This may however be disputed. First of all, a truly processual view implies a process ontology where there are no entities, but where the social is an on-going relational construction. Second, organizing should be understood as something fundamental spatial, not only temporal (cf Massey, 2005). This means that there is a need for a new, different kind of methodology that takes the coexistence of different trajectories taking form simultaneously but in different places, and the relations in which they are being shaped, seriously.

In this paper, we introduce the multi-spatial study as a suitable methodology. Based on the idea that there is a need to find ways of gathering/creating/constructing empirical material in such a way that the flow of reality is acknowledged – not only in its temporal dimension, but also in its spatial dimension in terms of the sphere of multiplicity of trajectories – the multi-spatial study is proposed as a way of doing qualitative research involving many modes of writing research: ‘traditional’ text, images, photos, video etc.

The idea of process and performativity in organization studies

The idea that organizations are to be seen as processes rather than as static entities is not new in organization studies. In his seminal “The Social Psychology of Organizing” (1969/1979), Karl Weick argued for the study of “organizing” as a “consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviours”; and “to assemble ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes” (p3). “Organizing”, according to Weick, thus refers to the process of the assemblage of actions into sequences; a definition closely related to the original meaning of the word “process”, which in latin (processus/procedure) refers to the development of a series of events or actions through which something is changed (Oxford English Dictionary). It is, thus, the relationship between “organizing” as a verb (the process), and “organization” as a noun (the entity) that is of interest (Bakken & Hernes, 2006).

With inspiration from philosophers and sociologists like Alfred North Whitehead, Niklas Luhmann, Judith Butler (see Hernes, 2008 for an overview) in combination with the spread of the idea that empirical phenomena are not to be seen as having ontological status, but are to be understood as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) through discourse and action (which some would say is the same, Boden, 1994, Potter, 1996); the idea of the organization as processually constructed became appealing to a number of scholars in various areas of organization studies, inspired by different methodological traditions. Hence, the processual view has been applied in diverse areas such as organizational change (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002); organizational strategy (Pettigrew et al, 2003); projects in organizations (Lundin & Steinhórrsson, 2003); community creation (Bragd et al, 2008); gender and intersectionality at work (Bruni et al, 2004); as well as in studies aiming at connecting

micro-level observations of actions with macro-level analysis of institutions (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Postmodern organization studies, it was argued, should focus on organizational *becoming*, rather than on the *being* of organizations, in order to avoid what Whitehead in 1929 called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, which can be explained as “the tendency to see physical objects and things as the natural units of analysis rather than, more properly, the *relationships* between them” (Chia, 1995:582).

The processual view in organization studies has gained further strength through “the practice turn of social theory”, which refers to a concern with structure and systems as the fundamental elements of scientific inquiry (Whittington & Melin, 2003). According to the practice idea, organization should be understood “as it happens”, and involve a focus on what people actually *do* when organizing, managing etc (Miettinen et al, 2009). Only then may the foundation for social order and institutions be understood. Practice, it has been argued, may be seen as a solution to the perennial dualism of subject and object, cognition and the external world, and mind and body (ibid). Furthermore, practice is described as a solution to the problem between agency and structure, since it is through actions (that which can be observed, and seen as an illustration of practice), that structures are both reproduced and transformed (ibid.)

The shift from the substantive view of the organization (as a noun), to the organization as a process (as a verb), could be described as a shift from an ostensive to a performative view of the organization (cf Latour, 1986). Whereas the ostensive view implies a view where the organization studied may be understood in principle, through the piecing together of various bits of data, the performative view means that the organization may only be understood in practice, not in principle (this is impossible, it is argued), by attempting to understand how actors define it, what it is made of, etc (ibid). Hence, organization is performed through everyone’s effort to define it, to paraphrase Latour (ibid, p273). Or, to speak with Czarniawska: organizations are what people continuously make and re-make them to (Czarniawska, 2008).

Existing methodologies for studying performativity

A shift from the ostensive to the performative view on organization also implies a change in methodology, which in organization studies has manifested itself in two ways: the focus on language and the focus on observable actions.

Organizational scholars taking an interest in language share the view that language at work is a fruitful way of understanding organization since language does not represent reality and neither is a neutral tool for transferring information. Rather language has indeed performative effects producing social reality (cf Shotter, 1993; Hosking, 2011). Organizations are flows of conversations (Gergen, 2010). The focus of this kind of study may be texts (cf Vaara et al., 2010), everyday talk (cf Boden, 1994), or both in relation to each other (cf Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). Hence, studies centered on texts take inspiration from various forms of narrative approaches (cf. Czarniawska, 2004b) or discourse analysis (cf Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002) in order to show what certain texts produced in organizations do, as in the case of the power effects of strategy texts (Vaara et al, 2010), or what other texts do to organizational phenomena, as in the case of entrepreneurship discourses (Ahl, 2002; Berglund & Johansson, 2007). Studies focusing on talk as action, inspired by ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, discursive psychology, and a number of related approaches, show the work done when talking, whether it is, for example, strategy work (Samra-Fredrericks, 2003) or leadership work (Crevani, 2011; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Finally, there are also different attempts at combining the two approaches, as for example the CCO-school in which organizations are

conceptualized as emerging in the intersection of conversations and texts (Taylor & Van Every, 2000).

Another path for studying performativity in organization is to focus on observable actions; what is done. In line with the call “to bring work back in” (Barley & Kunda, 2001) several methods have been proposed. One example is the “activity-community model” (the AC-model) in which the interplay between activities as a foundation for organization and communities is emphasized, through the plotting of activities as a way of making their relationship to the organization is made visible (Bengtsson et al, 2007).

Another example is the study of actors as they are linked to each other in actor-networks. The so called actor-network-theory (ANT; see eg Hassard & Law, 1999), emerging in science and technology-studies, fits well with the process view on organization since it also emphasizes the becoming of things, the heterogenous relationality and the contingency and time-aspect, it has been argued (Hernes, 2010)

A final example is the idea of the action-net, which was introduced by Czarniawska (eg 2004a). The action-net is based on the idea that at each time and place it is possible to speak of an institutional order, or institutions prevalent in the organizational field in which the action-net emerges (ibid). Depending on the institutional order at the time, actions will be taken and linked to each other over time by the actors as an attempt to make sense of the actions in retrospect (ibid). The idea of making sense of the organization as an action-net thus implies a shift in empirical focus from how actors act in networks and how organizations are constituted by them, to how actions are tied together in the organizing process, and how actions constitute actors; i.e. how organizing processes unfold (Lindberg & Walter, 2012).

A prerequisite for language-centered studies is the strict documentation of talk (sometimes accompanied by documenting the actions taken as actors speak) (cf Nicolini, 2009) and/or the collection of texts (cf Vaara et al, 2010), depending on the research focus. While talk and texts may also be of interest for action-based methodologies, a common prerequisite in all such methodologies is that the researcher needs to gather a thick empirical material (cf Geertz 1973/2000) in order to observe actions and how these are tied together, which is why ethnography is a method that is often used (see eg Hallin, 2009). Focusing on the micro-practices may also mean drawing from ethnomethodologically informed perspectives in ethnography (see Crevani, 2011). Other possibilities may be nethographies and visual methods such as ‘snaplogs’ (Bramming et al, 2012) etc.

Ontological underpinnings of performativity: process ontology for real

However, the performative view is not limited to denote the idea that actions such as discourses and the doings of people have performative power in making “things” come about, which is the traditional way of understanding the concept of “performativity”. Rather than implying structure, substance and entity, the performative view implies a process ontology, which entails a focus on activity and movement (cf Chia, 1997). And taking process ontology seriously means to acknowledge that the *being* does not exist outside of the *doing* (cf Nash, 2000) – not that the *doing* leads to the *being*, which is the traditional interpretation of “process” in organization studies (see eg Bakken & Hernes, 2006; Chia and MacKay, 2007). “Process” is thus not a perspective that may be applied as a way to better way of explain how the being comes about, i.e. the relationship between agency and structure, but a fundamental different ontological perspective. Organizations never exist per se (as in ‘being’), but *are in perpetual accomplishment* through action (cf Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Hernes, 2008), just as gender never exists outside of the doing of gender (Butler, 1990) and

just as space never exists outside of the performing of it (Massey, 2005). Hence, a performative view on organization as an alternative to substantive and representational views (cf Barad, 2003) implies a more serious shift in how organization should be understood.

This means that that which is done should be studied in its' own right, not as a way of understanding of how this precedes the "being" of something. Organization, just as the social world at large, is a flow; a "sociology beyond societies" or a world of "mobilities", as Urry puts it (2000). Acknowledging "the mobilities turn", i.e. the idea that the world is a flow of mobilities "enables the theorization as a wide array of economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information or objects" (Büscher & Urry, 2009).

The need for a different methodology

To take the shift from the essentialist/ostensive view of organization, to the mobile/performative view seriously, an equally serious shift in epistemology must be made, as pointed out by Law in his seminal work "After method" (2004). Furthermore, this should also be accompanied by a change in methodology.

The methods used in order to investigate a phenomenon also produce the reality they claim to understand. And the research methodologies we commonly use as social scientists tend to assume that the world is a "set of fairly specific, determinate, and more or less identifiable processes" (Law, 2004:5). Instead, methods used to research a world of flows should, as Law points out, aim at "knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight" (ibid, pX).

Current methodologies do not do this. Language-based methodologies focusing on the analysis of text, images and discourses, implies, it has been pointed out, a representational view which inadequately commemorates ordinary lives since it values what is written or spoken over multi-sensual practices and experiences (Nash, 2000). This representational view should thus be replaced by a non-representational view, according to which the focus should be on the manifestations of everyday life and the ways in which subjects "know the world without knowing it" (Nash, 2000:p655; Thrift, 1996). Such an enterprise also implies restraining from neatly ordering reality into coherent scientific articles, thus imposing truths upon reality, and trying instead to keep an agnostic position where doubts is not only a resource but also an important result (Bell & Taylor, forthcoming).

Furthermore, the methodologies described above imply a temporal approach to what which is studied. The empirical phenomenon is studied over time, since that which is said and done is perceived as possessing performative power to bring something into being. Not only, but following the unfolding of the said and done has been operationalized in terms of pointing the spotlight on one actor at the time, alternately. For each situation, we have a segmentation of time in which for each "basic-unit" of time we only have one person actively doing something – one spotlight dancing in the dark and making visible one person at the time. Similarly, when reconstructing chains of actions, the aim of showing consequentiality between actions results in selecting those actions that are made to lead to other actions, thus again pointing the spotlight onto specific instances related in terms of before-after. The importance of simultaneity is thus lost and the possibility of several spotlights being on at the same time not really researched.

Even though such implications may be argued to be against the foundations of several of these ideas – see for example the debate on the alleged difference between discourse with small d and large D

sparked by an article by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), the idea of talk as work (Boden, 1994) and the assumption that organizing never ceases underpinning the action-net idea (Czarniawska, 2004a) – the way research is carried out still leads to a temporal ordering; a linear and sequential construction of events, on different levels (utterances lead to utterances, action leads to organization; language constructs organization, sensemaking leads to action), implying cause-and-effect lines of reasoning.

This means that spatial dimensions are neglected, and how different trajectories that take place at the same time but in different physical spaces, or that simply coexist in the same place, are related to each other is not investigated (Massey, 2005). In order to study this, a “genuine openness of the future” (ibid, p11) is required, which means that the study should focus on multiple trajectories as they may be observed – or, as Massey puts it – the co-existence of “stories-so-far” (ibid, p24). Only this way may the relational constructedness of organization be understood. If organization is not to be understood as a succession of events (pure temporality), but a multiplicity of relations, spatiality is as significant as temporality, and intrinsically related to it (cf Massey, 2005). Hence, there is a need for a different way of studying organizing compared to the ways described above.

The multi-spatial study

Our proposition is the multi-spatial study, i.e. the study of as many of the manifestations of organization (the organizational phenomena one is interested in studying) as possible, in various places but *at the same time*. “Place” itself should not be thought of as stable and pre-existing the people and their relations, even places are relationally constructed and their “boundedness” is socially produced (and always contested). A multi-spatial study enables us thus not only to pay attention to co-existing trajectories, but also to the specific constellations of interrelations within which a certain place is set and what is made of that constellation (Massey, 2005, p 68).

This, of course, requires the collaboration of many researchers, but could also involve informants as co-researchers, as well as technology, although the use of technology only would deprive the researcher from her/his embodied apprehension of the phenomenon. One way of performing such a study is to place several researchers in different location and ask them to document what goes on by observing, taking notes and taking pictures. Pictures would then result in a number of simultaneous snapshots to be embedded in the narrative produced by the researchers, a narrative in which the snapshots would be connected spatially with the intention to reproduce “the everyday”, multivocality, emotions, bodily apprehensions. Of course, the researcher would need to edit and choose, accounting for everything that happens is neither possible nor meaningful, since the idea is not to represent reality but to reproduce it.

Hence, studying the organization/al phenomena/ at one point in time, but in many places, would allow for a sensitivity to mobility, and a reality of flows (cf Büscher & Urry, 2009). One possible contribution of such studies could be to make co-existing trajectories and their relations visible.

The focus of the multi-spatial study should be on “rupture, dislocation, fragmentation and the co-constitution of identity/difference”, since this relation of negativity and of “distinguishing from” is what creates the ‘other’ (ibid p51); this is how the relational comes about; the trajectories that together make up the relational constructedness of the organization.

More radically, what a multi-spatial study could focus on is *movement in space*. While in movement in time there is a directionality, from before to after, in movement in space directionality is more blurred. That is, the researcher can identify processes related to each other and the interesting point is the relation itself, rather than what leads to what. To exemplify this point, one may think of a process

study treating organizing processes as always in the making, inclusive the issues in which people attention gets channeled at work. Literature on sense-giving (Gioia & Chittipiedi, 1991) and leadership (Crevani, 2011) may exemplify such takes. One could hence be enabled to follow an issue as it emerges, develops and eventually fades away – this would be movement in time. But one could also ask other questions, for example which issues are particularly mobile (present in different places)? Or which emotions do take form around an issue in different places? Or which places are being connected by an issue? Questions that would open up for different kinds of inquiries. By proposing such ideas we hope to spark a discussion about what kind of questions we have not explored yet because of the primacy we have accorded to time over space.

Such ideas do also result in another conceptualization of rhythm, an important concept in process studies. Rhythm has been brought to organization theory by scholars inspired by Lefebvre (1992/2004) and may be defined as movement and difference in repetition. Referring to the distinction articulated above between movement in time and movement in space, we could thus think of *spatial rhythm* as movement in space and difference in repetition in space. Looking at a phenomenon taking form at several places we could thus identify its spatial rhythms, its differences in repetitions possible to recognise when our bodies and eyes move from one place to another. This is yet another way of paying attention to co-existence and simultaneity, rather than erasing it from our accounts. An example of such an analysis could be to look for the different ways in which gendering enactments take place simultaneously in “organization”, how “tight” in space are such enactments, is there similar differences in repetition in several places or are there “tighter” areas with closer repetitions?

This, hence, implies a conceptualization of organization as spatial; as “open, multiple, relational, unfinished and always becoming”, to paraphrase Massey (2005:p59) – an understanding that is a prerequisite for the understanding of politics. What becomes hegemonic, oppressive, conflicts etc are constructed in a spatial setting, not only in a temporal setting. Such a take grounded in an assumption of open-ended stories, nothing that is determined beforehand, also requires a different kind of approach when it comes to what is the aim of such studies. One way of handling this question and keep the story open-ended could be to build on an agnostic position (Bell and Taylor, forthcoming) and to consider the generation of questions as the researcher’s task. Rather than reproducing reality by neatly positioning the observed developments in certain sequences and imposing truths on such developments, the researcher could see as her/his primary focus to ask good questions, questions that can give raise to further studies and further questions, in a multi-vocal dialogue in which knowledge is thus produced.

To be noted, we also subscribe to the idea of time and space constituting each other (Massey, 2005), but in this article our main aim has been to bring the spatial to the fore, which leads us to treat the temporal as analytically secondary. Also, while the multi-spatial study enables us to take into consideration simultaneity and multiplicity to a certain degree, the researcher has to define the boundary of the phenomenon to study, thus not being able to pay full attention to other stories-so-far co-existing with the phenomenon but outside the boundaries of the empirical study. Something that is important to acknowledge and to reflect on. Finally, while in this article we refer to writing in conventional research journals or books, other ways of presenting a multi-spatial study, including different medias and experiences, could also be interesting to develop.

The multi-spatial study is similar to Marcus’ idea of the multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1986) in that it acknowledges the need for studying an organization/al phenomena across spaces. But whereas the multi-sited ethnography still involves the following of “people, connections, associations, and

relationships across space (because they are substantially continuous but spatially non-contiguous)” (Falzon, p1-2), the multi-spatial study allows for a different kind of knowledge to emerge where connections and similarities are made visible outside of time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to argue for the need of a research methodology that takes process ontology seriously: the multi-spatial study. After describing the development of process studies in organization studies, we argued that none of the methodologies that aim at acknowledging performativity take the ontological underpinnings of the shift from the ostensive to the performative seriously. This is why the multi-spatial study is needed.

Even though the multi-spatial study requires a different set-up in terms of collaboration between several researchers, we contend that it is fruitful. Not only does it acknowledge the spatial dimensions of organizing in a way that existing methodologies do not, it allows for the development of the understanding of the relational constructedness of the organization. This way, we conclude, the multi-spatial study allows for new theory development in organization studies.

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