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Overcoming empty spaces: understanding organizational co-operation as generative spaces

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the theoretical potential of *space* in relation to organizational co-operations and to probe what kind of ideas the use of the space concept brings forward applied on an empirical material. We do this by analyzing the habits of thought through which public servants in four different public organizations construct their organizations abilities for co-operation. Showing that they perceive their organizations as different, threatened and important based on their experiences of previous co-operations, we propose that such constructs contribute to their "empty space"-understanding of co-operations; i.e. their idea that it is difficult to overcome spaces created in-between co-operating organizations. Shifting the focus from the organizations participating in the co-operation, to the joint organizing of actions will enable us to redefine experienced difficulties as potential generative spaces, we argue, which creates better conditions for successful co-operation.

Keywords

organizational co-operation, empty space, generative space, habit of thought

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Introduction

> "The questions of security, integration, the environment…these are questions that no single actor can solve on its own. Several organizations need to co-operate…no one owns the solution by itself… we need to find new ways forward!"
>
> (Interview with strategist [R1] at a Swedish municipality, October 2014)

Organizations co-operate for a wide variety of reasons and in a number of different ways. They form projects, joint ventures, partnerships and strategic alliances. From a societal perspective, co-operation between organizations from the private and public sectors are often seen to be necessary in order to solve the serious challenges the world faces, as the quote above illustrates.

To co-operate is not altogether easy, though. Issues of trust, culture, formal arrangements and contracts play a role, sometimes hampering a positive outcome (Zaheer, McEvily & Perrone 1998). This may seem strange, since co-operation, seen from a rational point of view, is a way of reducing transaction costs (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975) and is a form of exchange between organizations where risks are spread and new strategies for innovation may be pursued without the separate identities of the co-operating partners have to be abrogated (Powell, 1990). Also, the isomorphic processes that occur when different rational organizational actors try to change their organizations, leading to their organizations become increasingly more similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991) should make it easier for organizations to co-operate.

Thus, theoretically, organizational co-operation is beneficial to the parties involved, and the co-operation between private and public sector organizations should work well since they become increasingly more alike, through isomorphic processes. So why do empirical observations still indicate that it is difficult for organizations to co-operate?

The question itself indicates that existing theory does not hold enough explanatory value and that alternative theories on co-operation are needed. In this paper we turn to the concept of space; a concept that has been introduced to organization studies quite recently, and that conceptualizes organizing as the product of interaction (cf Massey, 2005), and organizational boundaries as constantly constructed and re-constructed (Hernes, 2004). The concept of space allows us to not limit ourselves to known co-operations between predefined actors, but to explore and redefine the vocabulary used in studying and describing new forms of co-operation.

The purpose of this paper is thus to explore the theoretical potential of *space* in relation to co-operations and to probe what kind of ideas the use of the space concept brings forward applied on an empirical material.

Research context

The paper is an early attempt of writing within the context of a new research project set up in January 2015. The project, involving 5 researchers in total and with a time-frame of (at least) 3 years, has the overall aim of developing concepts and models that will help understand organizational problems public organizations face when it comes to solving societal problems they deem they are responsible for. It should be stressed that at this point we are first and foremost probing the potential of concepts rather than their empirical and theoretical limitations. This paper is thus a conference paper where we allow ourselves to explore, not a sub-version of an article where one would expect an argumentative outline.

Outline of paper

The exploratory form of the paper involves moving successively from theory on co-operation and theories on space, over an empirical reference point focused on habits of thought amongst public servants describing their experiences of co-operation, towards a discussion where we probe different theoretical concepts on the empirical material. The contribution of the paper is thus not solely expressed as conclusions at the end, but appear in relation to different concepts throughout the paper with a special focus on the concept of space and what it brings forward in different theoretical and empirical settings.

Explaining co-operation – and why it doesn't always work

Several attempts have been made to explain co-operation between organizations. Transaction cost economics have talked about co-operation as a way of reducing transaction costs (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975), sociologists have explained co-operation in terms of social networks (Granovetter, 1973, 1985) and historians have explained co-operation in networks as the next, natural step in the development of industrial organizing (Achrol, 1997; Chandler Jr., 1990).

The organizational result of co-operation between different types of organizations are not only that participating organizations become more alike through the isomorphic processes that

emerge (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983/1991), but that new organizational forms emerge, for example "hybrids", "post-bureaucracies" and "soft bureaucracies" (Christensen, 2012; Daft & Lewin, 1993; Heckscher, 1994).

In the public sector, New Public Management (NPM) may be understood as such an isomorphic processes. Developed in the 1980s, aiming at improving the efficiency of the public sector by widely inspiration for governance and management of the business, new public management has lead to the reorganizing of public sector organizations, in many cases making them more similar to private organizations. (Gruening, 2001; Hood, 1995; Hysing & Olsson, 2011)

One would think that these processes would make it easier for organizations from the public and the private sector to co-operate; actors that are more alike trust each other more easily for example (cf Thorelli, 1986). This is not necessarily the case, though. As for public organizations, it has been argued that the context for supplying public services and to implement policy decisions has become harder to manage. Different types of co-operation, collaborations and partnerships are realities that have to be handled by public servants without the tradition nor mandate to deal with the new challenges this new context leaves them with. Public organizations are not what they used to be. (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013)

In a report from a study of the Swedish welfare-sector it was recently suggested that organizational co-operation that fails does so because important issues "fall in between chairs" indicating an unproductive, "empty space" in between organizations (Tyrstrup, 2014). The idea that organizations occupy and constitute space, and that the organizational collaboration only party fills the space in between organizations is interesting and deserves more attention, since existing theories do not seem to help us explain organizational failure.

Introducing Space

Space is a concept that has been theorized by scholars in various fields. Within organization studies, scholars have primarily found inspiration in sociology and cultural geography when developing ideas in response to the call for "bringing space back in" (Kornberger & Clegg, 2004).

Sociologist Henri Lefebvre's distinction between spatial practice (how space is produced because of how it is used); representations of space (how space is produced because of how it is imagined); and representational space (how space is produced because of how it is

practiced) is a key-source of inspiration (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). With the help of Lefebvre, organization scholars have moved away from the Euclidian conception of space as an empty container, towards the understanding of space as social and multi-faceted (see for example Dobers & Strannegård, 2004; Fleming & Spicer, 2004; Ford & Harding, 2004; Halford & Leonard; Tyler & Cohen, 2010; Wapshott & Mallett, 2011; Yanow, 1998).

Even though space is still a rather new concept in organization studies, at least two contributions have been made that are interesting for our purposes here: space as the product of interactions and the re-conceptualization of organizational boundaries due to space; placing a focus on organizing instead of organizations.

Space as product of interactions

The understanding of space as it has emerged over the years is that space is the product of interrelations constituted through interactions, "from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny" (Massey, 2005:9). This conceptualization of space is anti-essentialist, meaning that space does not exist prior to relations, identities and entities, but as a result thereof. This, in turn, means that space is the possibility of several possibilities always under construction, or "stories-so-far", as cultural geographer Doreen Massey has put it (2005).

Paying attention to space enables the consideration of the multiplicity of co-evolving trajectories – the paths that the something follows across time and space; and that are dependent on time and space (Karrbom Gustavsson & Hallin, 2015).

Space, organizational boundaries and organizing

A second contribution to organization studies that has been made under the influence of space is the re-conceptualization of organizational boundaries and the sub-sequent shift in focus from the organization/s/ to organizing.

Departing from Lefebvre (1974/1991), Tor Hernes has suggested that there are three types of organizational boundaries: mental (core ideas and concepts that are central to the group/organization, i.e. theory and meaning); social (identity and social bonding tying the group or organization together; i.e. social relations); physical (formal rules and physical structures regulation human action and interaction in the group/org, i.e. material places). All of these have the function of ordering and regulating internal interaction; of constituting a clear demarcation between the external and internal; and of regulating flow or movement

between the external and internal spheres. (Hernes, 2004; Massey, 2005) This understanding builds on the idea that the drawing of boundaries is an on-going process, subjected to constant construction and re-construction, which implies a different ontology compared to the traditional view of the organization as an entity circumscribed by stable and unambiguous boundaries (Hernes, 2004).

This process ontology thus places a focus on the on-going actions rather than the actors; i.e. on the organizing rather than on the organization/s/ (cf Chia, 1995; Czarniawska, 2008; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010).

To explore the theoretical potential of space in relation to organizational co-operations thus implies a focus on the organizing of the co-operation rather than on the organizations involved and the differences in characteristics between them, e.g. public vs. private; bureaucratic vs. post-bureaucratic etc. Furthermore, developing the understanding of the spatial dimension of organizational co-operation develops the understanding of this as the unfolding of visions; of how multi-spatial practices produce different "stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005) that make organizational co-operation possible (cf Jonasson, 2009; Karrbom Gustavsson & Hallin, 2015; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013); understandings that current theories seem to be unable to develop.

Empirical point of reference

The paper mainly draws on ten interviews that were carried out as part of a pre-study for a larger research project. The pre-study was carried out by a team of four researches during a few weeks in the fall of 2014 and encompassed ten interviews with public servants from four different public organizations as indicated in figure 1 below.

Public organization	Position of the respondent	Respondent number
V municipality	Labour Market Strategist	R1
V municipality	Environmental Strategist	R2
V municipality	Administrative manager	R3
V municipality	Administrative manager	R4
E municipality	Development manager	R5

E municipality	Municipal strategist	R6
S county	Health care manager	R7
S county	Chief of staff	R8
V county	Planning manager	R9
V county	Chief of staff	R10

Figure 1: Respondents in the pre-study

The interviews were semi-structured and concerned the respondents' experiences of various collaborations, both intra-organizational co-operation (for example between the politicians and the public servants or between two different sub-parts of the organization) and inter-organizational co-operation.

We used an interview guide that contained questions in the following areas:

- Preparatory questions (about the respondent, his position and responsibilities)
- Signs of organizational problems in different co-operations (difficulties in the execution of missions, various kinds of difficulties)
- Problems that cause a lack of resourcefulness
- Consequences (for the organization and in the long run for society)

Each interview lasted for 45-70 minutes and was digitally recorded and documented through the taking of notes. Each interview was then summarized and partly transcribed. Field notes were also taken along with minutes from meetings in the research group. Based on the interviews and complementary data a thematic analysis was undertaken.

Important to note is that all ten respondents have strategic roles in their various organizations. This means that the results reflect a strategist perspective and approach, rather than those who primarily work in operational activities. The empirical material thus reflects managerial, possibly space-detached, interpretations on what should be regarded as co-operations but also the performance of these co-operations. Co-operations that are initiated and handled on a distributed level may be ignored.

The interviews were done in the framework of a pre-study to a 3-year research project involving 5 researchers aiming at developing the understanding of inter-organizational attempts to solve societal issues. The analysis developed through a process of oscillation

between the transcripts and the reading of various types of literature (articles, books; research as well as other types); and through discussion.

The respondents' expressions in the interviews are understood as expressing "stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005) i.e. ways of thinking about a certain phenomenon that define their action possibilities. The stories-so-far may thus be understood as "socially constructed templates for actions" (Barley & Tolbert, 1997:94), i.e. the institutional order constituted by "rules, norms, and beliefs that describe the reality for the organization, explaining what is and is not, what can be acted upon and what cannot" (Hoffman, 1999:351).

Being different, threatened and important

Through the analysis, three habits of thought emerged: the view of the own organization as different; as threatened; and as important. At the same time the explicit discussion revolved around other issues, where the presentation below first sums up the explicit issues aired by our respondents and at the end returns to the habits of thought we identified as common themes in the interviews.

The public mission and the democratic society

Throughout the interviews a concern for the democratic society can be traced. Several of the respondents expressed a fear that the public mission as such might fail and that citizen mistrust in public office and organization will increase. The legitimacy of the public sector is described being at risk.

> If the municipality does not have the mandate it is challenging for democracy. Therefore it's an important issue. (R1)

> My opinion is that public activities are not aligned with where tax money value is constructed. (R2)

Although the interviews focused on co-operation, the respondents didn't limit themselves to this topic. One way of putting it is that a discussion on problems in co-operation opened up a door to a more encompassing discussion on a variety of problems with the organization of the public mission. Problems in co-operation was not limited to the boarders between juridical organizations, but existed just as well inside the public organization. There were problems in co-operation between organizational interdependent units with overlapping responsibilities, but maybe the most frustrating lack of co-operation was experienced between different layers

of the public organization (and the democratic society); the political layer, the public servant layer and also the citizen layer.

> Today we do things, each one individually. Rather than see the whole. (R3)

The respondents, all belonging to the public servant layer why only this perspective is represented in the study, expressed concerns about friction and problems in their contact with both the political layer and the citizen layer, but their descriptions differed depending on layer.

The division between the public servant layer and the political layer was described as unclear with a need for clarity and partition through better communication and respect of each party's professional discretion. The division between the public servant layer and the citizen layer was described as a problem of coordination and priority where diverging stakeholder interests in a complex world could not be met with present recourses and organization.

Democracy as a problem

The respondents were very much aware that the political layer acted on democratic principles of power and where responsible for managing and thus also where in charge of the public organization. At the same time though, there were concerns that that politicians didn't respect the expertise of the public servant layer. Instead, in many issues there was too much detail in the guiding missions, hindering an effective organization, circumscribing the degrees of freedom available. At the same time the respondents, quite laconic, acknowledged that the political game was played that way nowadays and there was not much to do about it.

> You have to know where your task begins and ends, what mandate you have. Today politicians say, 'It is I who am the county council, the hospital'. (...) The politicians dictate and it is a democracy problem. (R10)

The last sentence is interesting as "the dictate" ought to be self-evident and a statement of how democracy is supposed to work and thus do not constitute a democracy problem. Non-the less, here it's described as a problem. It suggests that there's a disagreement on the partition between the political layer and the public servant layer. There is a surplus of political presence in the public servant layer, according to the public servant. This perceived disagreement indicate not as much a space in-between the layers, but a lack of space, which needs to be addressed in order to clarify the gap, maybe by dismantling one of the layers mandate.

Complexity as a major external threat

In relation to the citizen layer, the term complexity (as a descriptor of modern society) was uttered repeatedly by the respondents in reasoning about what ought to be done, how it should be done and a lack of control over outcomes.

> Increasing complexity in all dimensions. (R3)

> We must find ways of cooping with increasing complexity. The organizational gaps increase when the number of providers increases. It is a key issue that deserves a thesis. (R8)

A complementary line of thought deals with a need of communicating with a diversity of stakeholders, which is also a description of complexity.

> Municipalities must place themselves in a regional context (in order to work effectively). (R9)

> We are still in the way of thinking that we are doing things ourselves; while we are dependent on others require another sync. (R2)

> You have to find a way to talk to each other, find confidence, daring to meet in a way, find a common picture of what you want. It requires talks, and other types of discussions. (R3)

On the other hand complexity is also used in relation to how value or avail could and should be constructed where several actors have to co-operate. In the following citation one can note that the public servant asks for more guidelines from the political layer. Again we can observe a space in-between the layers, but at this time there is a deficit of political presence.

> There is a big ideological question how much we should do ourselves compared to what we're going to let others do. (...) It should be an ideological issue. (R2)

The utterances indicate an organization out of sync with the interconnected society now evolving, but it's also a description of a society in need of handling new types of problems. Indirectly the respondents tell stories about numerous actors in different constellations that seek to fulfill their different missions through organizing. There is a lot of organizing going on, but the respondents speak of them as something they are not involved with, and they also struggle with their mandate in this. According to the traditional democracy steering model, there's an expressed need for political guidance in how to proceed, where one can also recollect the existing friction between the political layer and the public servant layer. Politicians should both interfere less (withdrawing from giving too detailed instructions) and interfere more (giving guidance in how to proceed in new ways of organizing). The space in-between layers ought at the same time both be cleared and expand to new areas.

Co-operation in the public sector seeking new forms

The empirical material shows that all the organizations involved have experienced the influence of New Public Management. The counties of Västmanland and Södermanland, for example, have introduced the ideas of "Lean" in healthcare and the municipality of Västerås has implemented the purchaser-provider model (Beställar-Utförar-Modell in Swedish abbreviated BUM), which means that business is conducted in collaboration with a variety of actors outside their organizations. In fact, the municipality of Västerås has been in the forefront of this trend, and has been using BUM as a guiding principle for managing and organizing its activities since the early 1990s. Although the results from the implementation mostly are considered positive, a report from the city suggests that the BUM-model should be revised so that roles and responsibilities are clarified. (Wretås, 2010) An on-going project in Västerås Stad is described as the next step after BUM, sometimes called BUM2, where new less programmatic steering models are to be introduced.

A problem that rests nowhere and everywhere

Even though some of the respondents show good knowledge of NPM in discussions apart from the interviews, just one of them mentions NPM explicitly in the interview and then in the passing as follows.

> NPM emerged due to the problems that existed in the 80s. I do not think today's problems are bigger than yesterdays problems. (R8)

According to the interviews, none of the respondents puts much emphasis on NPM as a specific common denominator of experienced problems. Instead, NPM appears as just a part of the context that now is in need to be redesigned. This doesn't mean that steering and control does not constitute a problem, it does and it is discernable in utterances about the rigidity of present models and utterances about a flawed attitude, at least according to one respondent.

> One can find (new) methods and tools, but you have to have an attitude where people have freedom to act within certain limits. Then they become creative, and can be expected to drive development. (R4)

A story about a public servant acting, taking fast and personal initiatives, mobilizing recourses across current organizational boarders, in order to solve a most pressing situation where there was an immediate threat of youth upheaval, reoccurs as a benchmark for how the respondents from Västerås Stad would like to see their organization work.

There are also even other, more general, descriptions of an organizational context where sediments of the past still influence the present, circumscribing the creation of an effective organization.

> Looking at it from a control standpoint, we have in addition to municipal, county councils and government control had an awful lot of different agencies, both at official level and in politics. (R8)

> Supervisory authorities set up a framework based on old rules and interpretations. The reality is changing. (R4)

In the interviews there's an expressed need for adopting the public organization to changing circumstances in a multiple of interconnected steering contexts.

> The city has not found the right configuration in how to communicate our questions. (R2)

But current interconnections, the present state of organizing public sector, appear as interlocked and with this view the present state can be used to sanction inaction and a lack of self-examination.

> The system does not stimulate self-examination, either among politicians or officials. We are locked into the old structures. (R10)

Another way of phrasing it (below) shows that the interconnections are not neutral but consists of different stakeholders with different agendas, making it hard to comply with divergent goals.

> Too many cooks spoil the broth. The cooks also have different ideas about what a good soup is ... (R8)

There are also voices that claim that what we experience today might appear as something completely new but instead constitutes just an aspect of public organization life as usual.

> The experienced lack of performance capability is a mere illusion of a problem that has always existed and will always exist. (R10)

What the empirical point of reference brings forward

The interviews indicate that collaborations, whether they are intra-organizational or inter-organizational, may not create problems in themselves, but that both problems and opportunities arises when one of the parties experience that the current interaction does not create the intended value. Indirectly it's a call for change in how we organize the current value-creation for common good in a democratic society, but with two unknowns regarding the desired value and the manageability of alternative value-creation processed. This is

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crucial, because the "the value created appears outside the [municipal] organization," as one respondent (R2) put it. A way of expressing it is that we know what we do right now, we know that it's not the best way of doing things, but we don't know how to deal with a situation where we don't control the whole process, nor do we know our discretion in order to change the current situation.

Our respondents express a need for other types of collaborations, both internally (between different formal internal boarders) and with actors outside the formal public organization. It's not just private actors that are mentioned, as was the starting point for this study, but people in general who find new forms of organizing themselves and taking responsibility for common goals. Outside the interviews NGOs are mentioned as examples, but at the same time with a reflection that it doesn't have to be in the old formats, social movements and societies, the way NGOs are commonly known to us. Instead, with reference to the modern society, concerns about the individual's ability and willingness to commit are expressed. Long-term commitments, as in traditional Swedish social movements, are not what we see today. Instead people join together for specific causes, bounded in time and space, for swift handling. Social media is occasionally mentioned as a generative factor behind this, as it makes these types of temporal organizations possible.

> Technology and technology use, social media can contribute, resolving future requests for participation (R4)

In these types of utterances we also find descriptions of concerns relating to the overarching goal of safe guarding democracy as an organizing principle for building a stable society.

In relation to the empirical reference point, a focus on spaces have invited us to understand problems of the democratic layers in new ways, where spaces does not only separate layers but also bind them together. Although the separation of spaces, the interconnectivity of the layers tells us that we need to address current problems as part of a system, where it might be convenient trying to fix a problem at the time, but that the overarching problem is about how we organize a democratic society. "It should be an ideological issue" as respondent OB puts it, where the concept of space might open up for new ideas on the marriage between ideology and the public organization.

Complexity – a contemporary garbage can with a story to tell?

Complexity is in respect of this study not so much a theoretical concept as an empirical word frequently used by the respondents when describing the reasons behind experienced problems,

where one might reflect upon why it's so popular. Several intuitive interpretations comes to mind, like complexity is a faddish word often used in describing our present society and as such is constructed as a legitimate argument when one feels confused. Referring to the complexity of things will give any argument an air of philosophical depth and at the same time a perfect rescue clause if things don't turn out as expected. One can also bear in mind the quote from one respondent (R10), suggesting that today's problems are variations of traditional problems that always have confronted public organizations. Complexity might just be the word we chose today when we'd like to say that it's hard to design a public organization in order to meet conflicting demands. Hence, complexity appears as a contemporary garbage can, which might not so much be a description of the world but a pretext for hesitation and bewilderment in the studied organizations.

The use of the term complexity might at the same time indicate a growing insight that one cannot only structure public service through existing formal organizations. Indirectly it points to the existence of empty spaces as well as a lack of public resourcefulness, where the public servant perception of complexity conceals spaces in need of handling. The frequent use of the word complexity thus might also mean that public servants have started to recognize society as something else than just limited to formal entities that are easily described and stable.

Whatever the reasons for the use, complexity appear as something to consider even in future research. Complexity as a word and idea contains a story of the modern world as we've come to know it, now we must find ways to deal with it.

Stable public organizations meet instable temporal organizations

The new types of temporal organizations mentioned in the findings section, are interesting in many ways. First they tell a story about a society in change, where people still are committed to societal goals but that they turn their attention to other types of organizations that are deemed suitable for their needs, and those organizations are not traditional political organizations. On one hand, this can be described as a threat to society and democracy as we know it. On the other hand, this can also be described as a new awakening for core democratic ideas where people join up for pursuing common goals not judged to be possible to meet individually.

Whatever one thinks about this change, one can reason about its implication on today's society and the organization of the public domain. Given that certain spaces already are occupied with the traditional public organization there will be tensions arising, as these spaces

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easily will get crowded. A complementary way of reasoning is that, given certain spaces already are occupied, people will be less interested in moving into them. Instead, it will be very easy to justify non-action by expressing that the responsibility of handling those specific spaces are already in the hands of the public organization.

For the public organization this means trouble. On one hand, in the interviews, there was an expressed responsibility for the public organization to not only do what law regulates, but also engage in issues that are deemed to be part of the creation of a good society. On the other hand, by engaging in spaces not regulated by law, the public organization will potentially hinder other types of organizations to move into these spaces. Especially if one would like to muster temporal organizations in this quest, one can easily identify that the public organization need to expand its action possibilities. It might be that the public organization should not expand its domain and move its boarders; instead an issue or a space can be handled by an organizing ability within existing boarders.

A provoking thought, remembering the democratic problem expressed earlier, is that traditional political steering could be limited to areas regulated by law, and that other areas could be more open to other types of steering and organizing that suits more modern and temporal organizations. The democratic influence could be secured in other ways, e.g. as a core value in the public organizations organizing ability.

Building on this reasoning, an indefinite number of empty spaces emerge and change as societal attention move from one area to another. It's a description of a world in motion with both merging and diverging stories. What the public organization needs are ways of not only coping with this situation, but also find constructive ways of insuring a legitimate public interest in those processes where core democratic values are at stake.

Implicit themes revisited

While interpreting the empirical material a focus on spaces brings forward descriptions of a networked society, where interconnectivity is increasing, and where spaces are constantly created and recreated. It's a society that moves away from stable, formally organized value creation where traditional organizations deliveries predefined values in predefined spaces. But, unfortunately, the empirical material leaves us in the dark when it comes to expressing clear ideas of what the alternatives might be. This bewilderment can e.g. be traced in the reoccurring reference to the complexity of society. Non-the-less, spaces appears to be a most

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useful tool for further understanding challenges to society but also when it comes to possible solutions as spaces are not limited to the formalities of the present ways of organizing.

The public mission and the public sector are not at all questioned in the interviews. Instead the respondents describe that they personally and as part of an organization have a certain responsibility for protecting central democratic ideas and a democratic society. It gives their organizations an *important* role in today's society. It justifies their concerns and their will to create and protect co-operations that are necessary for upholding a functioning society.

These are descriptions of a societal role that makes public organizations special compared to other organizations. Even issues that not legally have to be handled by the public organization are still described as part of their sphere of interest where the public organization also has a certain responsibility for these issues. Underneath one can trace a belief in a strong society where the public organization has an unquestioned position for protecting the common good in relation to other actors. The public servant is thus not just an employee with a bounded job description, but a representative and protector of the common good in a democratic society. It makes both them and their organizations *different* compared to other organizations and their employees.

The concerns about not being able to fulfill this specific responsibility for the common good is set in a historical perspective. The present organization was shaped in another, less complex (to use their own word), kind of society. Today, a lot of things are changing all around the public organization, but neither the organization nor the public servant are described as being in tune with this evolvement. There is a lack of control and influence in important issues that affect society and thus these issues also indirectly *threatens* the legitimacy of the public organization and themselves. If we aren't taking part in this development, who will then protect the common good?, the respondents seem to reason. Will we at all be needed in the future?

On spaces

In the previous section we've reasoned about some ideas that the use of the space concept brings forward applied on an empirical material. In this section we turn the reasoning around as we explore the theoretical potential of the space concept. Gradually, we move the discussion from space as relationships between actors towards space as a playground for

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actions, describing some other theoretical concepts that have been identified as interesting in the process of making sense of our material.

Space as relationships between actors

Space between the interacting parties seems to be characterized by closeness and distance, which create different conditions for successful collaboration. As the study focused on problems, one might not be surprised that distance was more apparent than closeness in the respondents habits of thought.

Closeness

Closeness between the parties that define a space allows for trust. At the individual level, trust is a key aspect when all kinds of influences are discussed and is a key to social influence. According to (Ekman, 2003), trust is created when people share ideas or exhibit other similarities alternatively have collaborated over a longer period of time. Trust is also something that is explicitly mentioned in the empirical data as central to co-operation. One respondent stressed, for example, the importance of having good personal relations with partners to get a sense of confidence and trust.

In the interviews there are several examples of various groupings not understanding each other and having difficulties of taking each other's perspectives. As described above three main perspectives in the public organization, attributed to layer, where apparent in the interviews: the political perspective, the public servant perspective and citizen perspective. Just how stable and defined these perspectives are, this preliminary study does not answer, but judging by the habits of thought expressed in the interviews the contact surfaces between these three layers are weak (often limited to immediate contacts through the formal organization), that they speak different languages and that they deal with each issue as it is defined within their own specific context. Time and effort for building relationships amongst our respondents were devoted primarily to the public servants own layer at the expense of other relationships.

This indicates that shared ideas and fellowship mainly are developed in circumscribed contexts. The closeness within each group is strengthened, but the distance to other groups and contexts increases, which then promotes calculated relational forms between functions and positions in other layers. Trust may not be absent, but is harder to muster in relations between layers apparent in the study. Politicians talk with a political tongue, public servants

uses official language, where the citizen might be a stranger to both contexts where official services are organized and explained. Through this we can observe how internal spaces in the public organization evolve through a chain from politicians, through public servants and providers to the end users (citizens).

Distance

The opposite of closeness, distance, can also bridge spaces but then through a calculated relational form, which in its extreme means that relationships are created between positions and functions rather than between individuals. (Sjöstrand, 1997) These can work well if they involve well-balanced formal agreements covering the variance in value creation and / or a complementary personal closeness between the parties.

The preliminary study indicates that distance in a predefined space is not handled effectively, for example, in an organization where BUM was introduced, which involves the creation of positions and functions in terms of client and contractor. The prerequisite for this to work is that the clients are good clients that can specify the order, and that the executors not only are good at delivering according to what has been agreed, but see the overarching goal of what is to be achieved through the order; i.e. the benefit and the value of the interaction. When value creation, for example through BUM, increasingly is carried out by external parties (creating new relationships and new spaces, as described above) they are characterized by distance.

This development means that an increasing number of internal and external spaces emerge where the responsible public organization has difficulties in organizing and controlling the actual value delivered. Distance can, as described, be handled by calculated relational forms, but a tentative interpretation of the study, is that the calculations and formalities of existing co-operative relationships aren't enough for securing a good (and adjustable) value delivery. The use of space will in this situation constitute a promising reference point for critique of the present situation but also a reference point for constructing new types of calculated relational forms.

New organizing abilities needed

Building on this, and adding from our findings about complexity and new temporal organizations, one can spot a situation where the traditional way of handling spaces as distance through long term formal agreements can be questioned. Organizing actions that will build closeness and/or handle distance will instead be an alternative path to pursue. The

suggested organizing ability, mentioned above, must thus incorporate new abilities for handling space through trust and distance. Hence, both closeness and distance are deemed interesting theoretical constructs for building an informed understanding of the present situation in the public sector but also for developing new ways of constructing the public mission.

Expanding the space concept

Despite the imprecise nature of spaces, the concept appears quite versatile for analyzing problems evident in the empirical data. As apparent in the previous sections, it opens up for exploring all types of co-operations and problems that are not bound to formal and/or juridical boundaries in and between organizations. Space can be both identified and created by any type of actor opening up for new types of actions and abilities in handling it.

Judging by the empirical findings there are several types of spaces in-between actors mentioned in the interviews. There are also empty spaces within existing collaborations; i.e. situations that arise when collaboration fails or is absent, but maybe even more prominent are spaces spotted in need of handling but without clear ideas on how to engage them.

The idea of empty spaces opens up for other speculative ideas about occupied spaces or even crowded spaces. The latter noticeable e.g. when the political layer is described as moving into the same space as the public servants view as theirs. Defining a precise empty space might though be hard, as it will be much up to the eye of the beholder. In some respect malfunctioning or unbalanced spaces might be more appropriate, as it allows different views on the handling of the space, and whether it is empty, filled, crowded, unbalanced, or something else that seems appropriate. Questions regarding if, how and when actors recognize and handle space, thus appear to be a promising area of research. Taking a philosophical turn one might ask if a space exist if no one recognizes it, and then if this ignorance constitutes a problem? Can it be that utterances about complexity indicate the respondent's experience of his or her own ignorance and inability to define a space? More practically, one might at the same time ask if a space is recognized, do actors invade them, do they flee or do they wait for someone else to act, and then why?

According to the study, the normal public servant's way of handling space is hesitation in lack of clear instructions and responsibility as well as no clear mandate for action. The divergent story about the prevention of a youth upheaval (above) is also a story about the antitheses as the norm for traditional action; the preferred collaborative actions for handling a rapidly

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emerging empty space where not supported by the public organization in question. However, the story now told is about someone who broke this pattern, who had the ability to make sense of current trajectories in an unfolding story and in this spotted an action possibility in order to influence the outcome. By doing this, the empty space was filled with organizing action that turned it to a generative space.

Generative spaces

Value-creation has so far in this paper been used as a flexible term in order to acknowledge different values perceived by different stakeholders who have an interest in a specific space. Values do not have to be financial, instead each stakeholder may have their own perception of how unreleased values of a space should be accounted for and distributed. The value concept might therefore be more thoroughly studied, as different perceptions of value, what should be accounted as values, how values should be measured and who should have the right to distribute value will affect any space-organizing initiative. But value is also a word in common use, loaded with ideology, where it together with the use of e.g. the word customers is part of a discourse closely tied to a neo-liberal agenda. In the Swedish public sector, the term value is not used as much as avail (nytta), which in Swedish is less connected with financial gain and more with physical or psychological gain. This notion might also be of further interest in the research as it suggests that differences between the sought for ends differs between public and private actors, where both the design of organizations and the actions for organizing might take different forms due to the overarching ideas that guide the approach for dealing with recognition and handling of space. This leaves us in a bit of a fix, where we need to find a concept that does not limit us to a specific view. Thus, we suggest that the process of creating value (whatever that would be) and not the end result could be an interesting solution to the problem. The identification of a need, the enactment of possibilities, the creation and the realization of value could all be part of what we at this stage chose to call a generative space. Actions for organizing a generative space thus also appears as the solution to different sort of problems ems connected to space, like empty, crowded or malfunctioning space.

Within traditional organizations, value creation is managed both formally (for example through the realization of bureaucratic features such as hierarchy, clarification of roles and formal decision making) and informally (for example through the realization of post-bureaucratic features such as power and trust expressed in action and talk, rather than in

structures). These features are institutionalized and become part of/constitute an organizational culture. When organizations co-operate, value creation is more difficult to manage. But what we suggest is that if we view value-creation as organizing actions in a generative space it will be built up by e.g. both formal and informal structures from participating actors and over time build a culture that is more in line with the demands experienced by the public sector.

Spaces for learning and innovation

In complex and changing environments, control of the value creation process easily becomes a problem, especially if you also want to affirm that positive changes can be linked to efficiency or the creation of added value in the form of learning and innovation. Empty or malfunctioning spaces in value-creating collaborations, between traditional organizations as well as inside existing traditional organizations, indicate a need for action in order to secure the collaborative value-creating ability. These actions can be either geared for learning or for innovation and encompasses both formal and informal aspects, why both abilities for organizing actions for learning and innovation are deemed as interesting theoretical perspectives to pursue in this research. Adding generative space to this reasoning, we might also be able to understand how space interrelates with learning and innovation, but without being circumscribed by an explicit and one-dimensional intended value.

To continue, using the concepts of exploitation and exploration, coined by March (1991), we can distinguish between two different kinds of processes. While learning is central to exploiting the experience developed in an on-going interaction situation, innovating is central for exploring new areas and thereby developing new processes, services and products. Hence, there are potentially two main strategies for handling space. According to the study, one can trace a demand for both when the respondents either stress needs for making the current organization more adaptable (increase its ability to learn) and more able to handle new demands (increase its ability to innovate).

The paper thus suggests that we ought to redefine organizations as we know them. If we use space as a lens for our understanding and definitions we will be able to successively asses what the most essential organizational building blocks are as well as different ways of arranging these, adapting them to different contexts. In a complex and changing world these building blocks should be designed for constant motion (adapting, moving into new areas, leaving old ones behind). This suggests that any organization fit for the future is built around

an ability for organizing action in generative spaces that leads to learning and innovation. Doing this, it will be able to constantly handle empty or malfunctioning spaces that emerge in the trajectories of unfolding stories. Again, the reasoning points to a need for organizing ability, but here with two different ends – learning or innovation. An organizing ability for learning mean that involved actors must be able to change so that an emerging empty space is incorporated into an existing story. An organizing ability for innovation mean that actors have the ability to enact new stories by creating and recreating space, involving new actors and possibly dismantling present occupied spaces. Successful actors will in both cases be able to view and develop generative spaces, act on possibilities, making the most of problems and opportunities that arise, and hinder the negative influence from malfunctioning or empty spaces.

Spaces takes us from organization to organizing

Organization is such a central concept that one might miss that it's really interesting to discuss in relation to spaces, as spaces are created through our conceptions of organizational boundaries, whether they are mental, social or physical (cf. Hernes, 2004). Organizations, in common view, are defined by their formal and juridical status usually connected with a hierarchical distribution of power and responsibilities. An empty space reflects a need for coordinated actions, which e.g. can be met by co-operation between those with organizational boundaries adjacent to the empty space but also with the creation of new types of organizations. The formal and practical construction of adjacent organizations will thus influence both the creation and the handling of spaces through their organizing actions.

An organization will appear as something different from organizing, which e.g. can take place as a co-operation created to fill an empty space, where one also might reflect upon organizing actions for invading an empty or occupied space as well as protecting a concurred space. Organizing is the movement that fills the space in-between, where to some extent the term dynamic capability[2] can be used to describe a formal organizations' ability for organizing itself around confronted problems and opportunities that arise from empty spaces.

Building on this, we might say that a spotted problem, whether it's an empty, malfunctioning or crowded space, not so much calls for more organization but for organizing actions that will

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[2] Dynamic capability = "the ability to integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments" (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997, p. 516)

resolve the situation. Expanding existing organizations or creating new organizations might in this perspective be directly contra productive as a new organization in itself demands boarders for defining itself and thus will consequently result in new spaces along these boarders that need to be handled. The solution to the respondents reoccurring reference to complexity as a problem will thus not primarily lay in the creation of new organizations to fill empty spaces but in an ability to organize actions for handling space. New organizations would instead new spaces and add to complexity. To drive the point further, maybe dismantling current organizations in favor of building organizing ability, will decrease both the amount of experienced malfunctioning spaces and the experienced complexity?

Concluding thoughts

The aim of this paper has been to explore the theoretical potential of space in relation to co-operations and to probe what kind of ideas the use of the space concept brings forward applied on an empirical material. In this case the latter deals with habits of thought on problems of co-operation expressed by public servants.

To understand co-operation between organizations and to explain why they sometimes do not work as well as intended, our exploration of the space concept suggests that co-operation can be analyzed not only by looking at the differences between types of organizations that co-operate (e.g. public or private, bureaucratic or political etc.), but as a potentially generative space. By doing this we can view co-operations in the public sector as initiated to solve problems by creating value, not only (or primarily) for the organizations involved, but also for other actors e.g. in this case the end-user: the citizen. These potentially new types of organizations, outlined by co-operation in a value-creating network, also constitute a common space inhabited by formal organizations and other actors that participate in the process.

By viewing co-operation as actions, taken and not taken, within a generative space the paper shows that problems perceived by the public servants emerge due do what may be explained as e.g. empty or malfunctioning spaces between the actors. It is in the ability to manage these spaces, or in other words through learning and innovating constantly reorganize actions within spaces, that an answer to co-operating problems lays. Differences between formal organizations can of course still be interesting, but if we limit ourselves to just traditional forms or organizations we will no be able to discover those organizational forms that do not

fit the definitions we decided upon from start. Focusing on space will thus not unnecessarily circumscribe future studies in the field.

Turning to the empirical material we have identified three implicit themes relating to the problems of co-operation apparent in the habits of thought amongst the respondents, that public organization are different, important and threatened with a special task of upholding the public organizations mission of protecting the common good. The respondents are not satisfied with the way co-operation work at the moment. A distance exist in present co-operations where there is a lack of mutual understanding of what's to be done and who's responsible, thus opening up for malfunctioning and empty spaces. The isomorphic processes are thus not strong enough to handle emerging space. It can also be argued that isomorphic processes make each actor more similar in that they all become more focused on their own interest and less on the interest of those they are supposed to co-operate with. Doing this they are able to control their own known risk and costs better, with the drawback that each organizations boarders will become clearer stimulating the creation of empty and malfunctioning spaces.

Furthermore, the empirical data also indicate that it's not just about problems of co-operation between public and private actors, but about problems of co-operation between and within public organizations and with new types of organizations where the public organization does not have the tools necessary for organizing relationships in an efficient way. Malfunctioning and empty spaces present themselves when there's a change in the expectance among the actors of what's to be done and a delivery that do not fulfill the expectance.

In order to overcome these malfunctioning and empty spaces the study suggests that the public servants need a new understandings of co-operating and how co-operations could be designed for organizing actions, opening up for a wider diversity in the action possibilities of all participating parties. With this change, empty and malfunctioning spaces would more easily turn to generative spaces, ensuring that the value created is relevant and effectively handled. There's not so much a need for fixed solutions but for organizational learning and innovation processes that continuously will work against the emergence of distance in those value creation relationship the public organization chose to participate in. Given that the value is created in a mutual space, these learning and innovation processes should be open to a multitude of participating parties, ensuring balanced relationships, supporting isomorphic processes for common interests, protecting closeness and in the end safeguarding core democratic ideals that give legitimacy to the public organization.

At the same time the study suggests that we might have to redefine how we understand both the public mission and the public organization. When organizing actions become more important than organizations, the structure and role of today's public organization might not suffice. Turning from a focus on formal organizations to organizing actions for generative spaces thus opens up for a more unprejudiced discussion on co-operation as well as how to organize a democratic society.

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