

CLOUD OF THOUGHTS

- ON PROCES ORGANIZATIONS IN A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTED WORLD

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Organizations are “(...) a focus on the spontaneous, expressive-responsivity of growing and living forms: they are both responsive and expressive to each other, and, responsive to, and expressive of, the otherness in their surroundings (...) it is in the fluid back and forth flow of living, interdependent activity – activity that is always inseparably intertwined, as in an ecology, in with all the other activities occurring in their surroundings – that a certain, special kind of understanding becomes available to us¹.

What are Organizations?

Within the medical world, a precondition for curing a patient is knowing what a human being is. The same can be applied within the pedagogical world, where knowledge of a child’s development is helpful if you want to facilitate further development. Knowing what a car consists of is an important precondition for repairing a car or developing the model. If you want to preserve and help develop a municipal forest it is important to know the different kinds of trees and their optimal growth environment as well as their potential and which other plants complement their growth rate, etc.

As a leader, consultant, coach, organizational poet, organizational psychologist, etc. who wants to bring about change and development within a business it is thus essential to know what an organization is – or is it?

¹ John Shotter, Conversational realities revisited: life, language, body and world (1993/2008) p. 6.

Today all people use the word organization, however, very few people know or are able to describe what an organization is! Perhaps it is something that has to do with a number of people who meet up and do something together? Maybe organizations can be seen as buildings, virtual spaces on the Internet or streams of conversations and so on. When we try to “understand” what an organization *is*, it is as though the understanding slips away between our fingers. Many people have used metaphors to try and fathom and capture the essence of organizations. Morgan (1986), among others, speaks of organizations as machines, organisms, psychological systems, brains, etc. We will get back to the metaphors later on.

I have chosen to present an “understanding” of organizations influenced by the process organization theorists like Karl Weick, Alfred North Whitehead, James March, Ralph Stacey, Bruno Latour, Haridimos Tsoukas and Robert Chia as well as the process philosopher Henri Bergson. Further inspirations are post-structuralists such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who have also inspired this text.

In this text, the process understanding of organizations is described as the *process organization*, despite the fact that it is described differently by other theorists – or as Henri Bergson (1911) puts it: “There can never be a general theory on process”.

A Modern Understanding of Organizations

Research within organization theory began in the early 1950’s. The research revolved around organizations as a specific form consisting of individuals including managers, employees, stockholders, politicians, etc. There was a tendency to perceive organizations as being imbedded in an objective external reality where truth was found through valid measurements of “the world outside”. For that reason, organizations were objective parts of a real world. When they were correctly designed and managed in the right way, they were systems founded on decisions and actions qualified by, among other things, rationality and efficiency. To quite an extent, organizations revolved around input and output.

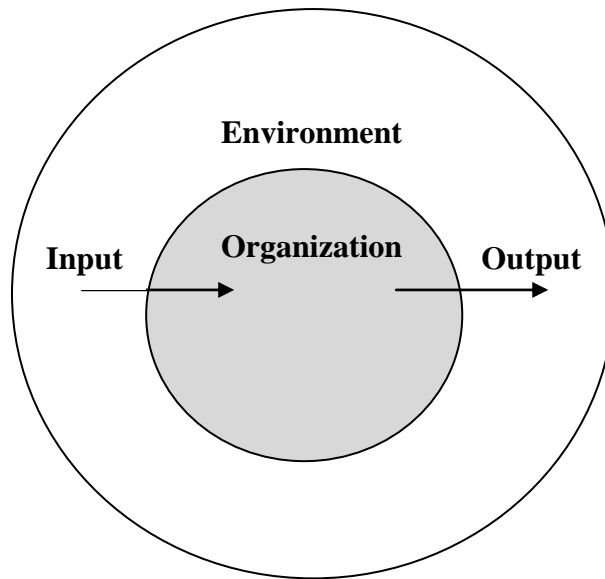


Figure 1
 A simple distinction showing the organization as an entity (subsystem) embedded within a larger system that supplies its resource inputs and absorbs its outputs (goods and services). Notice the presumption of a boundary separating the organization from its environment. (Hatch 2006: 63)

Organizations have frequently been understood from an organization diagram showing levels, units, stakeholders, management, etc. Via this reduced complexity, it became easier to name or black box (Latour 1998) the place inside the building where top management was situated as the “board of directors” or where the employees worked as the “production”. To each of these concepts were attached various possible actions, scopes or languages for the people who could be placed under such a concept.

In 1979, Mintzberg wrote the book “The Structuring of Organizations” where, among other things, he introduced six forms of organization and their coordination mechanisms:

Organization Form	Coordination Mechanisms
1. The simple structure	Direct supervision
2. Machine bureaucracy	Standardization of work processes
3. Professional bureaucracy	Standardization of proficiency
4. Divisional form	Standardization of output
5. Adhocracy	Mutual adjustment
6. Idea organization	Standardization of norms

Figure 2 – From “Organisationers form og function”, by Niels Bo Sørensen 4th edition 2000: 16

The book features illustrations of organization forms or stable images of how an organization can be understood as well as a glance at the coordination mechanisms that control the organization forms.

Once again we see a whole-hearted attempt at creating an overview over the understanding of organizations, and Mintzberg's work has helped many leaders to try and understand their organization. This is one of the mantras of modernity: to examine in order to understand and subsequently take action.

The modern understanding of organizations has been developing since the 50's with more and more interpretations of organizational realities. Via language we have built representations of reality, and the linguistic games that have been established around organizations are no longer helpful to the further development of a better social world (Pearce 2007).

In the next part of these thoughts, we will look at alternative ways of understanding organizations and the potential conversations they may call for.

Becoming organizations – The organization of constant becoming

mobility **fluidity** energy recycle renewable dynamic death ecosystem life heat waves interconnectedness form constant change constant **movement** stability instability **interactivity** clouds streams polluted lifegiving ice smooth tides shallow oceans streams becoming glaciers lifetaking flooding whirlpools snow **becoming** oceans rain fog continuous reconstructed powerful a drop delta deep clean waterfall cold wild rage beauty colors everywhere **unfolding** moving rearranging iceberg interaction impact reduced **speed** influencing borders are irrelevant hot springs patterns vapor moist uncertainty incoherence constantly shifting plurality freedom mobility unknowable **ungraspable** diversity temporarily sustainability **emergence** balance unfreeze refreeze non-sense un-finalizable diversity confusion entwinement evolve indefinite open unformed tangledness **potentiality** change rising water levels non-predictability sense **non-sense** unforeseeable substance flow possibilities the **ungoing** confusion acceleration

[“Concept cloud” Jakob Nørlem 2009]

This part of my flow of thoughts will present a process view of the world and of organizations and offer a number of concepts and considerations that support this view. Inspired by Derrida (1976), this process understanding is a deconstruction of previous understandings of organizations as described above. Not because the previous understandings have not been functional in their linguistic representation of the world, but because, with a process theoretical view, they are no longer helpful by themselves due to their stable nature.

As previously mentioned, many different diagrams or metaphors have been used in the attempt to understand organizations. Like in the above concept cloud, water or fluids are often the metaphors that process theorists apply to organizations. In this connection, Tsoukas & Chia write that "*Organizations are known by their (...) fluidity, pervasiveness, open-endedness, and indivisibility*" (Ibid. 2002: 570). In the same article, as a supplement to this image, Tsoukas & Chia present another metaphor for organizations by bringing Law (2004) into the picture whose image of organizations is an unmanageable, messy, constantly infolding and unfolding mass:

"The mass has contours which may have names, but it is a matter of definition as to where and when one contour stops and another begins. The mass twists and unfolds continuously, which is why practitioners experience it as an unfolding process, a flow of possibilities, and a conjunction of events and open-ended interactions occurring in time" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 572).

These images mean that things that apparently seem stable, calm and constant are an illusion in a fluidly connected world. "*Traditional approaches to organizational change have been dominated by assumptions privileging stability, routine, and order*" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002: 567). Moreover, Feldman (2000) has empirically illustrated how organizational routines perceived as repeated stable patterns of constant behavior actually are "flow of interconnected ideas, actions and results" (ibid:613) that regularly interact and change through new actions. In this sense the world is limitlessly interconnected when change and movement are inevitable parts of the perceived reality. All events are unique, even if they are reminiscent of previous events. In the perception of organizations as processes, change and temporality are consistent and becoming elements, whereas the perceived stability is a linguistic construction. In this connection, Tsoukas & Chia (2002: 570) describe how "*Organization is a pattern that is constituted, shaped, and emerging from change*".

With this dissolution of the traditional stable organizational limits, we can attempt to construct alternative concepts for the ones that traditionally are static. Seen from a process perspective, these alternatives can be a helpful way to orientate oneself when working with organizations.

Here I have chosen to describe two significant sets of concepts to support the process view of organizations. These sets are:

1. Becoming – understood as potentiality, opportunity and actuality
2. Organization and sensemaking

1. Becoming – Potentiality, Opportunity and actuality

”Becoming is like a (...) ceaseless activity, an enormous energy, which is constantly in the process of being produced by the very forces that it drives”

(Bakhtin 1986),

The word becoming has its origins in Aristotle’s philosophy about man’s *potentiality* and *actuality*. *Potentiality* describes man’s opportunity space whereas *actuality*, according to Bergson, has to do with the present moment: *”The present is only the ”tip” or ”cutting edge” of an indivisible, unfolding experience or becoming that constitutes our particular existence. The present is, then, an instance, an ”actuality”. It is akin to the note just played in an ongoing melody”*. (Middleton & Brown 2005:64). Like a note played in a melody, the present moment is the actuality that unfolds our being in the world, which is why the present moment becomes the temporary construction of man. The word becoming is thus the interwoven process that contains potentiality and actuality.

”The notion of potentiality is fundamental for the understanding of existence, as soon as the notion of process is admitted. If the universe be interpreted in terms of static actuality, then potentiality vanishes. Everything is just what it is. Succession is mere appearance, rising from the limitation of perception. But if we start with process as fundamental, then the actualities of the present are deriving their characters from the process, and are bestowing their characters upon the future. Immediacy is the realization of the potentialities of the past, and is the storehouse of the potentialities of the future. Hope and fear, joy and disillusion, obtain their meaning from the potentialities essential in the nature of things. We are following a trail in hope, or are fleeing from the pursuit in fear. The potentialities in immediate fact constitute the driving force of process.”

[Whitehead (1938:99–100) citeret i Hernes 2006: 60]

In an organizational context, it is interesting to speak about “organizational becoming” because the concept of becoming is important to the understanding of the continuous organizational processes of creation. As described by Whitehead in 1938, there is a risk that potentiality may disappear if the world is described only through the static nature of actuality. According to Whitehead, in such cases there is a danger that organizational movements will stop (Middleton & Brown 2005). In this context it is important to support the events that encompass both actuality and potentiality. These events could e.g. consist of the daily attempts of organizations to organize themselves, i.e. the process through which people coordinate meaning in language and action. When actuality alone exists, one assumes that the development of the organization is based on the idea that there is a more stable state in the development of the organization. This draws upon a more modern entity view of organizations (Hatch 2006: 36-41). Through the process view, both actuality and potentiality are present in the event. This results in the organization always being on its way to becoming something different as well as always ”to be repeated in a moment of becoming in a new and different form” (Deleuze 2005: 38). When potentiality and actuality are present, one can speak of the organization being in a state of becoming. The concept of *becoming* should help us maintain the process view of the organization as a whole. Further on in this cloud of thoughts I will examine the meaning of this view of the organization as a whole.

2. Organization and sensemaking

One of American social psychologist, Karl Weick's, great contributions to organization theory is the description of organizations as *organizing* meaning the movement from the stationary noun to the active verb. Weick is occupied with speaking about organization and sensemaking in the way we communicate with each other, and thus moves close to Berger & Luckmann's (1966:49-68) idea of social construction as an ongoing form of linguistic sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005). Weick goes on to say that we are always forced to work with words and visual models that are simpler than the world we are trying to organize. In regards to the use of words, Weick explains:

"People pull from several different vocabularies (Rorty, 1989) to focus their sensemaking. They pull words from vocabularies of society and make sense using ideology. They pull words from the vocabularies of organizations and make sense using third-order controls. They pull words from vocabularies of occupations and professions and make sense using paradigms. They pull words from vocabularies of coping and make sense using theories of action. They pull words from vocabularies of predecessors and make sense using tradition. And they pull words from vocabularies of sequence and experience and make sense using narratives. But all of these words that matter invariably come up short. They impose discrete labels on subject matter that is continuous. There is always slippage between words and what they refer to. "Words approximate the territory; they never map it perfectly" (Weick, 1995:107).

From this understanding of process, the fundamental instability and infinite interpretations of language mean that sense is a fluid phenomenon that moves across time and space (H. Bergson in Middleton & Brown 2005:65). This in turn means that sense is instable and that we thus inevitably take part in a constant process of sensemaking through our linguistic acts. What we do – our way of organizing things – is that we create temporary communities of meaning or language games (Wittgenstein 1965). As a part of coordinating meaning within processes of organizing, mastering language becomes an essential aspect for leaders and coaches. Moreover, they will be able to unfold and reflect the relevant forms of discourse in the organizing process. Like these leaders and coaches, the former philosopher, Derrida, who is especially known for the concept of deconstruction, seeks to challenge any focal point of a given discourse. He writes about language and meaning that: *"Language has no fixed meaning. The meaning of anything spoken or written is unstable. Constantly inviting multible and opposite interpretations"* (Derrida 1976)

When focusing on language and sensemaking, it is essential to not just create new language and language games but also to consciously phase out language, language games and, in a wider context, life forms (organizations).

Working with the concept of organizing is a way in which we allow ourselves to be fully present in the present moment, while at the same time moving along with the process of becoming – or as John Shotter (1993/2008) puts it: *"Thinking alongside the real, rather than reproducing it. Moving along the becoming process – from aboutnesstinking to withnesstinking"*.

The Impact of Process Theory on Our Language and Actions

What does it mean, this moveable and living view of our organization and our work as constructionists moving towards something that is perpetually becoming something else? It presents us with an opportunity to deconstruct the image we call organizational stability in order to see organizations as constant changes and movements. It gives rise to a new inevitable creativity, because we break with all notions of stability. Everything becomes possible. As coaches, leaders, consultants, business psychologists, employees, etc. we should all attempt to unleash this inevitable creativity and energy, which is a powerful part of all organizations. Here are a few non-empirical assertions, in relation to working with organizing based on a process theoretical perception, which are open to further discussion. They represent a temporary but not final suggestion for how people can change his or her actions and focus in everyday life:

Stop speaking about wanting to change and develop things. The change is already there. By not perceiving organizations as constant changes, streams of interactions and conversations and as a flow of situated initiatives, we make it difficult to overcome the issues that we are faced with today. It becomes difficult for us to implement new aspects and establish healthy businesses. We must stop talking about development plans and innovation projects that aim to force a specific result. Moreover, it is unnecessary to talk about employees who are willing to change or employees who refuse to move forward. Everyone is already changing – work on their potentiality instead. In such an instance, coaching becomes the speech form that supports the movements that inevitably have already begun.

Stop talking about “individuals in the organization”, George Herbert Mead wrote that: *“the self can only exist in relationship to other selves”* (Mind, Self and Society, 1934). The constantly emerging relationship between individuals is the most interesting language game to develop, because organizations cannot exist without relationships. Here constructing dialogues becomes essential in order to stretch and rupture the language and establish new discourses.

Stop talking about forms of organization and design. Firstly we have to understand the world as processes and then develop a language and take action before we once again, temporarily, can introduce more stable language games in local situations and contexts. Here it is the role of the constructionist to bring other perceptions of organizations into the picture and examine which ones are most helpful to the relevant business.

Stop talking about decentralization and employee involvement. There is no centre in an organization and it is impossible not to involve the employees. They are part of everything. The constructionist must examine and support events and language games where participation and constant influence are a natural part of the discourse.

Subsequently – what we should do more of:

We should: work with deconstruction (Derrida: undoing "reality"). Meaning that, within organizations, there are meta-societies (Bateson 1972:36) surrounding the linguistic games and life forms that are present within the organization. The meaning of language is discussed and helpful language is not discarded. Heraclitus said: "Vi kan ikke træde ned i den samme flod to gange". With our symbolic representation of reality through language, we fill the river with dams (language). If something does not flow as it should, we fill the river with more dams (we invent more languages) without removing any of the previous dams. In Jan Grau Kristensens PhD dissertation "Den selvopfyldende profeti der tryllebinder HR", Kristensen breaks with theories that are based on few but glorified experiments within organization psychology. The Hawthorne experiments, the Lewins experiment, Trist's research and Herzberg's interview are the pillars of any textbook on organization psychology. He emphasizes the fact that there is no research-related validation of the results and thus deconstructs large parts of the linguistic games that have been built up around organization psychology and HR, including McGregors X and Y theory (Kristensen 2005). This facilitates a new space for action within the process organization, and it is something we should practice more frequently. The constructionist becomes a deconstructor.

We should: re-establish our orientation. In some instances a new linguistic game arises suddenly, and many people quickly become engulfed in it – such is the case in connection with the current recession/crisis. This means that many people speak with a non-developed language about something that they do not have a language for. Experts, theorists and practitioners are looking in all directions for signs that are recognizable in their language. Signs in the shape of actions and languages. People try to interpret movements and place them in a currently “stable” language. This way of acting is typical of many people who do not have the courage to re-establish their orientation. This means that acknowledging the old linguistic games is no longer helpful, and that we have to assume responsibility for the future and create new ones through practices and languages. The meltdown of linguistic games calls for the ultimate astonishment and courage among top-management. Here the primary role of the coach is to facilitate the employees’ reflective abilities and offer them exactly the strategic insight necessary to build up an ability to constantly orientate themselves on the market and give feedback to the organization.

We should: “unsilence the other” – facilitate new voices. Fixed patterns quickly emerge within organizations in relation to the way in which different streams of conversation move i.e. what is discussed, who discusses it and who they discuss it with, when things are discussed, when discussions begin, when they stop and who decides so, what may and may not be discussed, etc. We must constantly strive to introduce new voices in the organization, dissolve the linguistic game and create temporary alliances, have customers on the payroll, have employees that speak with leader voices, leaders that speak with employee voices, invite theorists to share their thoughts, artists, poets, musicians and other voices to unfold aesthetic conversations within the organization. In this context, American psychologist and social constructionist, Kenneth Gergen, speaks of the ability to speak with many voices – being a “multibeing”. Gergen says that: ”We have created many different realities together, along with values rationalities, and practices of relating. Although these realities may overlap in important ways, they are all quite unique. As a result, we carry the capacity to live in multiple worlds. (...) one might say that we are multibeings, capable of being many persons” (Kenneth Gergen 2009; 112-113).

The important thing in organizations today, cf. Gergen, is to make room for the many voices and thereby release the energy that lies within organizations and relations on the other side of dated linguistic games. The coach is the person who can bring these voices to life.