Towards a Theory of Organizational Becoming

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1 Introduction

Organization studies appear at present to be maneuvering itself into situation where arguments revolve around a mutually interlocking dichotomy between stability on the one and change on the other hand. This dichotomy is closely linked to, and stabilised by, the dichotomy of individual-organization as individuals are viewed as “change agents”, while organizations, in the classical picture, provide the structural context for the action. Both dichotomies have served – and serve – the community well. However, when it comes to understanding organization as processes of becoming, they are not useful. We suggest that the notion of process should be disentangled from the stability-change/individual-organization debate, and that this may be done through a closer reading of Whitehead’s process philosophy. In conceptualizing organization as process of becoming, we rely on two pairs of concepts that are central to Whitehead’s work, which we refer to in this paper as dimensions for a theory of organizational becoming. First, the dimension of actuality and potentiality, which Whitehead defined as an ontological principle governing all processes. The basic tenet is that nothing can just exist somewhere in timespace without also harbouring potentiality elsewhere in timespace. This dimension is fundamental to Whitehead’s conceptualization of processes in general. A second dimension that we build on is what we define as concrete experience versus abstraction, which is a “sense-making” dimension that we find highly relevant to organization studies. Concrete experience refers to the life-world of actual, “brute” facts, where entities are present as experienced. Abstraction, on the other hand, refers to the objectification of entities into categories and their relationships. We suggest finally that novelty rather than change is an appropriate term for a perspective of becoming.

2 The double bind of stability and change in organization studies

Traditional organization theory is in no doubt as to the parts individuals and organizations play in organizational change: the organization, as a set of structures, routines or programmes, represents a stable environment for the individual agent, who is the source of change, novelty, and innovation. From the 1970ies onward, this view has been challenged by, among others, systems theory with the concept of self-organization, and population ecology with the notion of evolution. They portray organizations as ceaselessly changing themselves, while individual actions hardly matter any more, at least on the level of the unit of analysis. However, for many authors, especially from the population ecology school, organizations remain stable entities reminiscent of biological organisms. In contrast to both (but maybe closer to the latter), we propose to redraw the line sepa-