SYMPOSIUM: Embracing Uncertainties in Public Organizations: Experimenting as a Way of Doing Action Research

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Short abstract

Managers of public service organizations face a multitude of (often conflicting) values and purposes. Modern discourse invokes science to deal with the uncertainties thus engendered. In this symposium, we propose to embrace organizational uncertainty instead of curbing it; take conflicting values and purposes as a starting point, and develop an experimenting approach on organizational learning and the role of scientists herein. Experimenting hence points at probing and tinkering; searching and ‘doing’ instead of ‘knowing’. Through research in action, by intervening and experimenting, scientists and managers together uncover organizational normativities and develop ways of doing organizational complexity.

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Long abstract
Organizations, particularly those operating in the public sector, face high hopes and severe pressure to do good but have to deal with a variety of situated definitions of goodness. They must be responsive, innovative, efficient and resilient at the same time, as well as transparent and accountable to their publics. These ‘varieties of goodness’ (von Wright 1972) may cause frictions and leave managers uncertain about the ‘right’ or appropriate behavior. Scientific knowledge and ways of knowing are called upon to translate ‘evidence’ into feasible tools and solutions to curb organizational uncertainty. Action research is a case in point; here, researchers interact with organizational members (practitioners, managers) to translate research findings into real life practices, subsequently evaluating the effects of those interventions, resulting in an iterative process of truth-making and enhancing organizational performance (Kieser et al. 2015).

In this symposium, we take up an experimenting approach to action research. That is, rather than striving for implementing ‘evidence’ and curbing uncertainty, researchers experiment with organizational members (practitioners, quality support staff, managers) in creating reflexive spaces in which we uncover organization’s normativities and beliefs, and search for feasible ways of dealing with organizational complexities together (Bal and Mastboom 2007, Zuiderent-Jerak 2015). Rather than looking for certainty or truth, experiments are iterative practices of probing and tinkering, seeking answers in the course of problem solving (Hacking 1992, Sabel and Zeitlin 2012). Experimenting organizations create new spaces to navigate, as a journey with no fixed route (Clegg et al. 2005). This experimenting attitude also involves the researcher who is implicated in the experiment, standing in and outside the organization at the same time.

Questions central to this symposium are: What does this experimenting approach mean for doing ‘good’ research and knowledge development? And what does it mean for accountability, both for the sake of the experimenting organization and the experimenting researcher?

We warmly invite contributions (short papers, max 3000 words) that explore and theorize the experimenting organization and the doing of experiments in organizations, exploring the roles of managers, practitioners and researchers alike. Possible themes are:

• The way experimenting and accounting is done in organizations, and how organizations learn through those experiments.
• The role of the researcher in experimenting organizations: how are researchers implicated in the experiment and with what consequences for knowledge development?
• How does organizational experimenting act upon the relationships between managers and practitioners?
• How is experimental space created within organizations and how do organizations account for this?

Literature