The Theory of Process Research: Epistemological Issues

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“The classical ideal of science was to describe nature as a geometry. Now we see that nature is closer to biology and human history since there is a narrative element in nature as well - a story of paths taken or not taken. Indeed, the more we understand the structure of the universe, the more it begins to have common elements with human societies”
Ilya Prigogine (2000:36)

“We need not only laws, but also events that bring an element of radical novelty to the description of nature”
Ilya Prigogine (1997:5)
Process research: Sensitivity to *time*
Focus on *events*

*Time:*
Chronological: time measured objectively
Kairological: experiential time

Each *event* is connected with other events
Four perspectives on process:

• Process as development
• Process as historical reconstruction
• Process as unfolding
• Process as becoming
Process as development

Process is viewed in terms of stages/phases that lead to an outcome (Van de Ven and Poole, 2007)

Examples: life-cycle models; Isabella’s (1990) account of cognitive change; Weick’s (1979) evolutionary account of organizing

Time: chronological
Event: fait accompli; patterns of events
Process: closed
Process as historical reconstruction

Process is viewed as a trajectory that has led to a particular outcome; the researcher must reconstruct that trajectory by studying people, happenings, and circumstances.

Examples: Van de Ven et al, 1999; Pettigrew, 1985; Allison and Zelikow, 1999

Time: chronological
Event: fait accompli; patterns of connections between events
Process: determinate
Process as unfolding

Process is viewed as the pattern of actions undertaken by agents located in social practices, acting in particular circumstances, and interacting with others as well as with the results of their own earlier actions.

Example: Feldman (2002); Weick (1995); conversational analyses; ethnomethodological studies

Time: Chronological and kairological
Event: in flux; experience
Process: open-ended
"Agency is an important aspect of this perspective on routines. [...] Routines are performed by people who think and feel and care. Their reactions are situated in institutional, organizational and personal contexts. Their actions are motivated by will and intention. They create, resist, engage in conflict, acquiesce to domination. All of these forces influence the enactment of organizational routines and create in them a tremendous potential for change"

Feldman (2000:614)
Process as becoming

Process is viewed as tracing “the inner becoming of things” (Bergson); accounting for the process of becoming an event. Experiences are the building blocks of reality.

Example: “The student is reading”
• **Substantialist metaphysics**: the event ("reading") is viewed as happening to the substance ("student"). A substance first exists and then it enters into relations with other substances.

• **Process metaphysics**: the student is constituted by her experience of reading. An event does not first occur and then enter into relations with other events; the event is a synthesis of its relations with other events.
Event thinking: an event arises out of other events; it is a synthesis of its relations with other events.

*Prehension:* what was there-then becomes here-now; the way a momentary experience incorporates its predecessor; the past flows into the present (Whitehead).

Example: listening to the final chord of a musical phrase.
“You hear [the chord] as the completion of the phrase. The whole phrase resonates together. In other words, the earlier experiences of antecedent chords are also part of the present. What was there-then is included in what is here-now. Whitehead says that, in the present moment, I prehend not only what is happening in my ears but also the earlier experiences” (Cobb, 2007:570)

The past does not determine the present; there is always some self-determination on every occasion.
An event is completed when a “decision” is reached - all possibilities but one are cut off.

The final “decision” is determined by the many tiny, nonconscious “decisions” along the way. There is no consciousness of making those micro-“decisions”; only later one is conscious of having made them.
Whitehead discerns in every occasion of human experience subtle, nonconscious “decisions”

“According to the process worldview, the “many” occasions of the past are unified in the “one” becoming part of a new “many” which requires unification in a succeeding occasion. The dynamic rhythm of the many and the one is the continuing rhythm of process” (Farmer, 1997:74).
Actors are embedded in practices concerned with carrying out tasks in particular situations. Each time they enact their practical concerns they slightly reconfigure them.

“You need to restore the past to its own present with all its incoherence, complications, and “might-have-beens””
Weick (2007:17)

“[…] decision making processes are driven by the emotion, imagination, and memories of the decision makers and are punctuated by sudden crystallizations of thought” Langley et al (1995:261)
"[...] materiality is integral to organizing [...] the social and the material and **constitutively entangled** in everyday life. [...] The notion of constitutive entanglement presumes that there are no independently existing entities with inherent characteristics. Humans are constituted through relations of materiality - bodies, clothes, food, devices, tools, which, in turn, are produced through human practices. The distinction of humans and artifacts, on this view, is analytical only; these entities relationally entail or enact each other in practice"

Orlikowski (2007: 1437-8)
Time: kairological
Event: tentative; on the verge of becoming
Process: incomplete
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