Chapter 18
Organizational Learning and Action Research: The Organization of Individuals

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on organizational change, its control and regulation, from the standpoint of a non-dualistic conception of the relationship between individuals and organizations, rooted in the social theory of Norbert Elias, in a theory of organizational learning (Fabbri, 2003), and in a conception of action research (Albano, 2010) in support of organizational learning (Albano & Fabbri, 2010), which are consistent with each other. The combination of those theoretical and methodological references allows an original interpretation of organizational change and the identification of some prior rules for organized collective actions helpful at guiding change accordingly to organizational members’ needs.

The chapter shows that conflicts may arise in the regulation of empirical organizational processes, due to the incongruence between the existing structure of interdependencies and human needs. Under such circumstances and to the extent that empirical organizational processes are allowed to develop according to those conflicts, organizational learning becomes an actual cause of structural change. However, the chances to overcome conflicts and to identify more satisfying structural choices will be greater if the individuals involved in the analysis of organizational structure, can rely not only on the knowledge drawn from their everyday practice of work, but also on theoretical and methodological knowledge provided by organization theory. A peculiar conception of action research may support the re-composition of the two forms of organizational knowledge, which, to its turn, nurtures organizational learning, thereby positively affecting the relative position of the process/organization with respect to other natural or social processes/organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The person acting within the flow may have a better chance to see how much can depend on individual people in individual situations, despite the fixed general direction. (Elias, 1991, p. 48)

Mainstream theories of organization have always faced interpretative difficulties, which in great part are traceable back to one common postulate, i.e. the hypostasis of organization.

The impasse is particularly evident when researches focus on organizational change, its control, and regulation by individuals. The morphostatic aspects of the organization, and—with all the more reason—the morphogenic ones are considered separately from the dynamics and structures of individuals’ personality, and from individuals’ choices and actions. This is the case when organizations are seen as systems that, by analogy with natural ones, are regulated according to general laws, as well as the case when they are conceived as entities that unintentionally emerge from individual interactions. In both cases, individuals are not considered protagonists of their history. On the one side, a structural determinism holds fast them; on the other, their individual rationalities disperse in collective artifacts that are totally indeterminable beforehand, and escape any design aspiration.

Being convinced that human beings are competent protagonists in the process of reproduction of many of their systems, regulations, and institutions, even if with many limits on which we will dwell upon further, for years we have been investigating organizational phenomena rejecting their reification and conceiving them as processes of action and decision guided by intentional and bounded rationality towards satisficing results. This view of the organizational action is deeply rooted in social and human sciences. The Italian scholar Bruno Maggi (1990) tracks it down through an original and systematic review of some classic authors of the organizational thinking, that he called “Theory of Organizational Action”. Without going too far back in time, the notion can be found in H. A. Simon’s works. Starting from his famous work Administrative Behavior (1976), he clarified that a fertile organizational theory treats organizational phenomena such as products of intentional and bounded rationality of human beings; consequently, according to Simon, organizational artifacts are characterized by the same type of rationality. In this perspective, J. D. Thompson (1967) pinpointed that each organizational process always faces uncertainty, albeit in varying degrees and forms. This uncertainty is generated by lack of knowledge and/or consensus about desired outcomes, as well as about the tools and techniques to achieve them. At the same time, however, the process seeks to reduce uncertainty through a rational structuration of actions. Each empirical organizational process, guided by intentional and bounded rationality, expresses in such a way its relatively autonomous capacity of regulation (structuration), the validity of which is then evaluated on the basis of the achievement of the desired outcomes.

The cited contributions, as well as some others not mentioned here, share with the general social theory some important issues: the relationship between individual and organization is, in fact, nothing other than a special case of the relationship between individual and society.

A non-dualistic and processual conception of the society has been advanced in the past by classical sociologists such as Weber and Simmel, and—in the recent decades—by many other famous authors (namely, Giddens, Archer, Bourdieu, and Touraine, etc.). Particularly interesting for us is the Social Theory of Norbert Elias, because of its systematic nature—that can be encountered in a number of his theoretical and empirical research works—its heuristic capacity and, last but not least, its striking similarities with the point of view of the Theory of Organizational Action. This chapter shall address the issue of organizational change drawing from Elias’s Social Theory and the Theory