

## A Emergent Complexity Perspective on Change Processes in Organizations

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The aim of this perspective is to give expression to a particular way of speaking about complexity in organizations, one that emphasizes the self-referential, reflexive nature of humans, the essentially responsive and participative nature of human processes of relating and the radical unpredictability of their evolution. It draws on the complexity sciences, which can be brought together with psychology and sociology in many different ways to form a whole spectrum of theories of human organization.

At one end of this spectrum, there is the dominant voice in organization and management theory, which speaks in the language of intention, regularity and control. In this language, managers stand outside the organizational system, which is thought of as an objective, pre-given reality that can be modeled and designed, and they control it. Managers here are concerned with the functional aspects of a system as they search for causal links that promise sophisticated tools for predicting its behavior. The dominant voice talks about the individual as autonomous, self contained, masterful and at the center of an organization. Many complexity theorists talk in a language that is immediately compatible with this dominant voice. They talk about complex adaptive systems as networks of autonomous agents that behave on the basis of regularities extracted from their environments. They talk about complex systems as objective realities that scientists can stand outside of and model. They emphasize the predictable aspects of these systems and see their modeling work as a route to increasing the ability of humans to control complex worlds.

At the other end of the spectrum there are voices from the fringes of organizational theory, complexity sciences, psychology and sociology who are defining a participative perspective. They argue that humans are themselves members of the complex networks that they form and are drawing attention to the impossibility of standing outside of them in order to objectify and model them. With this intersubjective voice people speak as subjects interacting with others in the co-evolution of a jointly constructed reality. These voices emphasize the radically unpredictable aspects of self-organizing processes and their creative potential. These are the voices of decentred agency, which talk about agents and the social world in which they live as mutually created and sustained. This way of thinking weaves together relationship psychologies and the work of complexity theorists who focus on the emergent and radically unpredictable aspects of complex systems. The result is a participative approach to understanding the complexities of organizational life.

A key aspect of the work of the Complexity and Management Centre is a research degree programme for a Master of Arts or Doctorate of Management (DMan). The research methodology is based on the perspective described above. Research is undertaken from the perspective of a practitioner who takes his or her experience seriously and fundamentally questions ways of thinking in the process of practice.

This is very different to research on, or about, experience. In avoiding the splitting of theory and practice, and of emotion and intellect, particular attention is paid to understanding change as shifts in our experience of ourselves and of our patterns of relating to each other. It is an integral part of the research to create gatherings and workshops that provide an opportunity to reflect on our own processes of working together and the insight this might give on organisational life. Particular attention is paid to habit and spontaneity, cooperation and conflict and power as enabling constraints in relationships.

The research method can thus be described as the participative exploration of experience. This way of working reflects an understanding of organisational life as fundamentally conversational in nature. As change unfolds in unpredictable and potentially creative ways, people display the capacity to act into the unknown and it is this capacity that we seek to understand.

During this research, participants work with their own experience of change in their organisations, reflecting on insights gained from the programme, following an iterative cycle, which is intrinsically paradoxical in nature:



Everyone is acting with intention to shape the organisation while, at the same time, they are being shaped by the organisation. Paradoxically this shaping process emerges as one action in the present. This is the basis for speaking of self-organisation in the social sciences.

Beginning in autumn 2005 the Complexity and Management Centre will expand its activities to include a Post Doctoral Research Group.