Creativity, self-organization and emergence: The case for social science research

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The study of social organizations using the framework offered by complexity has become widespread. However, so far research has tended to report on phenomena as being 'out there' much in the same way as more traditional social science research. In this paper I will argue that the language of complexity lends itself well to the study and understanding of the social science research *process* 'in here'. In other words, the mutual construction of knowledge and the creation of a common language, which occurs between the researcher and the researched, or more aptly the 'researching'. I will illustrate the case in point, with the concepts of 'self-organization' (Varela, 1984), 'emergence' and 'creativity' (Montuori, 2003; Stacey, 2000; Stacey, 1996) using two empirical examples to illustrate the points were necessary.

Several authors in the field of organizational studies have directly (Montuori, 2003; Sturdy, 2003) or indirectly (Humphreys and Lorac, 2003) alluded to the limitations of conducting and re-porting the research process given current methodologies and text-based representations. Current methodologies struggle with capturing the creative and improvisational aspect of social research (Montuori, 2003) as well as the emotional dimensions of organizational life (Sturdy, 2003). Similarly, the textual based method and language of reportage are inadequate or awkward for expressing the spontaneous and the serendipitous – which, as many researchers may note are as much a part of the process, as the research 'design' itself.

I will argue that the research process can be conceptualised as a *space* in which knowledge is circulated and exchanged, and in which a new order – in terms of insights, new or different understandings or even discovery - emergences. I aim to develop my argument by first looking the 'traditional' methods of conducting social science research, including interviewing, focus groups, topic guides and then providing an alternative understanding of these methods from a complexity perspective. I will be looking to re-conceptualise the role of the researcher and the research process from a more 'systemic' perspective. I would like to develop the idea of the interviewing and focus group *time* as a *space* in which meaningful symbols are exchanged through a process of co-operation and communication. These spaces can be described as somewhere where participants can 'negotiate' meaning and through this unfolding 'rapport', negotiate a common language leading to action. This view has some commonalities with the postulate of 'reflexivity' advocated by, amongst others, post-modernist approaches to social science research.

I will make use of the literature on knowledge management and organizational studies to further this argument. In knowledge management literature the concept of *space* has be draw on in a variety of different ways (Boisot & Griffiths, 2001; Nonaka, 2000; Stacey, 1996), as both a conceptual, and sometimes physical, space where knowledge may either be allowed to emerge or through which information and knowledge circulates in an organization. Using these theoretical developments I will be arguing that what is 'advocated' for in organizations, that is the 'management' of knowledge, may be likened to what, we as social scientist experience during the

research process. However, 'knowledge' is not something that may be managed. Sometimes it may be purposefully organized by the researcher in meaningful ways in order to make it manageable, other times, especially during the process we commonly refer to as 'data gathering' knowledge organizes itself in spontaneous and serendipitous ways. The latter process may be better understood from a complexity perspective, as a process involving relationships, processes, interactions and positioning.

The first case comes from research carried out in a retirement residence for older people. The project aimed at generating and circulating knowledge about the context and the collective and finding ways in which insights could be used to improve the quality of interactions in the residence. Interviewing and focus group methods were used, respectively, as a means of (a) producing and constructing knowledge between the researcher and the participants and (b) opening bridges of communication between the participants. The second case comes from an action research project with a commercial organization. The method was qualitative using semi-structured interviews as well as discussion groups/workshops. A team of both 'insider' and 'outsider' researchers worked collaboratively with members of the organization to generate knowledge and to feedback findings in meaningful ways that could be used to address organisational challenges during a post-merger period.

Interviews and discussion groups can be described as a way of building bridges of communication between the participants (de Zeeuw, 2001). The interviewer and interviewee are a part of a system based on reciprocation and exchange of information – they respond to each other. Knowledge is constructed and communicated, in the first instance between interviewer and interviewee. However, because all of the interviewees are a part of an organization or a particular social milieu, it can not be assumed that the interviewees do not talk about their interview experience amongst themselves, in the absence of the interviewer. It is these discussions that open 'horizontal' communication lines between the participants and as such contribute towards the 'self-organization' (Vahl, 1998) and sustainability of the project after the researcher has departed.

In terms of positioning, I will make the distinction between insider and outsider researchers and their relationship to knowledge (this is not a novel idea) and 'access' to that knowledge – the point being that access is *different* depending on positioning. There is no associated value (better/worse; more/less legitimate) between the two positions – both contribute towards (a) an improved understanding of a particular situation and (b) a shared understanding between all involved – participants (see deZeeuw, 1992-extended L*). Outsiders have the benefit of approaching the situation a fresh – and as a result, hopefully, the ability to surface the 'taken-for granted'. Insiders have the experience and tacit knowledge of the situation and posses 'pieces of the puzzle' often 'inaccessible' to the outside researcher.

I will illustrate this distinction with an example from my second case involving research conducted by 'insider-researchers'. The repartee or 'banter' established by inside-researchers and the interviewees was noticeably absent from the interviews conducted by the outsider-researchers. Whereas the latter were more adept at prying out and unpacking the meaning of what interviewees were saying (reflected in the length and detail of the interviews), insider-researcher interviews, were much shorter

and less detailed, but yet appeared to illustrated a more tacit understanding of the situation.   The two different types of access complemented the overall analysis through an interplay of foregrounding and backgrounding of the 'taken-for-granted'. What then becomes common between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' is the research process and the 'construction' of a common language in the context of which they can work together.   In research we are all participants in the process.

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