

The process approach in strategy and organization theories: methodological challenges and perspectives

The AIMS Methodology Workshop is designed to bring together researchers interested in the research methods used in management work (strategy, organisational theory or organisational behaviour). It is intended to share recent developments in these methods. The 2023 Workshop is co-organised by AIMS and EURAM. It is dedicated to Process Studies as an ontology, as an approach to data collection and analysis for research in strategic management, organisational theory and organisational behaviour.

Whereas process approaches are sometimes reduced to highlighting the longitudinal character of the research, they are also recognised as a way of responding to the 'how' and 'why' of organisational phenomena (Langley, 2007). Through numerous possibilities for analysis (Langley, 1999) process research enable a wide variety of research that each holds intrinsic potential for knowledge elaboration. For example, processual approaches make it possible to study phenomena from the inside as well as from an external point of view, when they occur or more retrospectively, and even via a mix of these approaches (e.g. Leonard- Barton, 1990). As such, process approaches are also plural in terms of both ontologies and methods.

At the ontological level, two main approaches can be distinguished, the so-called weak and strong process approaches (Hussenot et al. 2019; Abdallah, Lusiani and Langley 2019; Langley 2007).

The first approach refers to a substantive ontology, Simpson et al. (2021) label this approach 'epistemological process research' in which the processes represent a change in the phenomena observed. Dominant in the '80s and '90s, this approach relies much on describing, analysing and explaining the sequence of events that make collective action unfold and generate changes (Pettigrew, 1990, 1997; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990; Vandangeon-Derumez & Garreau, 2014). This approach led to renew research in strategy and organization by considering how actions, events and situations order through time to produce organizational outcomes like how the interplay of managers at various levels enables internal corporate venturing (Burgelman, 1983), the sequence of actions and interpretations that unfolded over 7 years for people of a transportation company to deal with the issue of homeless people living in the company's area (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), or the phases a company that spun off from its mother company would follow to recreate a new identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Time here is considered chronological, and the analysis requires bracketing meaningful sequences into phases through which a process unfolds. Following this approach, bracketing of sequences, the theorizing mechanisms and reaching both the 'how' and the 'why' of organization phenomena remains challenging. As such, the emphasis is made on being rather than on becoming (Chia, 1995).

The strong approach also known as 'ontological process research' (Simpson & den Hond, 2022) – refers to a processual ontology, in which the phenomena are considered as an instantiation of the processes (Abdallah, Lusiani, & Langley, 2019; Langley, 2007; Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). In that view, the process is no more only a

chronology of sequences but the way actions or practices create inherent dynamics, the emphasis is here on becoming rather than on being (Chia, 2015) and Simpson et al (2021) label it as 'ontological process research'. In that view, organizational change is no more considered an exceptional step but a normal condition of organizational life (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) where the social agency is oriented by both past and future, and a continual evolution of ends and means (Simpson, 2009). This latter perspective inspired by American pragmatism offers an alternative view on routines whether it contributes to organizational stability or change (Simpson & Lorino, 2016). Moreover, the approach has articulated the practice view of strategy with the traditional process view, for example in the way it renewed) the way strategy emergence can be conceived (Chia & MacKay, 2007; Bouty et al. 2019). This approach has received increased and significant attention from a theoretical point of view over the last decade, the methods through which it is empirically implemented however remain underdeveloped (Hussenot et al. 2019). The Pfeffer / Van Maanen (Pfeffer, 1995; Van Maanen, 1995) dialogue in 1995 about Weick's way to theorize in his papers is illustrative of such challenge: when dealing with theories like sensemaking, which are inherently processual – in a strong way (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010) – researchers cannot use well-established methods or templates. Despite repeated calls to develop a more visible processual turn and the interest in work mobilising these approaches (Langley, 2007), to date, few articles draw on strong processual approaches (Abdallah et al, 2019) and methodological challenges may be one of the causes of such scarcity.

Whichever process-based approach is chosen, the notion of time and temporality is considered important to follow this approach. The field of process studies, therefore, offers a variety of perspectives for understanding, describing and theorising strategic processes and practices at work in organisations. A common feature in the implementation of this approach is the abundance, and eclectic nature of data collected, (Langley, 1999), to sum up, "process data are messy" (ibid, p. 691). This presents a challenge in terms of interpretation and analysis to capture the experience of temporality, its flow, activities and emergences explicitly and understandably (Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). Moreover, the embeddedness of phenomenon that appears crucial in process approaches (Chia & MacKay, 2007, Pettigrew, 1990, 1997) raises the challenges of data collection and analysis through multiple levels. Beyond the methods widely shared in the qualitative community, more specific approaches are associated with processual studies: qualitative (Hussenot and Missonier, 2016) or quantitative (Poole and Van de Ven, 2000) approaches based on events. Those data can use visual support such as visual maps (Langley, 1999) but the analysis and interpretation of processual data, often massive, also requires reflexivity, data condensation, transparency and theorising (Parmentier-Cajaiba and Cajaiba-Santana, 2020). A lot remains to be done for researchers to develop methods that grasp the inherent challenges of process approaches. Simpson and den Hond (2022) propose to consider American pragmatism as a process philosophy that informs the process approach to organization studies. Developing epistemic and methodological corpus enabling researchers to more easily appropriate and lead qualitative and quantitative processual databases would then participate in the spread of such a powerful approach and take part in strengthening a process turn in organization studies.

In line with this stake, the proposed workshop aims at attracting and debating methodological challenges of (any kind of) process approaches. We encourage papers that

deal with the following issues, but this list is non-exhaustive:

- How to deal with strategic changes and the researcher's place in that field;
- Using a process approach to develop concepts that grasp strategic and organizational phenomena;
- Considering new research designs that enable – and provide methods frames – empirical implementation of a strong approach to processes;
- Developing data collection protocol that is in line with processual challenges and the various temporality-related considerations and implications;
- Enhancing data analysis methods to develop a strong approach to processes;
- Questioning the access to the field over a long period and the negotiation relating to data collection;
- Methodologically distinguishing or bridging analysis organizational processes that are based on people practices;
- Writing the findings of a process approach;
- Etc.

Paper may be methodological papers or empirical papers in which the empirical part is used for illustration of the method developed. In all cases, the discussion part of the papers submitted should consider methodological contributions.

Submission guidelines

In order to make this workshop a place for new ideas and discussions, we ask people who wish to participate **to submit a 3-page short paper (3000 words)**.

Submission deadline: 2023 Sept 30th

Return to authors: 2023 Oct 15th

Date of the workshop: 2023 Nov 20th

Send your 3-page short paper to **methodo.aims@gmail.com**

Further development: a special issue in a European journal will be published in 2024, participants to the workshop will be informed of that opportunity when it comes out.

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