The Processual Perspective: Studying Change in Organisations

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The processual approach for understanding organisational change takes time seriously in addressing how an organisation moves from point A to point B. The temporal dynamics are often understood within a broader contextual frame that accommodates the past (historical and retrospective analyses) and the future (analyses of future expectation before and after the event), as well as the current ongoing processes of change (Dawson 2013, p 252). The processual approach is based on the assumption that change is complex and at times chaotic (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2008). It recognises that the unplanned, unforseen and unexpected will occur and that consequently, organisational change should not be reduced to a list of simple sequential steps (Dawson 1994).

The processual approach highlights the importance of temporality and context (the history and culture of organisations), political processes, power plays and decision-making that engage individuals and people in negotiations, in communications that may be misinterpreted or reinterpreted in various ways that create further uncertainties, ambiguities and confusion (Dawson & Andriopoulos 2014, p. 188-221). It also spotlights how these forms of 'equivocality' (where multiple interpretations exists) may be progressively resolved through collective sensemaking processes (Langley & Tsoukas 2010,p. 4), whilst also sustaining conflicting interpretations between different groups, interpretations that may be further reinforced through processes of change (Buchanan & Badham 2008; Dawson & McLean 2013). In this way, fine-grained processual accounts do not seek to resolve 'deviant' data through working data towards forms of generalisability, but to provide narrative accounts of the continuously developing and complex dynamic of people in organisations (Dawson 1997). Complexity is not sidestepped as the processual researcher sets out to catch reality 'in flight with a past, present and future' (Pettigrew 1985,p. 37) studying and recording the behaviour of people within and between organisations as their activities and actions unfold over time (Pettigrew 2012, p. 1316).

In practice, this approach aligns with a longitudinal qualitative research strategy in the collection of retrospective and real time data through multiple techniques including observation, interviews, and documentary/archival analysis (Hassett & Paavilainen-Mäntymäki 2013; Van de Ven & Huber 1990). In scheduling research activities it is generally expedient to mark out periods for fieldwork in arranging familiarisation visits, conducting interviews and observational work, as well as pre-planning follow-up and second and third phase data collection activities. The practicalities of engaging in this type of research also requires careful consideration, such as, gaining sustained access to organisations, working around other demands (administrative and teaching commitments), expectations of funding bodies, and the depth and detail of research given to one or a number of case studies. On this count, Pettigrew (2012,pp. 1315-1316) argued that comparative investigation of match pairs is an essential analytical feature of process studies in searching for the 'why' and 'how' that enables the researcher to establish 'causal links between process mechanisms and outcomes'. Equally, Eisenhardt (1989) promoted the benefits of comparative case study research for theory development, whereas Dawson (1997, 2003) maintains the value of single as well as comparative case studies of organisational change.

The processual approach aims to examine change processes as they emerge and interweave over time with the intention of identifying interlocking patterns of activities in order to gain a temporal understanding. This includes sensitivity to the way people make sense and give sense to their experiences of change, to the way that these are in turn influenced by the context (and historical legacy) within which these changes take place, and how stories of change both describe and shape the processes they seek to explain (Buchanan & Dawson 2007). In examining these

and other factors that shape processes of change, Dawson (2003) set out a framework (see diagram below), comprising three inter-related clusters, namely:

1. The internal context, e.g., people, technology, core business, history and culture, and those contextual elements associated with external activities, e.g., business market shifts, social and political events, legislative change;
2. Political activity within organisations, e.g., collaboration and conflicts within and between individuals and groups, and external processes, e.g., strategic alliances, lobbying of politicians; and,
3. The substance of change (content, scale and scope of change).

Figure 1.

The context, politics and substance of change overlap and interweave over time (past, present and future) as individuals and groups make and give sense to processes of organisational change. The researcher sets out to collect data on these dynamic processes in order to identify patterns and 'deviant' activities that shape the underlying processes of change and their outcomes. Post-analytical explanations are used not only to provide in-depth accounts of change, but also to refine and develop concepts and theoretical understanding. In engaging in this form of processual research, theory building involves using existing knowledge to frame understanding and to further provide conceptual insight through inductive theory building grounded in data. In other words, the researcher purposively develops ideas and formulate concepts around existing studies, but also ensures that these do not limit the research imagination in allowing data to speak for themselves. This type of deductive/inductive interplay informs the study and allows for ongoing refinement and development of ideas as new concepts emerge. There is a type of open-endedness to this process as the researcher uses the data to interrogate their research questions. The process of data analysis and the dissemination of results have been described by the author elsewhere (see Dawson 2003,pp. 114-141), and, it has been noted that:

> *By engaging in longitudinal research, processual researchers often act as chroniclers, storytellers and analysts.*
> *They are chroniclers in recording the time sequence of events and activities through the use of documents and*

observations and in linking interview transcripts to a particular time and context. The researcher is also a storyteller in their use of observational commentaries to narrate stories from fieldwork experience, and in the composition of stories that are built upon different interpretations of change. Finally, in identifying patterns, unlocking meanings, and accommodating deviant and outlier data, the researcher is also an analyst in developing post-analytical explanations of change (Dawson 213, p. 258).

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