

16. A Reflexive Methodology of Intervention

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Abstract. This chapter outlines a methodology of intervention in organizations which is compatible with the idea of sustainable work systems. It presents reflexive methodology as an alternative to the dominant paradigms of organisational intervention: First, the *rationalistic* idea of an optimal solution, to be achieved by „designing“ work systems and „implementing“ design concepts through external experts or internal promoters. And second, *participationism* which maintains to refrain from inducing external goals, models, norms, and values; this understanding of change agency claims to restrict itself to pure facilitation and moderation of dialogue between all stakeholders. As an alternative *beyond, not between* the two criticized paradigms we propose a *reflexive* methodology. It starts with the assumption that it is not possible to guarantee good results by good „design principles“.

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In former chapters of this book we outlined new heuristic ways to understand work, organization and reorganization in terms of sustainability. We proposed criteria for to evaluate the sustainability of work systems, and described some principles that should characterize what we call Sustainable Work Systems. The logical question now would seem to be: How can SWS be realized in practice, that is, how can we *implement* those principles? However, this would be precisely *the wrong question*. We have to give up the idea that work and organizational „structures“ can be „designed“ and systems can be „implemented“, then having to cope with „barriers“ against our well-meaning models, deliberative systems, or best practices.

In contrast to such traditional, rationalistic or expertocratic views of „work design“, our first main thesis is that an understanding of intervention in practice has to be structurally compatible with the very ideas of sustainability as outlined above, in the resource perspective: The different stakeholders and their interests have to be considered. Most of the design fields in organizations are *contested terrain*; interventions will always have contingent and unintended consequences which cannot be controlled or excluded a priori. Why these preconditions cannot be considered adequately within the well-known traditions of work design and organizational change, whether expert-oriented or participative, shall be explained in the following section. What, on the other hand, can be expected from a reflexive methodology of intervention and designing artifacts will be described in section 2. There, our second main thesis will be elaborated, namely that: the reflexive approach provides an alternative *beyond, not between* the two dominating paradigms of organizational change. In section 3 and 4 of this paper we will sketch some heuristic principles of how a reflexive methodology should work in practice; or less prescriptively: How we can evaluate existing practices of design and intervention with respect to criteria of reflexivity.

1 Expertocracy versus Proceduralism – Two Dead Ends

The discussion about problems and adequate forms of intervention by social scientists is presently dominated by two paradigms:¹

(1) The first is the model of knowledge transfer from science, the locus of knowledge production, into practice, locus of knowledge application. Roles of subject and object of intervention (and research) are well defined, with the researcher or consultant as the subject, and the organization members as the object of change, even if their participation is allowed or desired. We call this „classical“ model *expert-centered* or *prescriptive*, or in its most marked form, *expertocratic*. It starts from the assumption that scientific knowledge is superior to practitioner’s knowledge, and allows the deduction of unambiguous, empirically provable design criteria. The task of the scientist - or the scientifically legitimated practitioner - is conceptualized as analyzing the fit between external requirements and internal conditions, deducing a diagnosis, and recommending a therapy. „Therapy“ here means an optimal solution and a redesign concept (and more rarely, practical realization). The repertoire of methods for change is underdeveloped because this approach assumes that the intended effects will be achieved when the recommendations are detailed enough and their application is precisely controlled. We find this type of thinking in engineering and management sciences, but also in so-called human-

¹ A more profound analysis of these paradigms can be found in Moldaschl & Weber 1998, and Moldaschl & Kühl 2001).

oriented approaches in psychology and social sciences (e.g. in the Sociotechnical Systems Design-approach, STS, see e.g. Pasmore 1988; Trist & Murray 1993).

(2) The second model dispenses with the idea of an optimal solution, or generally with the idea of clear causalities between an external context and requirements for organizational solutions. Instead, it is assumed that the relevant knowledge is already present in the organization, and it only has to be mobilized by stimulating and moderating organizational communication. In this view, organizations and groups should be supported only in processes of self-organization by communicative *procedures*. Participation is, in most of the approaches, the general procedural mode, not only a technique or a value-based complement that supports the acceptance and local modification of expert strategies. There is no claim of superior expert knowledge, except the communicative aspects. Thus, we could call the interventionists of this model *procedural experts*, and the paradigm *proceduralistic* or *discursive*, because it restricts itself to procedural methods, and claims to refrain from inducing external goals, models, norms and values. The social scientist or consultant understands himself as a mediator of self-change, as a communicator who helps people to develop a common view on an organizational problem, and to achieve a consensual definition of a goal.

This second paradigm can be found as represented in the process consulting of Edgar Schein (e.g. 1969) and the “transformative” branch of organizational development (e.g. French & Bell 1998), or in the systemic intervention approach, based on the new (constructivist) systems theory of Niklas Luhmann (1990; see e.g. Willke 1999).² Other approaches where we can find these ideas is the field of action research, e.g. in William Foote Whyte’s (1991) concept of participatory action research, and Björn Gustavsen’s (1992) concept of *democratic dialogue*.³ Even if we have great sympathy for the egalitarian, emancipatory and democratic orientations of these approaches, we see some important shortcomings – not in part because organizational reality isn’t always democratic, or free from domination and ideology (see next section).

Of course, we have neglected many relevant differences between the approaches within the two paradigms, as well as intermediate expressions. What we find in practice are just accentuations of these approaches, mixed up more or less with elements of the other paradigm (ignoring Thomas Kuhn’s rule that paradigms are incommensurable). This should be kept in mind when we discuss the different approaches in Max Weber’s sense of ‘ideal types’. Furthermore, we distinguish between two general types of intervention, an analytical and conceptual on the one hand, and a processual and communicative one on the other, classically called ‘change management’ (see *figure 1*). It is necessary to make this distinction because it is not the case that the expertocratic understanding of intervention is only represented in settings where an organizational problem is identified ‘objectively’, and where a ‘best practice’ is deduced or introduced. In fact, today, analytical consultants are increasingly required ‘to stay’ on after they have developed *their* concept, in order to assist and accompany its implementation

² The systemic approach is theoretically powerful, but not motivated by democratic or humanistic values, and only well-known in German-speaking countries. It is one of the few serious attempts to found a proceduralistic methodology in social theory. This “substream” conceptualizes organizations in a fundamentally different way from the ‘behaviour’-oriented approaches - as ‘structure’ beyond specific persons.

³ Due to the very limited size for each article we cannot go into details. A longer version of this article which discusses Björn Gustavsen’s approach in particular and the participation concept in the Swedish Leadership, Organisation and Co-Determination (LOM) programme in general, can be received via the authors.

(change process). One reason for this is the increasing frequency and extension of organizational change in modern enterprises.

| | (1) Expert Driven Approach Functionalism | (2) Procedural Approach Participationism |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Concept of Intervention | <i>Goals & Tools</i> | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Best Practice Model o Deductive Process o Work Design Criteria o Participation (casually as Means) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o No Predefined Goal o Open Process o Process Design Criteria o Participation as (the only legitimate) Goal |
| Methods of Change-Management | <i>Phases & Cycles</i> | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Analysis, Diagnosis o Deduction of Therapy or Concept o „Implementation“, Execution o Success Control | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Orientation o Establishing & Developing Groups o Moderation, Conflict Management o (Cyclical) Evaluation |

Figure 1: Paradigms and Types of Organizational Intervention (Moldaschl 2000)

Inherent problems of both approaches

(1) The prescriptive or *expertocratic* paradigm is based upon an understanding in which organizational change is mainly seen as a (socio)technical problem solving task (*instrumental rationality*). It ignores the role of actor strategies, subsumes individual or group interests under a virtual interest of ‚the‘ organization (or under a *one-best-way* of organization design which is represented by the expert), overlooks social dynamics, and takes problems as givens. But: „In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves ... as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain“ (Schön 1983, 40). That is what Habermas called the ‚double hermeneutics‘ of social sciences: they have to deal with socially constructed facts, and they have to reconstruct these constructions. Of course, very few social researchers today would identify themselves explicitly using instrumental rationality as sketched here. But the „espoused theory“ of social scientists and their „theory-in-use“ (in the sense of Argyris and Schön 1978) often show the same big discrepancy in scientific practice as we observe in the practice of other practitioners.

(2) The problems in the purely discursive or *procedural* approaches are not smaller. A first main problem is that they normally pay a high prize for accepting a plurality of perspectives: *power and domination* in the actor-relations are weakly addressed or ignored. Neither the relations between the practitioners nor the relation between scientists and practitioners is free of unequal power. Second, in exchange for avoiding the normative problems of an expert-centered approach they must accept a *responsibility problem*. If the intervention does not introduce „external“ values, norms, models, concepts etc., the outcome of a change process always lies in the responsibility of the organization members, never on the side of the scientific or commercial consultants. As we know from empirical studies, a „criteria-free“ application of the participation principles creates severe risks for the employees. They participate in deci-

sions, perhaps, without being able to consider the preconditions, consequences, and alternatives. Therefore, *participation assessment* is needed.

Furthermore it has to be questioned whether it is possible to interact as a change agent without introducing any values, preconceived notions on what a good society looks like, or what peoples' needs are. For instance, it is a prescriptive norm that everybody *has to* participate. Yet, as we know, not everyone has the need to participate in everything, and to augment his own responsibility. And because we can watch how such needs are exploited in „modern“ management strategies, we have another reason to understand why it is sometimes problematic to apply these normative ideas. Also proceduralists don't come from Sirius: In their ‚terrestrial‘ perceptions and evaluations they are *socially embedded*, unable to be detached from any implicit theory. Isn't it curious that constructivists, who cite Paul Watzlawick (it's not possible not to communicate) don't apply that insight on themselves reflexively? *It is not possible not to judge*. A fourth problem is related to the previously mentioned problem of local theories, or better, of local ‚theories in use‘. Why, if all relevant knowledge is present in the organization, should there be a need for intervention? And how does a ‚procedural interventionist‘ deal with the problem of implicit theories? Because all experience is embedded, the ability to imagine alternatives to daily practices is always limited. Thus, proceduralism is even less adequate in a *knowledge society*, where knowledge is so separated and cultures of practice are so segmented. The change agent needs content knowledge, that is about different applicable forms of group work and their preconditions, about proved measures and criteria, and so on.

2 A Way Beyond, not Between: Reflexivity and Reflexive Action

Criticizing concepts means to learn from them. With the concept of a „reflexive methodology of intervention“ we propose an alternative to the *normative* and *procedural* paradigms. This alternative is inspired by anti-rationalistic epistemological positions, which understand science as *one* practice among others, and practice as situated action.⁴ When we apply this kind of thinking to a reflexive methodology of intervention, we must leap over the necessary steps of mediation. Basically, we understand such a methodology as an alternative *beyond, not between* the above criticized paradigms of intervention (Moldaschl 2000). The search for a golden mean, i.e. the attempt to combine the strong points of both paradigms eclectically, would just multiply their contradictions and blind spots.

What does Reflexivity mean?

Reflexivity as a scientific category has had a great career in different academic disciplines and theoretical approaches. As a consequence, we face a large variety of meanings in the definition and the use of the term. Here again, the variety can roughly be reduced to two paradigmatic understandings of reflexivity. The first has no recourse to mental categories, as in the mathematical definition of *recursivity* in fractal geometry which describes the application of operations or transformations on themselves. In his socio-historical theory about self-modernizing

⁴ Thus, the sources of inspiration are various and can only be mentioned in an exemplary way: They include analytical philosophy (e.g. Ryle 1950), the sociology of science and knowledge (e.g. Woolgar 1988), social constructionist epistemology (e.g. Gergen 1985; Steier 1991; Alvesson, Sköldbberg 2000); claims for a self-critical, reflexive sociology (e.g. Horkheimer, Adorno 1969; Gouldner 1971; Giddens 1984, 1994; Bourdieu 1990); and psychological action science in the pragmatist tradition (Argyris et al. 1985; Schön 1983; Raeithel 1998).

modernization (reflexive modernization), Ulrich Beck (1994) uses the category mainly in this sense of a *self-referential* process, i.e. in a *systems-perspective*.

The second meaning is based on categories of *reflection* and *reason*, with a consciousness that presupposes the division of object and subject. In the most simple (and trivial) case, reflexivity means nothing more than „thoughtfulness“, „pensiveness“ or *reflectiveness*⁵, a cognitive state or style. Referring to the tradition of enlightenment, Giddens puts forth another, and for us more important societal criterium: *justification*. In this version, the necessity to justify each action arises from social embeddedness and the existence of alternative options. In Giddens understanding of reflexive modernization (e.g. 1994), a (however limited) insight of the actors of undesirable consequences and principles of previous modernization is required. These definitions can be subsumed under the *subject-* or *actors-perspective*.

At any rate, explicit definitions of reflexivity are as rare as water in the desert, and the way the term is used often cannot be identified clearly.⁶ It seems useful, therefore, to explicitly put forward a *third definition*. Here, the use of the word reflexivity only makes sense if it makes a difference to recursiveness and reflectiveness individually – and integrates them as necessary complements of one another. As a term that integrates a system- and a subject-perspective, reflexivity means an insight of actors in their social or contextual embeddedness, and a consciousness about the *difference between strategic action and systemic results*. From there, self-reflexivity seems to be a tautological term because the actor is, in a sense, always part of the system. As a consequence, research has to apply theories about social reality on itself – very important for a conception of *reflexive intervention*. If a person wants to intervene in a social system, e.g. an action researcher, being reflexive means: he is aware that he can neither be value-free nor control the effects of his intervention; he knows that his own categories, concepts, ideas, and interpretations are always *situated*, i.e. necessarily selective and never „objective“; his activity is based on numerous undiscovered conditions; his intervention will cause “side-effects”; and finally, he would replace substantialist categories by a *relational thinking* (see chapter 5).

⁵ This use is common for instance in psychology. Here, reflectiveness is frequently conceptualized as the semantic differential to impulsivity (Baron 1985). Similarly, Kahn’s concept of psychological presence or Renie’s description of reflexivity as awareness of the action. Other authors claim self-reflexivity as a characteristic of the human species, e.g. Lefebvre (1992, 1): „the subject possesses a specific quality which we call reflexivity: he has an image of the self, which, in turn, also has an image of the self.“ Near to our understanding is the psychologist Michael A. West (1996) when he defines reflexivity as a continuous questioning of group tasks, cooperative rules, etc.

⁶ We don’t want to overload the reader with implicit or explicit definitions, but just to mention two other attempts at categorization in the area of organization studies: Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p. 5f) identify two “basic characteristics”: First, the assumption that all “empirical data are results of interpretation”, and second, reflexive thinking “turns attention ‘inwards’ towards the person of the researcher”. Ray Holland (1999) proposes a distinction between types or understandings of reflexivity. His *reflexivity one* encompasses Alvesson’s and Sköldbberg’s first characteristic: The beliefs of persons investigated by scientists are investigated by scientist’s beliefs (referring to George Kelly’s theory of personal constructs). To be reflexive means in this case to be aware of the fact. What he calls *reflexivity two* finds its initial example in Alvin Gouldner’s concept of a reflexive sociology, which claims to apply sociological analysis to ourselves, our actions, beliefs and ideologies (and the same for other human sciences). Basically, we don’t see a difference to type one, except that type two is conceptualized as more active, and more general, as he adds: Type one “is not in any way radical: it does not transcend the boundaries of the discipline or raise social issues of a conflictual nature” (Holland 1999, p. 465). In any case, this work offers inspiring ideas and deserves a deeper discussion.

Organization theory and theory of intervention

Rationalism is always looking for fundamental regularities and universal laws. In contrast, reflexivity in its cognitive dimension emphasizes the specificity of practice, looks for the embeddedness of action and thinking in specific contexts, and concentrates on the recursive production (co-evolution) of context and action. As a consequence, we argue against the search for universal principles of intervention. Some intervention theories give the impression or argue explicitly that, for instance, intervention on a personal level (e.g. psychotherapy) can be based on the same ‚principles‘ as intervention in organizations or states. In order to reduce complexity, and due to our present state of conceptualization, we concentrate here at the level of organizational intervention (but refrain from differentiating between types of organizations). In this way, we follow a basic idea of the SWS approach, namely the consideration of relations and contradictions between organization, individuals, and the broader context.

Another point we cannot cover, but at least needs to be mentioned is the relation between organization theory and theory of intervention. Organization science has shown that organizations differ significantly from other social systems (e.g. groups, societies) in their constitution and their ways of functioning. By defining and limiting membership, organizations develop boundaries which allow them to construct proper forms of structuration, like personnel or hierarchies. Both, structuration theory (Giddens) as well as systems theory (in the sense of Luhmann) support this view. Theories of organizational intervention, therefore, cannot be derived neither from the societal constitution nor from the operational characteristics of ‚interaction‘ or groups. Hence, an organization theory does not deliver or imply directly an intervention theory, nor can the latter replace the first or be effective without any reference to theoretical conceptualizations of its object. Some requirements that an organization theory should meet for the need of reflexive intervention are touched in section 4.

Intervention and Design

Design is the process of creating artifacts by intentionally and purposefully changing a given environment. This definition implies that we posit a distinction between making technical artifacts or modifying things, i.e. *design*, and attempts to change social relations or systems, i.e. *intervention*. Even though the relation between work and technology is very close in modern work environments, we insist that it is still necessary to distinguish between these realms in our concepts and categories. Although complexity-theory, chaos-theory or other natural science theories are comprehensive, it is a holistic reductionism to believe that everything in the world could be described in terms of them. Too often the transfer of such approaches to the living and the social had nurtured the believe in universal regularities, and, where failing, just the opposite believe, that purposeful intervention in social systems is impossible. Of course, organizational structures and procedures can be designed, in the sense of ‚planned‘, but this should be strictly distinguished from the real process, from organizational change, and the activities of external experts involved.

3 Reflexive Design of Technology and Working Conditions

Technical means and mental constructs are created by the acting person, normally in cooperation with others, where a reflective generation of meaning is mutually confirmed, partly shared or slightly changed. Concepts enable us to“act“ within our minds, and they can be ob-

jectified as symbols (language) or tools (technology). Thus, formation of symbols and construction of tools are closely related characteristics of human activity that are both rooted in mental concept formation and reflection. In this way, technical artifacts emerge as objectified explicit knowledge about human work. Technology, thus, is a constant concomitant of work, out of which it emerges through reflection and objectification of knowledge and that, in turn, is itself changed through appropriation (Brödner 1997).

Consequently, *usefulness* and *usability* of technical artifacts are determined by appropriate form, i.e. by adapting their forms and functions to the acting context as well as by satisfying their action requirements. Since technical artifacts are often derived from abstract, decontextualized knowledge, they have to be interpreted and re-contextualised. As a consequence, their use-value is constituted in application, which is open for diverse use. Users learn to express or to articulate their action plans in the technical language of the artifacts' forms and functions and to internalize them as new action patterns. The effective and efficient use of technical artifacts, therefore, requires both: that they are designed appropriately for the tasks at hand, and that the users learn to use them skillfully for accomplishing the tasks (*figure 2*).

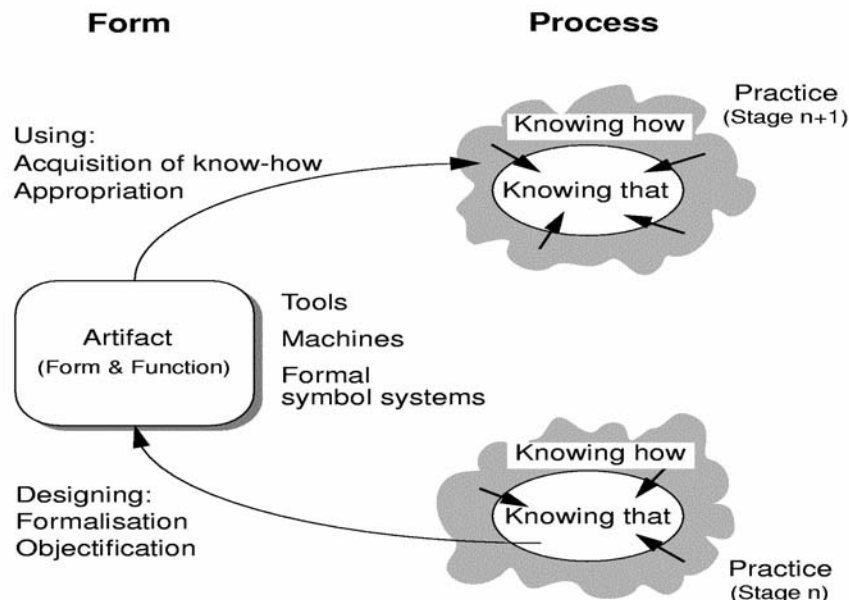


Figure 2: The spiral of competence development through practice (Brödner 1997)

According to this dialectic of form and process, the interaction with technical artifacts to accomplish a given task can be understood as a process of social construction of reality. Consequently, design is the activity of conceptualizing and determining new, so far unknown forms and functionality that satisfy a given set of requirements based on known cause-effect relationships. Design of work and technology in particular, therefore, is a self-referential endeavor, by which artifacts are created that, in acting with them, change the course of acting or the working process they are designed for. In *our* understanding, therefore, design is inherently a reflexive concept.

Reasons for a Reflexive Design

Human acting is basically intentional and goal-oriented (but of course, not always conscious). Acting then always has a range of intended and unintended effects that, simultaneously, form

new conditions for further acting. If the effects of acting correspond to a person's intentions or expectations, the internalized action schemes will be confirmed and stabilized. In this way, they are a basis for a continuous flow of acting which is taken for granted. This process of fluent acting may be disturbed, however, if the used flow of activity produces surprising or unexpected effects, if things in acting attract attention rather than being ready at hand, in short: if there is irritation about the difference between anticipated and actual results of acting (as far as they are perceived). This irritation or "breakdown" gives rise to reflection as a different, a conscious mode of acting. Reflection consciously takes into account and reviews given conditions and means of acting as well as the expectations linked to it. It creates consciousness about acting ("reflection-in-action", Schön 1983).

These basic considerations on human acting and design have strong consequences for the design of sustainable work systems. Design inevitably has a number of unperceived conditions and unintended effects. Explicit knowledge used in design is limited and incomplete in principle. Designers are neither aware of all conditions for the design process, nor do they know all of the cause-effect relationships of the artifacts they create. Moreover, the self-referentiality of the design process inevitably produces unexpected side effects. This also applies to the design of work and technology as well as to organizational interventions for achieving sustainable work systems. Additional aspects have to be considered in this regard, for example that working tasks in the new forms of work organization are so complex that it is nearly impossible to know beforehand exactly which and how many resources will be needed for carrying out the work without overburdening or impairing workers' health or the social relations. In addition, since there is no direct relationship between stress factors and the experienced strain, and since both are mediated by individual coping, the quality and quantity of *resources* needed are dependent on the particular mixture of personnel in the teams doing the work (see chapter 5).

In accordance with these considerations, the methodology of reflexive design and intervention in organizational change calls for "reflexive loops" as procedural building-stones. The procedure normally starts with a collective reflection of the present situation that the organization is in, and an agreement on necessary goals and requirements for further business. This shared strategy provides the actors with the orientation needed to derive first tentative steps of design and intervention for change that can then be made subject to reflection in recurring reflexive loops. After some time, provided that enough room is left for collective learning, shared views and action schemes will emerge that make sense of the new forms of work envisaged and that establish a new collective practice in the organization. These procedures then correspond to what others have called "organizational learning" (Argyris, Schön 1978).

4 Reflexive Intervention for Sustainable Change - Some Heuristics

The idea that the creation of technical artifacts and new operating procedures is a *negotiation* of commitments between working persons – as we define reflexive design – meets with our understanding of *intervention as a social medium for re-negotiation and self-reflection of both groups*: organization members, and external experts (e.g. action researcher, consultants). The heuristics for a reflexive methodology of organizational intervention that we are proposing, can be used to observe one's own practice as well as the intervention practices of others. Since we reject the idea that social systems can be 'designed' through a single intentionality, however powerful, we don't call them 'principles', and especially not 'design principles', in order

to avoid the common connotation of that term, i.e. the meaning of ‚context-free‘ rules. Heuristics, instead, are more open to and dependent on a reflective (here: not reflexive) use; they only provide an idea or an orientation, and no one would expect a 100%-applicability or -security. They have nothing to do with the popular lists of necessary competences of change agents.⁷ These epistemological heuristics could be presented in a more generalized mode, or more operationalized as descriptions of interventional roles, methods and self-understandings. We prefer the first mode, in order to stimulate the reader’s ideas of how to make use of them in his own interventional practice.⁸

(1) *The question of power and the legitimacy of intervention.* In the expertocratic as well as in the procedural paradigm, we identified a crucial weakness in not considering the role of power which has a central place in our approach. The first question we have to answer is: Who is legitimated to ‚design‘ work? And the second: What gives *us* the legitimacy to intervene? Who gives us the ‚license to change‘? Expert-centered approaches don’t worry much about these questions since management is normally the customer. Consultants adhering to democratically inspired procedural approaches tend(ed) to side with the workers regardless of the customer. We assume that it is necessary to think in two *categories of contract*: A formal one, constituting a legal and an economic commitment, and a social one, constituting trust relations and mutual commitment between the external expert and each social group he works with. The latter is difficult to establish; it requires evaluating whether and what the “objects” of change want to change. That the relation between these contracts can be conflictual or contradictory is obvious, and will be addressed below, along with the question of which of our unquestioned and unconditioned values are adequate and legitimate in practice.

(2) *Focus on side effects.* Since reflexivity means being aware of the contextual embeddedness of one’s activity, the focus on unintended consequences of action is in the center of a reflexive methodology of intervention. It focusses on side effects on both levels of strategy-in-practice: the practitioner’s and the scientist’s. That means, a reflexive change agent is aware that also „good design“ can have negative effects (as we know: the way to hell is paved with good intentions).⁹ Autonomy, for instance, would be seen as a problem, not merely as a solution. If an organization (the management, a coalition) plans to autonomize departments and persons, he would understand that as walk on the ridge, not as a summit conquest. Careful with language, he would take the use of the term ‚implementation‘ as a semantic indicator for the inability to disengage from rationalistic thinking. Thus, the *cyclical evaluation* of strategies (practitioner’s and scientist’s/consultant’s) with respect to the actual outcomes of interventions is a central practice of reflexive methodology. This requires an *open process model* with cyclical evaluation loops instead of linear phase models: process and outcome are seen as undetermined.

(3) *Contextualization.* A main ‚principle‘ is to reject context-free principles (a paradox, of course). To follow a reflexive methodology of intervention means to remain skeptical of any

⁷ As it can be seen, for instance, in Buchanan and Boddy 1992, pp. 89ff.

⁸ One could connect this with the arguments of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) in a double sense: We describe the (regular) practice of intervention as experienced, not as rule-directed. And we direct our text more to experienced researchers and consultants, i.e. to experts, rather than to novices, laymen, or managers, who ask for explicit and unambiguous rules (for theoretical grounding of these heuristics see Moldaschl, M.: Reflexivität. Working Papers No. 3, Dept. of Sociology, TU-Munich 2000).

⁹ That, for instance, participation can obviously have very problematic and unsustainable consequences for the employed, was outlined in other chapters of this book (e.g. chap. 5, the resource perspective).

universalism, any recommendation of “one-best-ways” or - the softer version - „best practice“, as usual in expert-driven approaches. It means accepting that any social ‘system’ has its history, culture, and context (e.g. Bourdieu 1990), and must be ‘treated’ according to that specificity. Instead of simply recommending or transferring knowledge and solutions from other organizations to a present one, the reflexive researcher or consultant would see his main task in the (re-)contextualization of experiences for the specific *case*. Instead of offering general problem solving models, he would prefer a *thinking in dilemmas* (between stability and change, autonomy and responsibility, involvement and relief, etc.).

(4) *Reflexivity through expert knowledge*. In contrast to procedural approaches, the reflexive scientist or consultant assumes that *not* all necessary knowledge is given in the respective organization, and that knowledge transfer makes sense. He will make use of scientific knowledge in a reflective way, e.g. when he understands design criteria and models as means to *augment the space of options* for practitioners, not as ready-mades. Hence, he draws the attention of the practitioners to alternatives, or offers them the opportunity for a *co-construction* of alternatives (Raeithel 1998). This implies mistrusting former reasonings, and opening mentally closed spaces of action.¹⁰ This is the core of increasing the reflexivity of (or in) practice. Scenario techniques are adequate methods. If the scientific consultant does not only use them as a method of intervention, but recommends using reflexive methods, like mutual consulting, personnel exchange, or the work with border crossers in the regular organizational practice, he pleads for an *institutional reflexivity* instead of rule-following behavior. However, this requires from the external expert a deep contextual *knowledge* of models and practices in the specific branch or industry, as well as the specific organization in order to assess their applicability. Thus, advocates of a reflexive approach would not consult for everyone.

(5) *Decentering – the power of questioning*.¹¹ To increase the reflexivity of a practice (or to try) is not a reflexive activity per se. Opening spaces for action becomes reflexive if the researcher or consultant is aware of that he, inevitably introduces values and norms into the organization, even if he appeals to science as a source of legitimacy. Science does not create knowledge from an Archimedic point beyond the social world; it is inescapably embedded socio-cultural contexts. We take so many things for granted: Change is ‘necessary’, it ‘must’ be continuous, participation and involvement are ‘good’, Taylorism is ‘bad’, etc. Only if we are aware that not only the practitioners, but also we as researchers are ‘full’ of implicit theories, can we be open to discover and question these implicit values and intentions. Reciprocal openness - and observation - between researcher and practitioner is a central element for the legitimacy of intervention. Thus, the category “reflexive” applies not only to the cognitive style of the researcher, but to the relation between him and the research-partner, as Gergen (1985) argues. How else can a researcher or consultant receive support to decenter himself from his actor’s perspective? What can a reflexive methodology offer as help to reflect on our own paradigmatic bonds, a priori ends, value ties, and implicit moral commitments? Methods of *supervision*, for instance, are a well-known means. They are common in the practice of psy-

¹⁰ Or, as Ulrich Beck (1994) puts the function of a reflexive social science: It should „besiege reality with alternatives.“

¹¹ We borrow the categories *decentering* and *recentering* from Arne Raeithel (e.g. 1998), an action theorist, who describes them (referring to Piaget’s concept of egocentric thinking, and to Hegel’s phenomenology) as fundamental modes of perceiving and acting, that is, of being in the world. A very powerful concept, still waiting to be discovered.

chotherapy – but not in the context of organizational intervention. Another adequate method is the *self-application* of recommended methods, particularly of *evaluation*. A reflexive approach would use such methods *regularly*, i.e. it would „institutionalize“ reflexivity, for instance, by commissioning followers of other scientific ‚religions‘ with a supervision task.

(6) *Confinement of identities*. A methodology of reflexive intervention inspired by social science will only be able to increase the reflexivity of (another) practice if it is aware of, and bewareing its particular identity, its relative autonomy. This is an idea from systems theory in Luhmann’s tradition (see e.g. Willke 1999, 92ff) that we can link up with. It is one of the biggest and most popular errors of many so-called practice-oriented scientific approaches that they are most useful if they adopt the view and logic of the practice they refer to. What an organization needs to overcome a basic problem is normally anything other than ‚more of the same‘. A reflexive methodology of intervention implies to accept the legitimacy of the practitioner’s rationalities, and does not claim a superior scientific rationality. It has the latter in common with ‚procedural thinking‘. On the other hand, it encourages the researcher/consultant to insist on a *difference in perspectives*, and to use this difference as a means of *productive puzzling* of implicit everyday assumptions; just as the above mentioned systemic approaches argue. This also applies to the involved people: There must be a productive difference between the *person* and the *role* of the researcher/consultant in order to allow for more incisive questions of value and sense. This is also true for the employed people of an organization. Cultures of consulting, as well as corporate cultures, can be differentiated by the scope which they allow for a particular identity, distance, and reflexivity (and thus question ‚holy‘ values of change, like high involvement or commitment).

(7) *Recentering*. If ‚decentering‘ emphasizes reflection, and ‚confinement‘ distance, then ‚recentering‘ emphasizes action. It is the common (but not necessarily the only) mode of action research. In contrast to the systemic approach, and according to the other stream of proceduralism (OD-movement and dialogue-approach), a reflexive consultant will not assume that he could succeed in remaining ‚independent‘. He is aware that there is no *presence in the field without effects*; that he intervenes imply by observing, asking or answering. Of course, he can ‚play‘ with being ‚inside‘ and ‚outside‘ the organization at the same time, while being aware that he is always and *inescapable a part of the interaction system*. Hence, he gathers experience through participating in practice, tries to *apply* what he has learned by decentering, and *utilizes* the effects of being an actor among actors. Utilizing here means making productive use of the divergence of demands the consulting researcher is confronted with by different stakeholders, if it helps to make organizational goal conflicts transparent and treatable. Since it is difficult to be an observer and actor at the same time, it makes sense to explicitly decide on the adequate mode within a cyclical phase model.

(8) *Political organization theory*. As mentioned previously, the idea of reflexive intervention accepts that there is a difference between perspectives or interests between science and practice. But this is only the special case of a social constructionist view which assumes that different social practices - with science as one of them - create different perspectives and interests. It is necessary, therefore, to refer to adequate organization theories (see section 2 and, e.g., Holland 1999; Alvesson, Sköldbberg 2000; Moldaschl 2001). First, theories that can feed a reflexive intervention theory should understand structures as „negotiated orders“, where (unequal) interests, power, and domination play crucial roles in the negotiation processes. That means they don’t understand organization as an ‚independent variable‘ as is common in organ-

izational psychology. Consequently, they would never assume a uniform organizational purpose or goal, as strategic management theories or the systemic consulting approach do. Instead, attention would be focussed on the structuring interplay of these interests. Thirdly, the organization theory needed should not work with a concept of interests that is reduced to material goals. Instead, it should deliver an interpretive understanding that is capable of capturing social and symbolic interests.¹²

Conclusion

Taking all these aspects together, the process of organizational transformation towards sustainable work systems turns out to be a *risky endeavor with a moving target*, with insufficient knowledge, with partially conflicting interests and, hence, with wide ranges of uncertainty and unexpected side effects. Thus, our heuristics of reflexive design and intervention for sustainable change are *not a tool-box* for ‘how to build’ SWS. They propose *procedures* that help to cope with insufficient knowledge, uncertainty, unforeseen side effects, contradictions, and conflicting interests; or less perententious: they call attention to these things. And they insist on the necessity to introduce *knowledge and values*, models and strategies. These can be reflected by the practitioners, selected or singled out, rejected or processed into proper options. Sustainability, as a multi-level-measure, is a compass in this regard.

Even if in modern organizations there is no real master of the process, *power* plays a crucial role in all selections, and a reflexive methodology has to reflect this. The expert must expect that his best-meaning proposals which try to balance all stakeholder interests on all levels, will be filtered through the existing web of power relations; and he must always count with being instrumentalized by particular interests. Keeping this in mind, we can still maintain that procedures of reflexive design and intervention deliberately make more, and a more sustainable use of reflective skills, of individual and collective expertise; also by forcing actors and external experts to systematically evaluate the consequences of their activity in relation to the measures and goals they had agreed on.

Again, this requires another reflexive loop, concerning the *limits of reflexivity*. As a form of institutionalized critique, reflexivity is not smoothly compatible with some practical interests. Managers and other practitioners are not interested in continuously questioning every aspect of their activity or coordinative solutions: „Excessive reflection can paralyze the individual“, as Sternberg (1984, 13) states. Even if this addresses only the reflection-side of reflexivity, the conclusion is still the same: Practitioners under pressure don’t want to check numerous options, don’t want to hear how complex and contradictory the world is. They normally want to hear: That’s the way, go for it, you’ll get it! This need is the economic basis of subsistence for the mainstream consultancy business. For intervening actors with a social science backpack a permanent tightrope walk remains – balancing rationality and reflexivity, goal-oriented rational action and systematic questioning, advice and critique, self-confident action and self-critique.

¹² Obviously, ‘micropolitical’ theories of organization (e.g. Crozier, Friedberg 1977), particularly those based on structuration theory (see Weaver, Gioia 1994), might be useful. However, since they emphasize (even competing) rationalities, they should be combined or complemented with theories that emphasize implicit knowledge (e.g. Weick 1969; Argyris and Schön 1978; Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

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