UNCERTAINTY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE. ISSUES OF THE
SOCIAL LOGIC OF UNCERTAINTY IN PROCESSES OF LEARNING

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Abstract

Competences in dealing with uncertainty are attached by a paramount importance for processes of
learning. Because learning, not least in organizations, always means confrontation with something
new. In many cases, the irritation of action patterns and meaning structures that are taken for granted
is the consequence. That causes discontent and reflexively leads to a quest for certainty, avoidance of
ambivalences and adapting ambiguity in integrating meaning structures. Against this background,
John Dewey’s analysis of the everyday need for certainty seems unwaveringly relevant nowadays in
particular: »The quest for a universal certainty, applying to everything, is a compensatory perversion.
One question is disposed of; another one arises and thought is kept alive« [1].

But how is indefiniteness in organizational learning and change processes perceived? How do
organizational action patterns and meaning structures change if knowledge that is taken for granted
enters a state of crisis? And what strategies do actors develop in order to secure cognitive capability?
We do research on questions like that in an empirical project about the capability to change ([2], [3],
[4]). To answer these questions, our concept won’t dismiss assumptions relating to uncertainty and the
contingency of action, but make them the starting point of the research. This approach is located in the
fields of action theory and epistemology. It works with reflexivity as a fundamental category of social
science. What is constitutive of a reflexive mode of thinking and acting is (a.) that the actor is capable
of developing an observational perspective of his actions. What is also characteristic is that (b.) not
just aim-means relationships are reflected, but also their collective genesis. »Access to reality« is
therefore interpretative, i.e. the meaning structures of significant others and also the intrinsic logic of
quite divergent partial rationalities are acknowledged. This is accompanied by (c.) an awareness of the
fact that one’s own actions can bring about unintended, occasionally counter-intentional, and some-
times paradox side effects. This presupposes (d.) a certain distance from the latest truths and beliefs,
which implies a minimum degree of scepticism towards unquestioned »one best ways« and the ac-
ceptance of alternative interpretations of reality ([5], [6]). However, since it is the supposed nature of
reflexivity to raise questions and not to resolve them for good (and all) [7] it is accompanied by a state
of disquiet and doubt as well as an act of searching. So this paper discusses the relation between
reflexivity, uncertainty, and learning in the sense of Dewey’s ideas of practical knowledge.

Empirically, we studied the dealing with uncertainty in the field of product development in an exem-
plary high-tech company of the automobile industry by means of observation, semi-structured inter-
views, and group discussions. Here, learning and innovation are thought of in recourse to irritation: as
a break with the familiar, a departure from routines, and a testing, correction, and revision of various
»problem settings« in the sense of a »reflection in action« [8]. It will be shown whether and under what
conditions the crisis of well-established modes of thinking and acting makes it possible to develop a
critical distance from the routines of day-to-day practices, to force open structural »lock-ins«, and to
make oneself the subject of one’s own observations. Finally, learning and change processes in a pub-
lic sector establishment are focused in order to mark out the social field and lay the groundwork for an
empirically validated typology of dealing with uncertainty by systematically contrasting combinations of
characteristics.

Keywords: reflexive modernization; organizational inertia; pragmatist epistemology; reflexive learning;
self-inquiry; uncertainty; organizational change