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## Locating complex responsive process research in the approaches of theorising about organisations

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**Abstract:** Both in the UK (University of Hertfordshire) and the Netherlands (Open University) research is undertaken based on the complex responsive process perspective. In this perspective organisations are understood as population-wide patterns that emerge in daily interaction between people. This way of understanding life and work in organisations has clear implications for the way research in organisations is carried out. The kind of research which is implied by the complex responsive process perspective is focused on experiences in daily practice, which are represented in reflective narratives and reflected upon in so called learning sets. In this paper this research approach is discussed and related to existing approaches of theorising about organisations. What are the basic elements of the research which the complex responsive process perspective implies? And how can this research approach be related to broader traditions of theorising about organisations?

**Keywords:** complex responsive process research approach; Stacey; methodology; narrative research; witness research; theorising; quality criteria for qualitative research; non-dualistic; reflection and reflexion; communities of interpretation.

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## 1 Introduction

Sometime in May 2011, some of the PhD students who participate in the ‘complexity PhD-track’ of the PhD-school of the Open University presented their research proposals to a broad group of faculty members and other PhD students. During this session our students (and so indirectly we as thesis supervisors) were heavily critiqued: ‘this is not generalisable’, ‘this is not publishable’, ‘the research questions are too vague’, ‘subjective’, ‘completely wrong methodology’, ‘this is just self-indulgent navel-gazing’ and so on. Sometime later, I had a lunch with a professor of a famous business school somewhere in Europe. During this lunch with a high pitched voice he explicitly urged me to immediately stop with this program: ‘what you are doing there, is very dangerous for your academic career’, besides ‘everything you do is already done and on a much higher academic level at my university’. He suggested me to quit the program as soon as I could, hoping to be able to limit the ‘damage already done’. In another conversation a few months later I talked to a highly experienced professor in research methodology, sharing with him these quite disquieting experiences. He reacted: ‘oh, *that* discussion... That is already resolved 35 years ago and your research is perfectly accepted. No problem at all’. These experiences shocked me and basically made me wonder: ‘what the hell am I doing?’ As a supervisor, participating in the complexity PhD-track I see high quality beautiful and interesting research results. Together with the students we have intense discussions on ontological, epistemological and methodological matters. Yet it almost feels as if I am committing a crime.

In 2009, together with a top executive of a large Dutch organisation who also is a graduate of the professional doctoral program in complexity, leadership and organisational change of the University of Hertfordshire (Groot, 2007), we started a PhD program at the Dutch Open University. This program is based on the research approaches and didactics used in the University of Hertfordshire doctoral program of Ralph Stacey’s Complexity and Management Centre. Right now we have 11 students participating in our program (the complexity track of the PhD school). The first student graduated in June 2015, the second one in December 2015. The other students plan to finish their research in 2016–2017. Already several scientific publications which evolve from the research of the students are published. An issue popping up continuously is our having to defend our research work, being compared to the more traditional positivistic research traditions. My conversation with the professor of the famous business school was only one example of many.

The ‘originators’ of the complex responsive process perspective are Ralph Stacey and his nearby colleagues Patricia Shaw and Doug Griffin. Although Stacey, his colleagues [Stacey and Griffin, (2005b), pp.22–27] and their doctoral students [e.g., Board, (2010), pp.170–178; Monaghan, (2007), pp.123–132; Mowles, (2007), pp.166–177; Risdon, (2008), pp.164–168] write about their research methods quite a lot. Mainly concepts and frameworks are used from the complex responsive process approach as developed by Stacey (et al.) himself. An international journal publication further locating these methodological assumptions and approaches in the wider traditions of theorising about organisations is missing [Monaghan, (2007), p.131]. This is the aim of this paper. Central questions are: to what traditions of theorising about organisations can this complex responsive process perspective and its implied research approach [Stacey and Griffin, (2005a), p.25] be related? And having located this research approach in these traditions, what can be said about its status, both in the academic and ‘practical’ world?

The organisation of this paper is as follows. After a short paragraph on the method used to develop this paper, the complex responsive process perspective and the research methods related to this perspective are described. Although there are several comparable research approaches (e.g., the method of emergent participative exploration, Johannessen and Berg Aasen, 2007) in this paper the emphasis is placed on the methods used in the 'complexity' PhD program of Stacey et al., as the methods used there are most close to the place of birth of the complex responsive process perspective. With some exceptions the program of the Dutch Open University is almost a carbon copy of this approach<sup>1</sup>. Next the paper progresses by relating this perspective and available methods to some major ontological and epistemological traditions. After this the components of the research approach are explored on a more detailed level, also relating these to existing traditions of researching on and theorising about organisations. Given all these descriptions the criteria to evaluate the academic and practical quality of this kind of research are discussed. The paper closes with some conclusions about the status of the complex responsive process related research approach.

## **2 Method for this paper**

A core element of the research which is implied by the complex responsive process perspective is that students research their own experience of their own daily organisational practice. This paper uses an approach which parallels this way of doing research. As one of the initiators I am deeply involved in the complexity-PhD-track of the Open University. My role is – together with other professors – to run the program and supervise the PhD candidates. In this position I am experiencing the power dynamics when other professors try to lean on me to change the direction of my research and supervisory activities. As I did not get my doctorate at 'Hertfordshire' I am a relative newcomer in this way of doing research. The contrast with more traditional types of research is quite big, so I went through almost all forms of surprise as conceptualised by Louis in his classical 'varieties of surprise' model [Louis, (1980), p.237]. My most prominent experiences in this regard have to do with the contested academic status of this genre of research work, including the continuous power struggles and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Elias and Scotson, 1994). As a new general theory of action (other theories of action being for example the psychological, cultural and social system theories of action), clearly the complex responsive process perspective still is an emerging approach (Griffin, personal communication, February 2014) contesting for 'a place under the sun' in relation to dominant traditions of theorising about organisations (Fleck, 1981; Kuhn, 2012). The complex responsive process perspective is not yet fully taken for granted in mainstream literature on theorising about organisations. The same goes for the way research is undertaken and the criteria to evaluate the quality of this way of doing research.

The core way of reasoning in this paper can be characterised by paraphrasing Karl Weick's iconic question 'how can we know what we do until we see what we produced?' [Weick, (1995), p.30]. The complex responsive process perspective has already produced a stream of serious academic publications. Now it may be a good time to take stock and reflect on what has been done. This paper aspires to be a next step in this reflection process on the 'status' of the complex responsive process perspective. The paper itself is

the result of a series of translations (Latour, 2007). After immersing myself in the complex responsive process perspective and its research methods I studied an extensive body of research literature, open coding this literature signalling ‘points of resonance’ with the complex responsive process research method. A next step was to bundle all these points of resonance codes, developing themes and later on paragraph headings for this paper. Having approached the development of this paper in this way, the findings are my own interpretations, possibly being influenced by my own role in the program and my own professional positioning and ‘mental and affective landscape’ as both an academic in management sciences and consultant in a wide array of organisations. In general the tone of my research and this paper is foremost appreciative: what does the complex responsive process research method entail and on what points can I find links with other approaches of theorising about organisations? And how the status of this kind of research can be evaluated? For a more critical discussion of the complex responsive process perspective (see Zhu, 2007).

### **3 Research from a complex responsive process perspective**

Established by Ralph Stacey in 1995, the Complexity and Management Centre (CMC) in Herfordshire has produced 50 doctorates 11 research masters (University of Herfordshire, 2014) and two series of books on complexity and management. The CMC is a well-developed research area at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire. The Centre runs PhD groups since 2000. With his close colleagues Griffin and Shaw, Stacey started a part time professional doctorate program with students from countries and economic sectors from all over the world. The complex responsive process perspective is foundational for all this research work, understanding organisations as population-wide patterns that emerge in daily interaction among people (Stacey, 2005). This perspective emerged out of a more general development of ideas about complexity. In this development several ‘stages’ can be discerned.

#### *3.1 Complex systems and environments*

Approximately since the eighties of the last century complexity theory has entered the field of theorising about organisations (Anderson, 1999; Burnes, 2005). In many publications complexity concepts like emergence, nonlinearity, self-organisation are used to characterise the organisational environment or the organisation itself. This means that in these publications the environment and the organisation are constituted as ‘complex’ contextual phenomena. Managers (consultants, decision makers) then are indicated as those who have to deal with this complexity (e.g., Gerrits, 2012) in order to guarantee the survivability of their organisations. In conceptualising complexity in this way, natural science concepts and models are (more or less) literally applied to organisations, ontologically assuming that organisational realities are comparable to natural systems.

#### *3.2 Complex adaptive systems*

As a reaction to this natural-scientific approach a more ‘human’ complexity perspective is developed, with the organisational complex adaptive systems (CAS) approach as one of its more prominent theoretical strands (e.g., Goldstein et al., 2010; Hazy et al., 2007).

In this approach attention is paid to the micro-dynamics of local interactions and the ways global patterns can arise from local interacting agent behaviour. Typically CAS-informed research entails the merging of computational agent-based simulations with empirical observations demonstrating self-organising systems behaviour. The focus on local dynamics leading to global patterns especially goes for the so called Steps 2 and 3 CAS-simulations. In Step 2 simulations (e.g., Reynold's 'boids' models of bird flocking), a final equilibrium state of the whole of all interacting agents is not assumed, nor are average interaction rates. In Step 3 simulations [e.g., the fisheries simulation from Allen et al. (2006, pp.15–17)] next to the assumptions of the Step 2 simulations, the entities in the simulation are assumed to be heterogeneous agents which can change and develop themselves, allowing for creative development and evolution of global behavioural patterns. Although the results of these simulations look quite realistic, according to Johannessen and Berg Aasen (2007, p.423) still these computer simulations are unable to capture the full range of human experiences. In traditional CAS-research the individual actor is constituted as a rule-driven agent (e.g., MacIntosh and MacLean, 2001), reacting to other nearby agents, who on their turn react to the focal agent being informed by their own 'internal' rules, being either the same rules (Step 2) or different rules (Step 3). A frequently used metaphor for this way of reasoning is a flock of starlings showing amazing and unexpected global patterns. In the CAS-framework this emergent collective behaviour is explained as a nonlinear result of countless local interactions of the rule-governed individual starlings.

### *3.3 Complex responsive process perspective*

The complex responsive process perspective of Stacey (et al.) takes a unique and different perspective on human complexity compared to the other theories of action and conceptualisations of complexity mentioned above (see also Johannessen, 2009; Johannessen and Berg Aasen, 2007; Mowles, 2011). To continue the starling-metaphor, the complex responsive process perspective does not assume the starlings to be more or less mechanistic entities (automatons) reacting in a rule-driven fashion to their neighbours, but 'endows' the starling with thoughts, reflections, emotions, anxieties, ambitions, socialisation, history, political games, spontaneity and unpredictability and uncertainty, also understanding (human) interactions with others as intrinsic power relations. Furthermore the set of rules to which the starlings react is considered to be almost infinite, constantly changing and developing, being linked to processes of changing power balances, identity formation and ideology development. Furthermore this 'reacting to rules' is not assumed to always be a conscious and deliberate process. In most cases it is assumed that behaviour emerges in a spontaneous and 'automatic-pilot' fashion. When the agents are conceptualised in this way, trying to understand and researching complex responsive processes implies that explicit attention needs to be paid to the direct experiences (ambitions, anxieties, origins of spontaneity, uncertainties) of these agents preferably by really trying 'to stand in their shoes'.

Focusing on the importance of these profound understandings of group and social processes, the complex responsive process research encourages researchers to take seriously their own daily experiences of the social processes in which they are involved in their own organisations [Stacey and Griffin, (2005a), p.35], using narratives and develop reflective and reflexive inquiries and arguments about the way their experiences

can be understood. This implies that the ‘unit of analysis’ in the complex responsive process approach is the experience of interacting with others in local social settings. Here the concept of complexity is not used to describe the context ‘in’ which the individuals interact, but as a fundamental attribute of the quality of the interaction of interdependent humans (Stacey, 2003a). In these local conversations thematic patterns may emerge which can ‘give’ meaning to the daily experiences. These patterns themselves are not assumed to be static, but may change and disappear in the same interactive path-dependent power-related processes ‘in’ which they emerge. History and earlier experiences are both repeated and potentially transformed in the present, building on expectations of the future [see Stacey et al. (2002), pp.34–37] on the concept of transformative teleology, based on Hegels’ notion of time and Hegels’ attention to micro-interaction in which meaning emerges. A non-dualistic stance implies that a clear separation between the individual and the social (the context) is not postulated. Agency is conceptualised as non-dualistic, not assuming a subjective autonomous individual nor a limited agency determined by local social or macro institutional influences. A radical process perspective on human development is adopted (Johannessen, 2013) espousing the development of mind, consciousness, self-consciousness and action as an ongoing social process in interaction with interdependent others. Building on the insights of Mead (1967) human beings are assumed to have the capacity ‘to take the attitude of the other’ enabling them to provisionally understand what they are doing by enacting expectations of possible responses of the others. The fundamental human reality, as assumed in the complex responsive process perspective, is the interaction among human bodies. This means that higher order concepts of wholes (i.e., the group, the social context, the organisation, the culture, the system, ‘macro’) and realities outside of the interacting individuals are assumed to be nothing more than constructs arising in local interaction. On their turn, these emerging ‘global constructs’ can be interactively folded back in local interactions where they are reproduced and particularised being influenced by the local habitus. Thus interaction processes themselves are not assumed to produce higher level phenomena, but only to lead to further human interactions.

The interaction aspect of the complex responsive process perspective goes hand in hand with Elias’ (2000) view on power relating, arguing that power is an intrinsic aspect of all human relating. ‘Out of’ local interactions power figurations emerge: groupings of people in which power is tilted in favour of some and against others. Furthermore elements and concepts of complexity theory are used analogically, assuming that the interactions and the patterns which emerge locally can become widespread global patterns, reproduced and particularised in many organisational interactional locales. As mentioned before, this implies that the concept of complexity does not refer to an organisational reality ‘out there’ but to the dynamic properties of interaction between interdependent people.

An important tenet of the complex responsive process perspective is the explicit and repeated rejection of system thinking (Stacey et al., 2002). The emerging global patterns are not constituted as higher levels linearly acting back on local levels. No other forces are assumed than the local interactive power-invested dynamics among those who participate in a conversation. Individuals, individuality and identities are both assumed to form in local interactions and in turn to be being formed by these patterns at the same time. When one becomes involved in a certain group, the individual’s cultural background, habitus (Bourdieu, 2010), and social forming will inform the individual’s behaviour. Yet the specific and temporary local identity of that individual emerges in the

interactions with the others present. Given this local interaction-centred emphasis, change and organisational development are not conceptualised as a result of a dominant agency (management, change plans, organisational blueprints) who stand outside of the interacting members of the organisation ‘managing’ them to change (Mowles, 2011). Organisational development is understood as emerging in a non-predictable, nonlinear way through transformative causal dynamics where amplification of small differences can break existing patterns and symmetries (Stacey, 1995).

A core element of the complex responsive process research is the personal reflection on ordinary everyday experience of organisational practice of the researchers. Experience is defined (Stacey and Griffin, 2005a) as the meaningful engagement in interacting with others and oneself as we do our everyday work. In this interaction themes and patterns emerge. Research then entails the taking of these local themes and patterns seriously and reflecting on them, trying to develop an understanding of the complex dynamics involved.

### *3.4 Research approach of the complex responsive process perspective*

Ideal typically described, the actual research approach in the PhD program<sup>2</sup> involves the writing of four ‘projects’ (later on in this paper the content of these projects is specified in some more detail). Each project consists of a narrative account of a particular puzzling, unexpected and ‘forked’ situation in which the author is involved, describing what the author and the others in that situation are doing, saying and (author) are thinking and feeling. This narrative is regarded as ‘raw material’ and serves as the basis for further reflection. This reflection generally has several emphases: the first being the identification of important, central themes (‘what is this narrative about?’, ‘what is the central plot?’). The second is an extensive and critical literature search about these themes: ‘what is known about these themes?’ And ‘does this theory, concept, model explain what is going on in the narrative?’ So each time the results of the literature search are related back to the narrative itself, maintaining the link with the concrete experienced social situation [cf. ecological validity, Agar, (2013), p.37]. This whole process of reflection is – in line with the complex responsive process assumptions – understood as an ongoing interaction process in which new meaning emerges continuously. This reflective interaction process is not a solo-activity of the researcher but – again consistent with the assumptions about meaning emerging in interaction – takes place in so-called learning sets of three to four PhD researchers and their supervisors. The learning sets meet on a regular basis, resembling Pierces communities of inquiry (Seixas, 1993).

Characteristic of the research dynamic is the researcher writing versions of his or her Projects and rewriting these on the basis of the discussions in the learning set, but also on the basis of continued experiences and discussions in his or her own organisational practice. In all these local interactions new patterns of meaning may emerge. The final thesis is built up of a number of Projects and a synoptic chapter in which the researchers reflect on their ‘movement of thought’ as a global pattern emerging out of many local interactions and experiences. This whole research process of (re-)writing, literature search, discussions and new experiences can be seen as a process of increased objectivation where the researchers becomes more detached, while at the same time allowing them to immerse themselves more deeply in their experience (Mowles, June 2014, personal communication).

Furthermore the research process is regarded and reflected upon as a complex responsive process itself, not assuming linear causal influencing relations between the different building blocks of the program. Further reflexivity involves the reflection on the process of the research itself. For instance, this concern reflecting on the ways the researcher's past experiences are of influence on her or his understandings of and reflections on the daily experiences. Also reflecting on the development of the researcher's own identity as a result of the research experience can be part of the research process. To stimulate this reflection in the first project the researchers are invited to describe their personal life history, formative location and experienced critical moments therein. Typically these critical, pivotal moments are described narratively. On the basis of literature research, self-reflection and discussions in the learning set, core themes are identified being central puzzles, recurring problems identifiable in the life and work experiences of the researcher. Apart from the explication of his or her personal background and 'habitus', another goal of the first project is to formulate the researchers' focus of attention, the research domain, including the academic and practical relevance of researching this domain. This domain then works as an informative guide for selecting experiences to be described and reflected upon in the following projects. The whole interaction process of reflecting, discussing, literature search and writing lead to a further development of the research focus and a reformulating and sharpening it. As the research process is seen as a sense making process, this reformulating of the research domain is related to the developing insights on the fundamental question 'what is my daily organisational experience with regard to my research domain about?'.

#### **4 Locating the complex responsive process research in the traditions of theorising about organisations: ontological and epistemological reflections**

The complex responsive process perspective can be characterised as subjectivist ontology (Saunders et al., 2012). Characteristic of this subjectivist ontology is that a separate and stable reality independent of human action and interpretation, available for observation and analysis is not assumed. The lived experience of the organisational world is regarded as a conversational local experience and accomplishment. This implies the existence of many different locally experienced and constituted 'realities', which may become interwoven in more global patterns and interactional themes. This position excludes a cultural realism of postpositivist (Hall and Callery, 2001) interpretive approaches (e.g., Cameron and Quinn, 2006; Peters and Waterman, 1982) where more or less homogeneous collective meanings exist as measurable realities. Organisational experience is a local and plural experience. Sense making is assumed to be a social and conversational process, in line with the social constructionist (Gergen, 2000) perspective. Yet contrary to most social constructionists meaning is not socially constructed *about* a reality, but meaning and reality are assumed to emerge at the same time (Johannessen, 2013). More in general the complex responsive process perspective leans towards a postmodern ontology, abandoning grand narratives about universal truths [Brinkmann, (2012), p.33]. Yet, contrary to postmodernism the complex responsive process perspective does not go along with the 'anything goes' assumption. In local interactions, local 'truths' (more or less shared 'reality' constructions) can emerge as a result of negotiations about the meaning of the experienced 'reality'. Thus reality and truths

[‘legitimate themes’; Stacey, (2001), pp.167–175] are not assumed to exist as phenomena outside of the interaction; yet in the interaction itself local constructions and experienced realities can emerge as ‘our reality’; ‘our truths’ [Stacey and Griffin, (2005b), p.20].

The importance of local interactive sense making as an everyday experience is shared with ethnomethodology, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and discourse analysis (Brinkmann, 2012; Board, 2010; Mowles, 2007). Yet in all of these different perspectives a (sometimes subtle) duality between the individual and the social is still somewhat recognisable. The one school prioritising the individual, the other emphasising the social. The complex responsive process perspective posits itself as explicitly non-dualistic, assuming an interactional, conversational basic unit of analysis instead of an individual or a social primacy. In this perspective the individual experience is not just the perception of an autonomous subject, but reflects all kinds of past sediments and actual influences of previous and present social interactions. This implies non-essentialist ontology where the self emerges interactively in different conversational processes. This stands in contrast to essentialist ontologies where the behaviour of the individual is explained by phenomena which are supposed to exist ‘within’ the individual (e.g., personality theory in psychology). Groups and organisations are not depicted as functionalist or structuralist macro phenomena but as global patterns emerging in many localised interactions. This implies an ‘organisational becoming’ ontology (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) where global patterns are continuously developing local accomplishments politically vying for attention and dominance.

This being said, the complex responsive ontology links to ontological discourses like Alvesson’s ‘local positionism’ (Alvesson, 2003) and can be positioned at the local-emergent side of Deetz metatheory of representational practices [Deetz, (1996), p.198]. Some research publications working from the complex responsive process perspective veer towards Deetz’s dialogical postmodernist representational discourse, emphasising reality dimensions of marginalisation, conflict suppression, claiming space for lost voices, diversity and creativity (see also ‘critical management studies’, Alvesson and Willmott, 2012). Furthermore this approach relates to Hardy and Clegg’s categorisation of the dialogic approach, emphasising the role of researcher reflection and reflexion [Hardy and Clegg, (1997), p.9]. What the complex responsive process research approach has in common with (organisational) (Neyland, 2008; Ybema et al., 2009) ethnography (Silverman, 2013), phenomenology and discourse analysis is its primary focus of study: the everyday experience of living and working in an organisation. This emphasis on studying the daily practice of organisations is in line with the emerging ‘practice turn’ in organisational theorising (Nicolini, 2013). Brinkmann (2012) calls this kind of research ‘qualitative inquiry in everyday life’.

The kind of research that is implied by the complex responsive process perspective is strongly advocated by Weick when he writes (1974, p.487): “if you want to improve organizational theory, quit studying organizations”, advising to study everyday events, everyday places, everyday questions and micro-organisations (see also Bate, 1997). In line with this argument Silverman states: “slow down and look around rather more attentively!”... “and identify what is remarkable in everyday life” (2013, p.17). This everyday experience can be characterised as highly active, experiential, local and conversational. During local conversations features of the experience in that situation are interactively emphasised, ‘facts’ and ‘data’ are selected and constructed together with emerging interpretive categories. This implies that epistemologically facts and data

together with categories, labels and discursive dimensions, do not have a general meaning outside the specific conversational setting in which they emerge. They are local and conversational attempts to 'fix' local 'reality' (Mumby, 2004) and normality. Thus the meaning of facts, data, categories and dimensions lies in their local political and practical use and emerges as significant symbols in chains of gestures and responses Mead (1967). Seen in this epistemological perspective 'research' has to do with understanding the meanings (including data, facts, categories and so on) which (temporarily) organise the local interaction. Exactly this kind of research relates to interpretive interactionism as defined by Denzin (2011) and interpretivist research according to Alvesson (2002, p.3). In this kind of research the researcher tries to become aware of how local thinking, feeling and interacting guides historically and socially constructed action. This is why this kind of research cannot be characterised as positivistic, as there is no reality implied outside of the local interaction that has to be discovered and which has to be wrenched from a recalcitrant pre-existing reality (Hardy and Clegg, 1997).

The most direct way of researching the way understanding is locally constructed is the co-interactor co-actor position [Bate, (1997), p.1165] allowing the social phenomena to be studied in their natural state [Alvesson, (2009), p.158] paying attention to naturally occurring situated interaction [Emerson et al. in Silverman (2013, p.47)]. Only this position offers 'access' to the experienced thoughts, emotions and tendencies to act of oneself and of the others present, and to the ways in which meaning is produced about these experiences. The anthropological spectator, onlooker position implies too much distance to get an intimate understanding of the way local understanding emerges in the local interactions. No contact than can be made with the inner dialogues, emotions and intuitive reactions which form an integral part of the conversational reality Mead (1967). Also the many problems of traditional [Silverman, (2013), p.37] ethnographic research design where the researcher interviews the respondents to unveil their 'deep interior motives and meanings' are circumvented in this way [Silverman, (2013), p.46; Alvesson, 2003]. There are several labels for this co-interactor-actor-research position like interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 2011), witness thinking (Shotter, 2006), inquiry from the inside (Evered and Reis Louis, 1981), understanding life from the inside (Brinkmann, 2012) and insider academic research (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007): 'insight always comes from the inside' [Bate, (1997), p.1161]. De complex responsive process research approach appears to fit well with the kinds of research these labels refer to. It belongs to a genre of ideographic research where the researcher is just another subject, influenced by the restraints embedded in the interaction process of which s/he is part. In this vein Agar (2013) refers to 'lively science' in which the researcher and the researched remain the humans they are. Research than is not 'finding' but 'taking'. It consists of the reflection, and thus an interpretation, on how s/he and all the other people involved in an interaction make sense of themselves, each other and their daily experiences. It is not 'what do I see these people doing' but 'what do I see myself and what do we see ourselves doing?' [Spradley and McCurdy in Bate (1997), p.1160]. How do we as interdependent interlocutors create order out of what appears to us? Or to put it differently: this kind of research is not 'what shows up in front of the camera of the researcher?' but 'what are the emerging and continuously developing self-produced 'home movies' the participants in local social situations are looking at?' Again, these typologies seem to show clear resemblances with the research approach implied by the complex responsive process perspective.

The co-interactor co-actor stance implies that the insights of the research must arise in the researcher's reflection on the micro detail of his or her own experience of interaction with others [Warwick, (2011), p.7], being an abductive (Thomas, 2010) translation between the participant/researchers' first person view towards an audience third person view [Agar, (2013), p.80]. The 'knowledge' gained from this kind of research – the locally emergent themes and meaning patterns – is not discovered but emergent in local interactions; it concerns accounts and 'truths' that are inextricably tied to the locally vocabularies and discourse. This implies that the epistemological quality of the knowledge brought forth by the research which is implied by the complex responsive process approach is less *episteme* (universal laws invariable of time and space) nor *techne* (technical and practical knowledge providing rules, instructions to solve problems, procedures to realise goals) but much more *phronesis* (practical wisdom) (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Thomas, 2010). Also this implies that the dualistic line between researcher and participant is very thin [Bate, (1997), p.1151] being a paradoxically detached involvement and involved detachment at the same time. As one of the PhD researchers says: "I was present in two minds; the first as a manager and someone who needed to achieve a particular result, the second as a researcher interested to see how things would develop and how interactions between people would play out. [...] This was an intense experience, which contributed to a heightened awareness of my actions and the actions of others, an intensity that grew further as I would later work with the narrative" [Warwick, (2011), p.13]. The 'representations' of the research findings do not intend to capture the 'true' and factual reality as experienced. Rather the researchers who work with the complex responsive process perspective seek to capture experiences and images, narratives and other representations which symbolise their own interpretive reading of the local experiences and which highlight salient (in relation to the research domain) characteristics of the experienced *and* interpreted local processes by the researcher.

## **5 Locating the complex responsive process research in the traditions of theorising about organisations: methodological reflections**

The complex responsive process research is focused at the local emergent phenomena which occur while the researcher is being submerged in activity and taken up in his or her role. As the social reality of the daily working experience is regarded as a perpetual process of becoming, the 'method' of this research can be described in terms of Dawson's (2003, p.41) 'catching this reality in flight'. Given the assumed unpredictability of social processes, in this kind of research it is impossible for the researchers to plan in advance which situations will be interesting to research and form relevant material for the narrative [see also Agar, (2013), pp.12–15]. This implies that the research is not a pre-designed and pre-planned research method with clear conceptual categories, research methods and phases being specified in advance. The researcher 'sucks it in and sees', assuming that the place to find the right questions and answers is not a textbook but out in the field, following his nose, learning by going. A research approach which resembles Bates' ideals about anthropological research in organisations (1997, p.1152).

Each project starts with a narrative about interesting, surprising or puzzling situations, followed by reflections on this narrative. Next the researcher (in interaction with the members of his or her learning set) theorises about what has happened. These narratives are first person accounts of personally observed and lived through interactions, together with experienced feelings and thoughts. The role of the narrative can be related to the auto ethnographic research approach of Ellis et al. (2011, p.4) and to the quality criteria for narratives formulated by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). Used in this way the narratives in the complex responsive perspective-research can also be compared with Denzin's 'thick descriptions' (2001, pp.99–103), or, to be more precise, 'thick inscriptions' as the narratives are the researcher's selections and impressions highlighting aspects of the interactional situation which the researcher thinks are important and relevant to write about (employment, see Ricoeur, 1994), given the research domain.

The narratives are written in such a way that they evoke the impression of having truly been there, of having close-in contact with the local conversational experiences. In this sense the narratives' function corresponds to Bate's (1997, p.1163) concept of the narratives being a specific 'window' to certain experiences rather than an 'objective' representation of the organisational reality. The narrative is not intended to mirror something 'out-there' in an objectivistic way. It is intended as a subjective reflection of the researcher's experience inviting the reader to enter his or her world, bringing the readers into the scene, sensitising readers to issues of identity, politics, allowing the reader to experience the experiences of the researcher; an approach that fits well with Ellis et al.'s (2011) perspective on auto ethnographic research. In this way the narratives permit a willing reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured. This means that the narratives are invitations to shared subjectivity and 'natural generalisation' [a term originating from Denzin (2001, p.99)], where the reader experiences the text subjectively through his or her own thoughts, assumptions and emotions. Thus, more in general this approach of narrativity can be linked to the auto ethnographical research tradition (Ellis et al., 2011; Huber and Whelan, 1999; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Roy, 1959; Sparkes, 1996, 2000; Wall, 2006) and to Alvesson's at-home ethnography (2009). The former emphasising the personal experience of the researcher in order to understand socio-cultural experience; the latter less inwardly looking but from the researcher's point of view analysing the flow of interaction and the patterns [see also Agar, (2013), pp.56–60] emerging therein. Although one could say that the writing of a narrative goes hand in hand with the analysis of the lived experiences, in the Projects the narrated experiences also function as raw material for further analysis and reflection. In line with the thoughts of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), the recognition that the narratives are results of interpretation induces the necessity for systematic reflection on the theoretical and practical implications of such interpretation. Following Alvesson and Skoldberg's ideas, the whole process of the complex responsive process PhD-research can be regarded as a prolonged and deep process of reflection and reflexion which include activities as categorisation and theming, studying literature, having discussions in learning sets and re-enacting emergent insights in the researcher's own practice, each time triggering new experiences and insights. In terms of Cole et al. (2011, p.142), this process can be labelled as a 'research journey'.

Basically the complex responsive process research process is seen as an iterative sense making process itself. It is a process of continuously weaving back and forth between intuition, data-based reflection, discussion and feedback. This conceptualisation of researching can be linked to the concept of 'theorising' (after Weick, 1974, 1989)<sup>3</sup>,

being a sense making process constructing theoretical statements out of concrete experiences by ordering relationships amongst elements that constitute the researcher's focus of attention. On top of that the research process parallels our daily experience where we also use theoretical concepts, hunches, catchwords and so on, to enable us to understand and cope with the world [Brinkmann, (2012), p.4]. Theorising is a developmental process of selecting more 'competent' (interesting, plausible, non-obvious, surprising) social constructions as 'believable' explanations while absurd, irrelevant or obvious outcomes are dropped [Weick, (1989), p.525]. As Weick states, the quality of the theoretical contributions of this kind of research is enhanced when a great number of conjectures are produced. The specific elements of the complex responsive process research approach seem to be quite functional for this. The studying of literature, the discussions in the learning set, the self-reflection and the writing and rewriting of the Projects potentially trigger a large and varied number of possible explanations for the experiences described in the narrative. Further discussions and the continuous mirroring back of potential understandings to the original experience provide an objectifying, honing dynamic (Weick, 1989) retaining explanations that 'make sense'. The academic literature which is studied in the beginning phases of this process is not primarily regarded as a source of universal truths, but mainly as 'sensitising instruments' (Brinkmann, 2012), as a source of questions and comparisons [Ellis et al., (2011), p.5] infusing the existing ideas of the researcher with yet even more insights and potential conjectures.

Using the terminology of Fossey et al. (2002) two different analytical foci can be recognised in this theorising process. In 'meaning focused discovery' the emphasis is placed upon understanding the meaning of the experience for the researcher him or herself and the discovery of common themes or patterns in the researcher's own experiences. During 'discovery focused analysis' more formal definitions or categorisations of themes (and linkages amongst these themes) are sought. Typically the first half of the projects of the PhD students can be characterised by meaning focused discovery. The second half of the projects can be understood as discovery focused analysis. Furthermore the whole research approach can be characterised as an abductive process, as described by Thomas (2010). In this kind of processes categories are developed inductively from the concrete experiences instead of from a priori theory. Staying close to the original experience allows narrative reflective research to be a vehicle for new insights about concrete human social action.

In the complex responsive process research approach the subjectivity of the researcher forms an almost paradoxical mix of both resource and blinder [see also Alvesson, (2009), p.166]. The closeness to the concrete experience forms a rich potential for new insights. Yet this same closeness can lead to closure where the researcher steers blind on past and locally taken-for granted understandings. Thus, in contrast to conventional positivistic research the challenge for this kind of research is not 'breaking in' (how to get access?) but 'breaking out': how to defamiliarise, to denaturalise oneself enough (but not too much) to be able to reflect on the lively experienced daily events [Brinkmann, (2012), p.19], 'seeing things afresh' [Silverman, (2013), p.9]. As stated before, the process of sense making (theorising) about daily experiences which are represented in the narrative is not a separate activity, taken apart from the concrete experience. It goes on during the concrete experiences, takes place after the experience, during the writing of the narrative and the discussions in the learning sets and with others, and during concrete subsequent experiences when new insights are enacted.

As mentioned earlier, reflection is an important ingredient in the complex responsive process research approach. The different kinds of reflective activities which are undertaken in the research which is implied by the complex responsive process perspective can be linked to several reflective and reflexive traditions and categories. First of all to provide the reader with an understanding of the 'origins' of the subjective insights of the researcher, the researcher might epistemologically reflect on his/her role [Fossey et al., (2002), p.728], his/her habitual preunderstandings (Cole et al., (2011), p.143], the effect that the background, political interests etc. of the researcher have on the selection of experiences as described in the narratives [Hall and Callery, (2001), p.263] and the effect of the habits, social location and habitus of the researcher on the research process [Johnson and Duberley, (2003), p.1293]. As the narratives describe local meaning as it emerges in interaction – in line with the ideas of Hall and Callery (2001) – also a 'relationality reflection' can take place of the effects of the researcher-researched (i.e., with colleagues, managers) interactions on the construction of data and on the power and trust-relationships between researchers and the people he/she is working with, potentially extended by a reflection on the way the anticipation of what colleagues will do and how they will react to the research once it is written down might lead to flatter descriptions and somewhat watered down conclusions [Alvesson, (2009), p.166].

In the PhD-research approach these reflections are facilitated by inviting the researchers to write a so called 'progression report' half way the research process. Furthermore at the end of their research the researchers are explicitly required to reflect on their methodology and methods: what kind of research have I done and what are the effects of that kind of research for the conclusions and outcomes? As advocated by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009), this reflexive stance invites the researchers to place their work into different kinds of intellectual traditions; the complex responsive process perspective being one of them. In the complex responsive process research approach, the point of all these reflective and reflexive activities is not that they will lead to 'better', 'more proven' or 'true and accurate' accounts and conclusions. The whole exercise is about deepening the researcher's understanding and denaturalising grand narratives or one-sided explanations of complex interactive processes. The researchers do not 'double-glaze' themselves from the local and the unique [Hardy and Clegg, (1997), p.S11], but place themselves in the middle of concrete experienced situations, explicitly explaining and developing their own interpretations (Creswell, 2013) and theorising about these situations. This leads to 'exemplary knowledge' through which understanding of problems in comparable contexts becomes possible (Thomas, 2010).

Furthermore – and in line with the assumptions of the complex responsive process perspective – this whole process of sense making, theorising, analysing, reflecting and reflexion is not taken as a linear, distant and isolated rational process, but as a complex responsive process itself. This entails that the process of theorising is seen as an interactive process, involving feelings of fear and excitement as taken-for-granted assumptions of the researcher and the people s/he works with are thoroughly questioned. This way of doing research can be related to the ideas of Warwick (2011, p.7) on reflexivity. In this process the researcher may also discover that the knowledge of him or herself is ambiguous and limited [as in Sparkes, (1996), p.470] and that the way s/he reflects on these experiences is itself structured according to his/her own previous experience, intellectual habitus and vocabularies [as in Johnson and Duberley, (2003), p.1291].

## **6 The academic and practical status of the complex responsive process research approach**

The complex responsive process research is directed to historically unique situations where the researcher is co-interlocutor. The research products are interactively emergent interpretations of the researcher: 'how do I understand my daily experience with regard to my research domain after I went through the whole research journey?'. Typically the research products are intended as situationally relevant products with possible natural generalisations to other comparable practical situations. These research products can provide guidelines for action in a certain class of situations but can also provide new theoretical insights, new 'theorisations' contributing to existing academic and practical knowledge.

When this kind of research is held accountable to the habitual foundational criteria for evaluating academic quality as used in conventional (positivistic) management research, the academic status of this kind of research would probably be evaluated as somewhat poor. My own experiences at the beginning of this paper are a short reflection of this. Also the research which is implied by the complex responsive process perspective can have clear practical and pragmatic implications. This means that status of this kind of research should not only be evaluated from an academic but also from a practical perspective. What seems to be necessary is that the criteria used to evaluate this kind of research need to be consistent with the nature of the ontological and epistemological assumptions 'behind' the complex responsive process perspective. This implies that the criteria used should be relational, reflecting and validating the relationships which specific communities have with this research. Thinking about the kind of communities that would use or work with the results of this kind of research again not 'only' academic but also quite a few non-academic (or not purely academic) communities come to mind. This would imply that complex responsive process research is evaluated from (and within) several quite different interpretive communities and also that this kind of research can mean different things to these different communities [Flyvbjerg, (2006), p.23]. Furthermore – and in line with the assumptions of the complex responsive process perspective – the criteria used and the evaluations done with these criteria are not fixed external objective reference points, but become a matter of critical reflection, interaction and discussion, going on in (and possibly amongst) these 'communities of interpretation' [Lincoln, (1995), p.278] evaluating this research. As stated before several interpretive communities (both academic and non-academic) can be recognised for the complex responsive process research:

### *6.1 The academic inquiry community*

Scientists and knowledge producers focusing on scientific quality (rigour). As I see it, the complex responsive process research offers an alternative research perspective in comparison to the conventional positivistic research approaches. In this way it may help to falsify existing theories, generate hypotheses for further research, identify new not yet fully disclosed research themes, exploring organisational phenomena first hand instead of through pre-fixed conceptual schemes and objectifying research methods. To judge its academic quality questions like: 'does this research contribute substantial new insights or

Does it falsify existing theories?’ and ‘does it trigger new research or open up new theoretical discussions?’ seem to be relevant here.

### 6.2 *The community of practical users of this research*

Professionals focusing on pragmatic quality. As stated earlier the research products of the complex responsive process research are not episteme, techne, nor absolute truths, but potentially provide phronesis, practical wisdom and exemplary knowledge. This kind of knowledge can inform the development of professional practice [Cole et al., (2011), p.143] through interpretation and ‘transfer’ of the understandings to other practices. The research outputs are then given a situationally relevant meaning or can help in the sense making about the social context of *other* professionals who are confronted (or perceive to be confronted) with comparable issues. These experiences-made-meaningful can help to make sense of new possible options for local action and provide forward glances [Flyvbjerg, (2006), p.25] helping the users to anticipate future situations. This pragmatic quality then has to be evaluated through asking questions like: Does the research product allow the reader enough experiential congruence? Is the research product helpful for others in understanding of and acting in comparable (future) situations?

### 6.3 *The community of readers*

For the people who read this kind of research the performative quality of these texts is a relevant evaluation criterion. Closely related to pragmatic quality, the research products can be evaluated on the degree to which they trigger critical reflection of the reader about him or herself (Gergen, 2007). Does the research product raise the consciousness of the reader, does it offer new ways of understanding the live and work situation of the reader? In this perspective readers are not assumed to be passive receivers of persuasive knowledge statements where the writer wants to control the interpretation of the reader, but as active and subjective constructors who (mentally and emotionally) interact with what they read and talk about it with others. The research product then can be a trigger to realign past experiences and give them new meaning in relation to the present and future (Sparkes, 1996). Criteria for judging the quality here are: does the research sensitise readers to issues such as identity, own political behaviour, unconscious themes? Does the research product enable the reader to enter the subjective world of the researcher? For this interpretive community the conventional concept of generalisability moves from the respondents of the research (does the research use large enough samples?) to the reader: can the reader naturally generalise the experiences described in the research? Does this research product ‘work’ for the reader?

### 6.4 *The researchers themselves*

What did the research do with the researcher? What is his or her movement of thought? What did the researcher learn from his or her research journey, both academically, practically and personally? As the epistemological stance of this kind of research entails a development of insights in coexistence with others, this kind of research poses questions like: Who did the researcher become through the research effort? And what was the emerging transformation of the researchers’ identity?

### *6.5 The colleagues of the researcher; the researched*

The research takes place in, and is addressed to a specific organisational community in which the research was carried out. Presumably the research serves some purposes for that community. Does the research foster and stimulate social ameliorative action? Furthermore the fact that the researcher and the researched work together in a shared daily practice posits several ethical questions, for instance concerning the disclosing of confidential material and the reactions of the colleagues to the final published material [see Mosse (2006) for an intriguing experience]. How are these ethical issues addressed in the research?

### *6.6 The communities of silent voices*

This interpretive community concerns the postmodern critical component of this kind of research. The involvement of the researcher with a concrete organisational reality can lead to enhanced insights into the pluralistic character of their social context, understanding a diversity of voices. Not only the voices of the powerful but also of those who are silenced and marginalised. So this aspect of the research, one could say, is the emancipatory element, opening up attention for silencing and marginalisation. Evaluative questions which can be asked here are: did this research help reveal the relevance of a whole and diverse range of voices and emancipate marginalised suppressed voices? and do the research results provide the marginalised with insights about their identity and status?

So instead of evaluating the complex responsive process research method using a set of fixed, 'objective' and foundational yardsticks another view on the discussion on its status is proffered. This view builds on the ontological and epistemological positioning of the complex responsive process perspective itself. First a reflection on the aims, locus and focus of the concrete research project is needed: what interpretive communities are addressed by this specific research endeavour? As implied by assumptions of the complex responsive process perspective in most cases the answer to this question will be that not only the evaluation criteria of 'purely' academic communities should be taken into account. Also more 'pragmatic' interpretive communities use – and thus evaluate – the research products of this kind of research. So the 'status' of the research which is undertaken from this perspective should also be evaluated by a broader set of criteria than just the criteria of one group (the academic community). When some major interpretive communities are identified, the next step is to investigate per community what relevant evaluative questions are to be asked. And finally: who should give an answer to these questions? The researcher her or himself? Or are answers derived at in interactions with people belonging to these interpretive communities, these interactions themselves again being complex responsive processes?

## **7 Conclusions: taking the complex responsive process research approach seriously**

In the beginning of this paper you 'heard' me desperately pondering the question: what the hell am I doing? After the research journey that I undertook to get some answers, I

can conclude that I did find some first answers to this question. I think the ways in which this kind of research is undertaken offers an interesting set of inspirations, not only for academic research about human complexity in organisations and the unpredictable and spontaneous self-organising dynamics of organisational daily life, but also for several other interpretive communities who use or work with the results of this kind of research. Concerning the academic interpretive (research) communities the dominance of conventional positivistic research pushes this kind of research somewhere at the outskirts of the research and theorising on organisations [Bate, (1997), p.1148]. Yet I think it can perform a profoundly needed alternative and critical role, adding practical flesh to the (sometimes) reductionist causal bones of many theoretical models, falsifying existing theories, generating new research ideas, reformulating definitions of existing problems, identifying new and practically relevant research areas and contributing to existing theoretical knowledge also sometimes exposing the limits of statistics and statistical evaluations. Next to this auxiliary function of ‘ameliorating’ existing (positivistic) academic research, as I observed above, the complex responsive process research is undertaken from a perspective which is radically different from mainstream research approaches in organisational sciences [Deetz, (1996), p.198; Alvesson and Willmott, 2012]. This implies that the complex responsive process research also should have a separate ‘place under the sun’, which is different than mainstream theoretical assumptions about organisations and research methods. So for me it is time to move the complex responsive process perspective a bit more from the margin to the centre of the attention.

Next to its academic relevance, this kind of research can have great (practical) value for other interpretive communities like the researchers and the researched. But also for the readers and users of the research products. On a content level the ‘first hand perspective’ provides unique additional material and insights about the conversational everyday reality of organisational working and living. For example with regard to leadership theory this kind of research shows what ‘backstage conditions’, thoughts and emotions leaders themselves experience during important moments in their work; adding ‘live’ to the host of ‘second hand’ (observational, questionnaire-based) models about leadership. It is not research about leadership but research from-within, providing an alternative and unique vantage point. In this sense the complex responsive process research method tries to bridge theory development and pragmatic value; a praiseworthy effort which is whole-heartedly called for in many publications (e.g., Hambrick, 1994; Mowday, 1997; Rousseau, 2006; Walsh et al., 2007; Bansal et al., 2012). The fact that the major components of the complex responsive process research approach can be quite straightforwardly related to existing and well established schools of thought, perspectives and methods gives me the impression that this method stands on firm grounds. And this gives me confidence that ‘we are on to something worthwhile here’. Of course – as more in general goes for qualitative research [Lincoln, 1995; Fossey et al., 2002] – the complex responsive process perspective and research approach are both still ‘works in progress’. The same goes for criteria for evaluating research quality. Yet the unique contributions this kind of research can make to both science and practice, promise that this research could be a good investment which deserves to be taken seriously.

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**Notes**

- 1 Also part of the Herfordshire-programme are so called community meetings. During residential sessions the students meet in the tradition of the Institute of Group Analysis without an agenda and without a group leader. These meetings are aimed at deepening the students' understanding of complex responsive processes by experiencing group dynamics 'working live'. This type of meetings is not part of the Open University program.
- 2 The way the research in this PhD program is undertaken is a good example of a research method which lies closely to the ontological and epistemological orientations of the complex responsive process approach. This does not mean that this is the only method. Of course other methods are possible, even more creative ones like the arts-based research practice of Leavy (2009). Rather the research approach described is seen as a good illustration and elaboration of the intentions researchers can work from when undertaking their research from a complex responsive process perspective.
- 3 I am referring here to the 'process-side' of theory development. The term 'theorising' which is used in the title of this article refers to the content of theories which are developed in different scientific traditions of organisational sciences. In this sense this 'content' is a result of the 'process' of theorising.