

Abstract – Successful or not? Evidence, emergence and development management.

This article offers a critique of the dominant ways of conceiving of, managing and evaluating development. It argues that these management methods constrain the exploration of novelty and difference. By drawing on insights from the complexity sciences, particularly the theory of emergence, the article calls for a broadening of our understanding of how social change comes about. Arguing that the domain of development is not a narrow technical discipline, but an intensely social and political practice of mutual recognition, this article calls for a greater focus on power and processes of relating as they affect local interaction between people.

Key words: complexity, emergence, managerialism, evidence, natural science methods, politics, relationships.

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Successful or not? Evidence, emergence and development management.

This article will explore some of the concepts that underpin the management of international development as a way into enquiring into theories of method, knowledge and evidence. In doing so it will describe what it is that staff in INGOs actually do when they are working, and what theories they take up in their practice. This will involve narrating an episode in the life of an organisation and thereafter generalising from it. In generalising the article makes no claims that the sector is homogenous, and in particularising it makes no claims that this particular example is typical of all INGOs. What is of interest is the generative tension between the two, a tension we will call dialectic. The article will go on to explore this nexus, how the general arises from the particular, by drawing on analogies from the complexity sciences. It will set this out in contrast to the way that generalisations and global patterns are usually thought to arise, particularly according to theories currently in use in the international aid sector.

Narrative as a research method

The international development domain is no different from many others, being awash with tools, grids and frameworks, generalised recipes for how to undertake the work. What is often lacking in the literature is a description of what actually happens when staff take up these ideas in their daily practice and how they affect what is possible to achieve. What practical sense do staff make of project cycle management, logical frameworks (LF), performance management, and how helpful are they?

This article contends that the grids and frameworks currently in use in most INGOs are abstractions from a rich hinterland of lived experience: they are simplifications, sometimes reductively so. They are representations of reality, but ones which can cover over the messy business of trying to square experience with theory. Rather than merely reflect experience, when taken up uncritically by staff in INGOs they actively shape reality as the abstractions take on a life of their own. How staff take up conventional methods of working directly affects what it is possible to achieve.

In order to explore this phenomenon, the way that conventional methods are taken up, how would one give an account of what happens in organisations as staff engage with each other to particularise these abstract ways of knowing? Increasingly in organisational literature qualitative methods, particularly those using narrative, are accepted as a valid research method (Stacey: 2007; Czarniawska: 2004; Tsoukas and Hatch: 2002). The advantages of narratives are that they can weave together abstract concepts, subjectivity, feelings and ambiguity into a particular context with particular agents who act within a temporal structure. Narrative can provoke many resonances in the reader and stimulate them to make their own connections and associations with their own lived experience. Narrative is a very common but often neglected form of meaning making. Stacey (2007) makes the claim that the everyday process of organising with other involves the patterning and repatterning of narratives that describe organisational life. Organisations, as the ethnomethodologist Deirdre Boden (1994) would have it, continuously arise out of people talking about what they are doing, and the ongoing sense they make of this together. Although they share some of the same characteristics, narratives are distinct from both stories, which are fictional, and case studies, which are more tailored and crafted accounts of particular episodes of organisational life often used in business schools to demonstrate a pre-reflected pedagogical point. Instead, narratives are intended to reflect some of the messy, open-ended and ambiguous nature of experience, and it is on this complexity that this article turns.

Narrative - how schemes of thought shape the work

I have been invited to work with a senior management team in a country in Africa because they are deemed not be working as well as they might be. There have been low level conflicts between individuals on the senior management team, there is not a great deal of critical enquiry into the work, but in general and more or less the team is doing what it is supposed to be doing and meeting donors' expectations. After my first visit to the team I tell my contractor that I think this team shapes up well in comparison with many teams I have worked with.

We agree a second visit and discuss a programme of work. As way of demonstrating my particular method I suggested that I attend one of their routine three day quarterly management meetings as a participant. Thereafter we would find the time to talk about what we thought was going on there as a way of enquiring into practice.

The first two days were spent reviewing the different projects that this INGO was managing in country. Each presentation was almost the same. It consisted in the presenter, usually the manager of that particular project, showing a slide of the aims and objectives of the project, then going on to show in subsequent slides whether the objectives and milestones had or had not been fulfilled. The dominant way of understanding the work was as progress against pre-reflected targets. This often led the presenter into a review of future targets, the possible impediments to achieving them, and how these constraints might be managed away. Usually there was a brief five or ten minutes set aside for discussion at the end of the presentation before we moved onto the next, which was given in almost exactly the same way.

The organisation I was working for was obliged to construe its projects with the LF in order to get funds from donors. Managers also operate a performance management process based on setting annual objectives. The organisation employs committed workers who are keen to succeed and do well at their jobs and it was interesting to notice the kinds of dualistic thinking that these ways of working were leading to in the workshop where I was a participant: I was constantly being asked to help participants 'correct their mistakes', to help them stop doing what was 'wrong' and start doing what was 'right'. Objectives were either achieved or not achieved, projects were either on target, or, very often, close to it. What I noticed was a lack of discussion, moreover and absence of argument and debate. Professionalism in this context was understood to be about conforming to what was expected and predicted, very little about being surprised.

Locating this article in development literature

The above narrative might be deemed an extreme example, but nonetheless it falls broadly within the author's experience during 15 years of offering consultancy to INGOs. There is a growing literature critical of what we might term managerialist approaches to development management, which draw on a range of abstract instruments and schemes such as the LF, project cycle, strategic planning, performance management and others. Dar and Cooke, 2008; Wallace et al., 2006,1997; Quarles van Ufford and Giri, 2003; Eyben, 2005, 2006; Mosse, 2005; Mosse and Lewis, 2005 variously understand managerialism, a body of theories which idealise the role of manager in organisational life, to be a legacy of colonialism, an extension of global capitalism, or a reduced and unproblematic manifestation of modernity. There have also been a number of interesting studies which explore how development interventions cover over politics and represent social struggle as a series of discrete projectised problems in need of technical solutions from development organisations (Li, 2007; Dichter, 2003; Mitchell, 2002; Ferguson, 1990). All concern themselves with the implied power relations

between those who work in the aid domain and those whose lives they seek to affect.

This article broadly accepts these critiques of contemporary development management, and also agrees with the idea that in subscribing to a narrow technical and rational discourse, staff in INGOs contribute to the covering over of contestability and conflict. However, the approach in this article will be to engage more fully with the conceptual underpinnings of what we are terming managerialism, sometimes New Public Management, and in doing so it will investigate how it affects the day to day practice of staff who interact with development beneficiaries. Rather than concentrating on a broad canvas, however, the article will focus instead on the local relationships of power that arise between colleagues. In drawing on more radical manifestations of complexity theory, it will argue that it is in this daily, local communicative interaction that opportunities for radical transformation and knowledge arise. What development staff choose to talk about with others, and what they pay attention to, will profoundly affect how knowledge arises and how they evaluate the success of what they are doing.

This article will show briefly the ways in which the dominance of managerialism arose and persists and will then go on to argue how a greater understanding of emergence might open development practitioners up to an appreciation of pluralism which their habituated practice may have led them to cover over. The article will make the case that there is no inherent contradiction between scientific method and contestability, and that it is in the local interactions between engaged colleagues that opportunities for exploration of novelty arise.

Borrowing scientific language - how managerialism came to dominate

Broadly there are three reasons for the ascendancy of managerialism.

Firstly, previous articles (Mowles: 2008a, 2008b) have described how INGOs have imported management theories largely uncritically from the private sector, and how the majority of these theories are underpinned by systems thinking. The LF, the project cycle, performance management, even many ways of developing strategy often rely upon assumptions explicit in cybernetics (Wiener, 1948). These are based in concepts of linearity, predictability and control, that it is possible to set goals in advance of undertaking the work and through a series of interventions aimed at correcting deviations from the desired path, to achieve the intended outcome.

When using modelling techniques and frameworks based in systems approaches, modern management theories adopt the language of scientific method, and in doing so lay claim to a more reality convergent way of dealing with organisational problems. Adherents of theories of systemic management are setting out a particular discourse which competes with existing ways of understanding management practice, which Lewis (2001) has argued have been historically weak in the international development sector.

Aspirations to scientific method and rationality in modern management theory are often explicit and are reflected in the use of vocabulary, although the if-then causality and systemic theories of change are usually implicit. There are also explicit attempts directly to bring over disciplines from the natural sciences through a relatively recent turn to 'evidence based management' (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006). Rousseau draws on an analogy with medicine as a 'success story' in her article advocating for evidence-based management and sums up the key concepts of what evidence-based practice would look like:

- learning about cause-effect connections in professional practices;
- isolating the variations that *measurably* affect desired outcomes;
- creating a culture of evidence-based decision-making and research participation. (Rousseau, 2006: 259-260)

For Pfeffer and Sutton it is possible to find out unproblematic facts about mergers and acquisitions or management practice, and to apply these facts in one's own organisation as way of 'driving up performance'.

The second reason for the domination of systemic ways of managing is the dimension of power-relating: they allow administrators, whether they be managers within the INGO themselves sitting at HQ, or bureaucrats sitting within funding organisations, to 'see like a state' (Scott, 1998). With a simplified summary of what it is that the project intends the work is thought to be more 'transparent' at a distance, and thus project workers more 'accountable'.

Thirdly, as argued in a previous article (Mowles, 2007) drawing on Bourdieu (1991), international development is a highly professionalised practice, 'a field of specialised production', where the players have a large stake in the game, and in which they are completely absorbed. Many INGOs are obliged to take up the LFA to get funding, but others adopt it because everyone else, including those with high social capital in this particular game, is adopting it. The dynamic of the game is self-reinforcing. From an institutional theory perspective, DiMaggio and Powell (1987) reach a similar conclusion, that organisations are more likely to adopt a way of managing because of the pressure of others adopting them, rather than because there is evidence of their effectiveness, despite the recent turn to evidence-based management.

So for at least these three reasons systemic management methods taken up by advocates of managerialism have come to dominate in the sector. In a very real sense, systemic management methods have come to take an ideological hold on the practice of development management and thus make certain ways of seeing and knowing more difficult. People try to fit their development experience within abstract and reductive schemes of thought and consider this the most important thing they are doing, rather than considering the messy day to day reality of trying to go on with others as being the data from which theories about the world emerge.

Investigating the claims of evidence-based management

What does it mean to be evidence-based as far as the management of development is concerned, and how relevant are analogies made with evidence-based medicine, for example?

In an interesting article following through the implementation of some policy directives on the treatment of glue ear in the National Health Service (NHS), Dopson (2005) treats the way that policy recommendations based on evidence-based medicine were taken up in four NHS hospitals and the surrounding GP surgeries that served them. She found that amongst the different clinical groups who were involved in the treatment of glue ear, GPs, Health Visitors, audiologists, ENT surgeons, there was an acceptance of the recommendations of evidence based medicine in theory (that in this disease, 'watchful waiting' is preferable to surgery), but in practice each of the different professional groups had a greater or lesser inclination to follow policy advice.

Dopson explains the uneven and episodic take-up of the new policy directives by drawing on the process sociology of Norbert Elias (2000). For, Elias the

development of societies, the civilising process as he called it, arises from the constantly fluctuating asymmetric power relations between people:

Whether power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is a functional interdependence between people. (1978: 75)

Elias makes the case that we are governed as much by our feelings as we are by rationality: both arise together in our relationships with others. We approach sets of problems cognitively, but at the same time are caught up in what we are doing as our identities are called into question and our relationships of power with others fluctuate. For Elias it would be impossible to think scientifically about human relating without acknowledging the interweaving of rational and affective selves which arises out of a specific history of interactions, and leads to a further patterning of interactions. He was deeply critical of sociological approaches which described social processes as though they were in a reduced and fixed state. Rather, he thought of the relations between people as being in a constant process of flux and change.

There are many similar examples in the development literature, particularly those written from an anthropological perspective (Mosse, 2005; Crewe and Harrison, 1998; Grillo and Stirrat, 1997), which document the conflicts that arise as seemingly rational endeavours become the locus of struggle and contestation between the different groups engaged in trying to undertake them. For example, in a chapter that deals directly with what is and is not measurable called *The Character of Calculability*, Mitchell (2002) describes how the apparently technical practice of mapping Egypt's agricultural land to develop a cadastral survey at the beginning of the 20th C was buffeted by politics: inter-departmental rivalries in the civil service, complaints, subversion, and disputes by and between farmers, and by the constantly fluctuating course of the Nile and the changing patterns of land ownership. Mitchell concludes that 'expert knowledge works to format social relations, never simply to report or picture them' (2002: 118). The process of abstracting, reducing and simplifying, to enable managers sitting at a distance to presume the ability to predict and control, is nonetheless subverted on a daily basis through the practice of engaged social actors.

Summary of the argument so far

This article started with a justification of narrative as a research method as a means of finding out how INGO staff take up conventional management methods in practice, and described the author's involvement with a team in Africa. It depicted how each manager chose to talk about what they were responsible for using the tools and frameworks which are ubiquitous in the sector and how this had encouraged a much reduced discussion, often expressed in dualisms, about whether practice was correct or incorrect, on course or not on course. There was little opportunity for shared meaning-making. The article then set out an explanation of how these particular ways of managing the work were replicated and sustained in the international development domain, and the ideological impact that they had. The case was made that contemporary management theory borrows the vocabulary of empirical science, and in doing so covers over some of the discussion that might be had about power, values and difference. By intimation, then the article argues that this way of working privileges theories of control and manipulation and tilts power towards donors and centrally-based managers at the same time as pretending not to do so. By drawing on Dopson, Elias and Mitchell we are beginning to make an alternative argument that, despite the case sometimes made that technical and rational methods afford greater detachment, those using them will always get caught up in conflictual social processes which they will help form, and will be formed by at the same time.

The arguments set out above are not making an argument for being anti-scientific or anti-rational. Rather, they are beginning to set out how current managerialist thinking is not scientific and rational enough, if we can take a broad understanding of rationality to include our acceptance of both our subjective and objective selves, and the way that conflict, difference and power relations affect what it is we are doing and the way we are doing it.

The battle over being scientific

The dispute as to what we might mean by natural science methods, and if we could define them, how far they might apply in the social sphere has been termed by Flyvbjerg (2001) the 'paradigm wars'. Flyvbjerg understands the two methods to be grounded in very different ways of understanding the world, and sees no way forward but to separate them:

Just as social science has not been able to contribute with Kuhnian normal science and predictive theory to scientific development, so natural science has had little to offer to the reflexive analysis of goals values and interests that is a precondition for and enlightened development in any society. (2005: 53)

Flyvbjerg's argument, drawing on Aristotle, is that there is a difference between value rationality, which considers matters of social value, and instrumental rationality, which is more concerned with problem solving. He makes the case that in modernity we have taken a rationalist turn and that the latter instrumental rationality has come to dominate. It was Aristotle's view that questions about who we are and what we value should always precede scientific enquiry so that we never become a society of ends without means. For this reason, Flyvbjerg states, we should abandon the project of trying to reconcile the two and develop research methods with particular relevance to the social and political nature of human interaction. In highlighting the case for putting power at the centre of social research, Flyvbjerg overstates the case for splitting the social and natural worlds.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens (1993) makes a similar binary case, though negatively, arguing that we should resist the 'hegemonic claims' from both the natural scientists and those who would oppose them for understanding social phenomena:

It is necessary, in fact, to resist the claim to universality, with regard to the explanation of human conduct, of the two major competing traditions of philosophy: hermeneutics and positivism. Each aspires to cover the whole range of human behaviour, to accommodate it to its particular logical scheme. (1993:65)

Giddens is helpful in his assertion that truth can be found in neither one nor the other set of methods, but may also be posing an unnecessary dualism. Neither positivism nor hermeneutics is monolithic. The sociologist Patrick Baert (2005) and Bruno Latour (2000) have separately argued this case. It is not possible to argue that natural and social science methods are interchangeable, or even that they are becoming more like each other, but it is possible say that they share things in common and are more nuanced than a reduced view would allow. Baert, for example, puts forward the idea that the term scientific method is inadequate, since it covers a multiplicity of methods:

Different disciplines in the natural sciences function according to very different procedures unless the logic of inquiry is spelled out at such a

high level that it loses any meaning. It becomes increasingly apparent that those who believe in this unifying methodology erroneously generalize from a few sub-disciplines (mainly in physics) in which the procedures apply. (2005: 148)

There are dangers, then, in generalising about what we might mean by scientific method. Equally, positivism and hermeneutics share some similar characteristics.

Gadamer (1975) one of the hermeneutic philosophers to whom Giddens refers, points to the Socratic process of questioning, the opening up to otherness, of continuing to expand one's argument and one's horizon. Questioning is not about being in control but about being increasingly undogmatic and questioning further:

The art of questioning is the art of questioning further i.e., the art of thinking. It is called dialectic because it is the art of conducting a real dialogue. (1993: 360/361)

This is not to say that Gadamer is uninterested in truth, merely that he is less interested in truth as an end point rather than as an ongoing cycle of enquiry. Drawing on Socrates and Hegel, he believes that knowledge arises in the process of question and answer in a way that is driven by the movement between engaged discussants. It is a process of dialectic, and one might make the case that this is exactly the same process that takes place between engaged scientists and as they contest each others' findings and thought moves as a consequence.

The next section will explore further this continuous questioning to which we have been referring, the Socratic process of enquiring, then enquiring further. It will do so by drawing on the scientific concept of emergence, which we will investigate below. The emergence of the patterning of relationships that arises from continuous interaction throws into question causality, truth and knowledge and poses a fundamental challenge to the common frameworks for understanding the management of development, which, as we have seen in the narrative, directly affect the way that many staff in INGOs go about their business. Instead of suggesting, a reduced and binary world, successful/unsuccessful, achieved/not achieved, theories of emergence promote a rigorous and continuous enquiry into the complex interplay of local activity and theorising from activity to encourage a richer, shared world of meaning.

Emergence as mathematical modelling

Peter Hedström is a mathematician working at Oxford University who has developed agent-based computer techniques for modelling complex social phenomena. In his book *Dissecting the Social* (2005) he explains the factors he has taken into account in developing a computer programme to model the behaviour of unemployed young people in Stockholm. Since he is dealing with non-linear equations, which have no solution, he is explicit that what he is doing offers explanations of what has happened, rather than predictions of what will happen.

Hedström aspires to pure Platonic mathematical abstraction, balanced with a sense of what he calls realism, to develop sociology as a 'rigorous science.' For him qualitative methods lack the generalizability and reliability of agent based modelling. He acknowledges the shortcomings of running experiments on a computer, since they are the laboratory equivalent of scientific research which does not take place in the real world, but nonetheless he stands by his method as one which applies formal scientific principles.

Having developed his model of the behaviour of young employed people and having run it thousands of times to mimic the behaviour of individuals in society he goes on to derive the following lessons:

One such lesson was that the structure of social interaction can often be of considerable explanatory importance in its own right. Small and seemingly unimportant changes in the structure of social interaction can have a profound impact on the social outcomes which emerge. This also means that the effect a given action has on the social can be highly contingent upon the structural configuration in which the actor is embedded. (2005: 149)

Hedström's modelling does not deal specifically with power, which is probably too inexplicit a concept for him. However, there is nonetheless a nod in the direction of the power that arises between people in his acknowledgement of the significance of the structure of social interaction, by which we take to mean our ability to affect each other in social relationships.

His work is extremely stimulating since it problematises a number of taken for granted assumptions but from a clearly natural science based position. Firstly it undermines the concept of linear cause and effect and predictability: history, context and power are of profound significance to what actually happens in global social patterning. This has important implications for the idea of evidence-based management, or best practice, if the notion is that examples of good practice can simply be replicated, or scaled up, elsewhere and are likely to be equally successful. It makes much more fragile the predictability of social development interventions, even those based on previous experience. Secondly, the method points to the importance of a fine-grained attention to every day processes for understanding how social patterning arises. When we are dealing with a simplified and reductive abstraction such as a log-frame, it will tell us very little about the day to day practice from which it is abstracted and what becomes necessary to sustain the abstraction. This attention to daily practice should concern us if we want to take into account both ends and means of our social development intentions. And thirdly, even paying attention to micro-processes may ultimately give no indication of how social change will eventually come about. Hedström himself says that it is 'even more difficult to convince others, that the large scale phenomena that are observed may simply be due to an uncommon combination of common events and circumstances,' by which he offers his own definition of emergence.

Emergence as complex responsive processes

In setting out their theory of complex responsive processes, Stacey (2007), Griffin (2002) and Shaw (2002) draw both on the traditions of Western thought by way of Hegel, G.H. Mead and Norbert Elias (some of Elias' theories have been set out above) and analogies from complexity theory at the same time.

Stacey draws on Mead (1934) and Elias (2000) and the insights from the theory of complex adaptive systems, to make the case that global population wide patterns emerge only out of the local interactions of individual agents. There is a simultaneous, paradoxical emergence of local and global for which there is no overall plan and of which no one is in control. In making an analogy between complex adaptive systems theory and the dynamics within organisations Stacey and colleagues develop the idea that population wide patterns of activity emerge in the interplay of desires and intentions of people who are cooperating and competing with each other through communicative interaction:

In other words, in local communicative interaction, local patterns of interaction are being formed by population-wide patterns – generalisations and idealisations – while at the same time forming them. Pattern is emerging locally and globally at the same time, all in local communication in which the interplay of intentions making particular to a particular situation that which is general and idealised. (Stacey, 2007: 309)

Themes of organising build up over time, and are turned into mission and vision statements, and policy documents. They can also inform the structure of what Mead calls social objects, those generalised tendencies developed by large groups of people to act in a particular way, like an organisational away-day or an AGM. Themes of organising and artefacts of organisation get taken up by staff as imaginative idealisations of the 'whole' organisation. The way these idealisations are discussed between people in particular ways, constrained as they are by relationships of power, offers the potential for both continuity and change.

Similarities and differences in theories of emergence

Like Hedström, Stacey argues that it is in daily interactions that the global patterning arises, and that small differences between locally interacting agents can eventually have unpredictably large population-wide effects. Both have a more or less explicit theory of power, or socially structured configuration, for explaining the dramatic differences that can arise from similar activities. Both undermine the idea of linear cause and effect by drawing in their own ways from the natural science domain and point to the importance of history and context for offering explanations of what has arisen. Both stress the importance of paying attention to what is going on locally if we are to understand global patterning.

Thereafter there are marked differences between the two. Unlike Hedström, Stacey does not support the case for the scientist as detached observer, but rather argues that actors are formed by the very processes which they are trying to study. As they try to influence others, they are caught up in the same figurations of power, with a greater or lesser ability to affect those around them. For this reason he takes an explicit interest in exploring paradox and does not subscribe to what the philosopher John Dewey (2005) calls 'the spectator theory of knowledge' as perhaps would Hedström. Equally, Stacey takes an overt interest in narrative as a method of research, since he would argue that it better models the subtle, complex context-dependent nature of human interaction a position which is anathema to Hedström. Stacey is comfortable locating his theory within the natural science tradition as manifested in the newer complexity sciences, as well as a broader canon of Western philosophy and sociology. Hedström meanwhile thinks more narrowly of his natural home as being amid a more orthodox understanding of science.

Where both lead us, however, is to a re-evaluation of our daily interactions with others if we are to gain a better understanding of what we think we are doing when we try to act together. As we deal with often idealised, abstract simplifications of what we are supposed to be doing, we need to be more fully aware that these reductive ways of knowing will inevitably shape what it is we pay attention to, and the way we understand the world. Nonetheless, in struggling with the abstractions we also begin to shape them as well, forming and being formed both at the same time. In developing a greater understanding of the unpredictable nature of organising, we will be obliged to pay greater attention to the broad set of data that is available to us in doing so, the fluctuating relationships of power between us, and between us and other people, because these will significantly affect what it is possible to say and do.

We may also begin to question our linear concepts of time which accompany our linear models for managing the work – in the LF, project cycle management and other linear management tools, if-then causality leads us ineluctably from one step to another. However, as we pause to reflect on what we are doing we call attention to the way we are working with each other and in doing so create the possibility of understanding what we are doing anew. We begin to pay attention, in an iterative rather than a linear way, to how our thought is moving, how our knowledge and understanding are emerging. If we started our work with a particular understanding of what we were doing, now, six months into the project we understand what it is we are doing completely differently. We might consider that what we do and how we react to what we do are both important data sets for deciding how we might go on together.

A return to the narrative

Having sat for two days experiencing PowerPoint presentations, one after the other, I was asked by the group of managers if I would take the third morning to give my 'feedback' on what they had been doing.

We reconvened as a big group after an hour or so and all kinds of observations, reflections, and evaluations emerged. As a participant in the discussion I also offered my own. We agreed and disagreed, challenged each other, began to point to some of the power relationships between us and how they constrained what it was possible to say to each other. It was also possible to reflect more widely on the work and what it meant for the way this particular group of managers understood what they were engaged in. They themselves began to make connections which I, as an outsider, could not see, to reinterpret what their organisation was asking them to do and to destabilise their previous understanding. The group began to make plans about how they would organise the next quarterly meeting differently.

In the afternoon I met with a much smaller executive group of managers to reflect further on what had happened in the morning. As we began to discuss what had happened and how this particular group was functioning, the low level conflict that had existed between two members of the group erupted and became a fierce argument, also catching up a third member of the team. We began, in the moment to talk about what we were experiencing there and then and how we might deal with it, and the personal and professional matters with which we were confronting each other.

The outburst in the meeting reverberated for the remainder of my visit. It shocked some and relieved others in the team and everyone was obliged to talk about it, bilaterally, in small groups, formally and informally as way of coming to terms with what had happened. Things had shifted and we were beginning to talk in detail about the functioning of the team.

Concluding remarks

This article has used narrative about development management as a way of reflecting upon what people actually do in development organisations. This has been done to open up a discussion about how dominant methods for managing international development constrain the undertaking of development. Although making no universal claims that the organisation the author was working with was typical of all INGOs, he is nonetheless using the narrative as a way of particularising general trends of development management practice to see what we might learn from doing so. By explicitly drawing attention to the particular and local, a case is being made for the importance of exploring context-dependent examples of what happens as people try to undertake development work. And further, the article is pointing to the importance of reflection and reflexivity,

taking seriously the day to day interactions with others which are relationships of power. The reasons for doing so are derived from theories of emergence, which suggest the idea that global patterning arises solely out of the interaction between locally acting agents, which form the global pattern, and are formed by it at the same time.

This method is offered as a counter to the dominant way of understanding development management which is heavily influenced by systems theory and a reduced understanding of scientific method. This privileges abstraction, simplification and linear cause and effect. The dominance of these ways of managing exercises an ideological constraint on what it is possible to say and do, which affects what workers pay attention to in their daily practice, as has been demonstrated in this article. The article makes the claim that these methods are reductive and tilt power relationships in favour of donors and managers who sit at a distance from the work, because they privilege generalised, non-contestable accounts of what is and is not happening. They cover over the messy business of achieving things with others as employees compete with each other to claim success. The author would argue further that they also have the potential for squeezing out the emergence of novelty, which, as Hedstrom and Stacey argue, arises solely out of local interaction.

Human experience does not have a clear beginning, middle and end, whatever most project management methods would have us believe. Where we decide to cut the iterative cycle of the ongoing patterning of human interaction, and whether we judge this to be a success or failure reflects an ideological position. An illustration of what this might mean is as follows:

Let us take, for example, the author's intervention in the team in Africa: using a dualistic approach, would we consider this a success or not? To flatter the consultant would mean cutting the interactions at the end of the workshop to demonstrate how the author had made a significant contribution to the effectiveness of the team, which was now planning a much more effective quarterly meeting. It was a success. However, if we were to include the subsequent meeting with the senior management team, the author might be deemed to have helped in some ways and confused in others. Was it successful or not?

However, if we were to take an entirely different view, placing a different value on conflict and the messy business of working together, understanding it as a necessary and inevitable consequence of trying to organise, then the intervention was neither successful nor unsuccessful, but more or less supportive in helping the team make sense of what they were doing. A sounding taken from the team immediately after the intervention might look very different if taken a month or six months later, if bringing inter-team tensions to the surface of subsequently allowed better ways of working to emerge.

Our understanding of what it is we are undertaking together changes from minute to minute as we interact with each other and make sense of what it is we are doing. The way we interact, the things we pay attention to, what it is possible to say to each other, will all affect the course of the work. The schemes that we use to understand our experience will shape what we consider to be the success of our enterprise. Paying attention to local interaction rehabilitates the richness of experience which taken-for-granted managerial frameworks potentially cover over.

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