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Jens Thoemmes

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From the point of view of work sociology

Jens Thoemmes, CERTOP, CNRS, Université de Toulouse Jean-Jaurès

Introduction

This contribution aims to discuss from a sociological point of view the scope, value and limitations of the “Organization and Well-being” Research Program’s approach. Given our interest in this Program’s approach we will try first to present the most salient features and then make out the differences that exist with our approach. Basically, the approach of the O&W Program constitutes a rich and heuristic point of view. It is concerned with the work process. The approach distinguishes a) technical actions independently of operators, b) their accomplishments - therefore with the operators and the characteristics of the situation (space, time, modes and values), c) technical knowledge mobilized into action related to the object, the means and the process. This analytical distinction allows a description of the process which then leads to an interpretation of the organizational constraint, the choices that preceded it and the possibility of transformation of the work process with the goal of improving the well-being of workers.

To develop our reading of this approach we would first go over some of its features: distinction description/interpretation, work as a process of action and transformation, “the worker” at the center of such approach.

Then we will refer specifically to its theoretical framework in order to show the foundation of the approach and to expose what seems questionable, namely the way of conceiving interdisciplinary.

Finally, we end our reading by returning to the subject's autonomy, a broader debate that can be submitted for discussion with another vision of this concept in order to clarify its status in the approach presented here.

The elements of a research approach

The approach is summed up in its title: it is firstly analyzing organizational dynamics, here called “organization” in an “interdisciplinary” way and, secondly, to enable greater welfare of workers, the “well-being”. The approach is practical in this double sense: to describe an observed reality and to promote better working conditions. The process is finalized with clearly stated objectives. For each research it offers a detailed protocol, methodical and multidimensional. In order to understand better the implementation of this approach, several elements must be underlined.

The first is the strict distinction between a description of the observed reality and the interpretation of the work situation. These two levels do not mix. This distinction allows for example other researchers, approaches or disciplines, to accept the description of a situation, while challenging the proposed interpretation.

The second element of the approach concerns the principle according to which work is understood as a process and a series of tasks that are differentiated according to the phases of this process. Take the case of research on the welding activity (Maggi, Rulli, 2014). For each of the welding work phases the description distinguishes: a) the expected result of the phase, for example the preparation of means for welding, b) technical actions, c) the performance of the actions by one or more operators, d) technical knowledge mobilized during this phase. The process continues with the interpretation of the description. At the heart of this other way of presenting the same stage of the work process, the researchers would characterize organizational constraints which appear in the analysis. Here are successively addressed the possible consequences in terms of inefficiency relative to the desired result, such as factors slowing the preparation of means for welding, but also the risks and damage to operators. The issue of health appears in the center of interest and interpretation. Therefore, indications for the improvement of working conditions, health and safety are made. In all phases, the same activity of

description and interpretation is performed, thereby producing a detailed analysis in order to find the levers for action on the “well-being”.

The third element of the approach is to associate the workers by giving them a place of “subject” in the envisaged process, not as an observation of the work of others, but as a transformation of the earlier work process to which the research contributes. The approach is seen as a transformation of the reality with the “workers” integrated to the point that “the analysis – with its transformational and re-design consequences – is entirely carried out and managed by the subjects themselves” (Maggi, Rulli, 2012 : 20).

These three elements, distinction between description and interpretation, phases of a same process and the integration of the subjects studied in the approach already indicate the characteristics of an organizational analysis that deviates from many other approaches used in the social sciences. The so called “method of organizational congruencies” (MOC) invites subjects to describe their work by distinguishing the analytical components of the process: the desired results, the actions taken to achieve goals, the technical qualification of actions, and the regulation of all elements.

In order to explain the ways of seeing social reality, we would like to highlight briefly some theoretical foundations of this approach. This will also allow us to address another element of the approach we have omitted to mention: “interdisciplinarity”.

Theory and methods

The theory of organizational action (TOA, Maggi, 2003/2016) is based on epistemological characteristics that may be displayed briefly. Work is, as we mentioned, a “process” that is of the order of “social action”. The reference to Max Weber (*Soziales Handeln*) is fundamental here (Weber, 1921/1980). The subject acts according to his sense-meaning which is oriented by the act of another. The organization then refers to “the *regulatory aspect* of the process of social action” (Maggi, Rulli, 2012: 6), to the constraints that it exerts on the

subjects. But *acting subjects* are central to the process (design, implementation) and organizational choices.

The focus on “well-being” of the TOA refers to a humanist tradition. The “interest” is clearly located around health and includes the normative act of the researcher. We can call this a non positivist theory. Furthermore, the TOA is part of the legacy of sociology of work, especially that of Georges Friedmann, without sharing his pessimism nor his Marxist theory (Friedmann, 1956/1963). The well-being concerned is not that of a class, but of a potential transformation of the organization, for example resulting from a research command from business favoring the work of workers who are part of the methodological device. In this sense well-being is a “pragmatic” goal that ultimately could serve both sides (labor and capital).

The focus is mainly on the organizational choice of work, including Taylorism that is not regarded as a postulate, but as an organizational constraint that can change. It’s one of the differences with an alternative experience of Ivar Oddone in occupational psychology and renewed forms of the “worker model of knowledge” that has sought to transform largely relations of production incorporating also the subject in the research. The method called “doppelganger” is fundamentally different from the approach of the O&W Program: “If there was someone exactly like you from a physical point of view, what would you tell him about how to behave in the factory in relation to the task, to the colleagues, to the company’s hierarchy, to the union (or other workers’ organizations?” (Oddone *et al*, 1977: 127)¹.

The experience of the subject is passed here by the advice given to the investigator, while the O&W approach replaces this method to avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism and objectivism. Through the prism of well-being it confronts

¹ « Se ci fosse un'altra persona perfettamente uguale a te dal punto di vista fisico, come gli diresti di comportarsi in fabbrica rispetto alla mansione, ai compagni di lavoro, alla gerarchia aziendale, all'organizzazione sindacale (o ad altre organizzazioni dei lavoratori)?», translated by us.

organizational choices in a process of change led by the workers. The expressions of autonomy, constraint and regulation are used to enter the objective and subjective characteristics of the process and thus to identify the organization in order to place the subject in the situation of transformation.

The other difference with the O&W approach is the epistemological position around the doppelganger method that seeks to combine cognitive analysis, subjectivist, causal, etc. The TOA judges this combined position “fragile”. More fundamentally, the persistence of functionalism related to an insufficient questioning of Taylorism is criticized (Maggi, 2010a).

A final important element of the O&W approach concerns the concept of interdisciplinary research that we would like to discuss. We have never claimed that position and we do not have the experience to evaluate the substance of the disciplinary status of this approach. But we would like to generate, through a few remarks, a debate on that notion. We can only agree to the posture of cooperation between disciplines of the TOA but we wish that their scope was clarified.

In our first reading, interdisciplinarity requires exchange of analysis, methods and disciplines, it presupposes a transformation of the relationship between analysis. The O&W approach seems actually closer to multidisciplinary research where each discipline retains its specific concepts and methods. In our second reading, we could then go further, look at the theory and argue that the latter is not interdisciplinary, but *un-disciplined*, that is to say based on a distancing of “discipline”.

We offer three additional meaning to that concept for the approach of the O&W Program: rejection of the discipline as a relevant part of the analysis, the transgression of disciplinary boundaries without replacing them by a new field and the replacement of discipline or of a perimeter of disciplines by the uniqueness of the theoretical framework.

First, the TOA has multiple inputs: ergonomics, law, sociology, psychology, language science, organization theory, economics, history, etc. But

the TOA does not seem to embrace the idea of capitalization of knowledge within a discipline and for good reason. The dominant paradigms within disciplines, and the “normal” science, are rather rejected, because they are seen as a deterrent to the production of knowledge. In this “disciplinary” perspective a discussion among representatives or “spokesmen” of them seems almost impossible or at least undesirable.

Second, always against the interdisciplinary approach, the TOA is not pursuing the Weberian or Marxist idea of a general social science because this fact would exclude other important areas for research such as medicine or biology. The underlying project, but that remains to be determined, would be more that of a general science of work, but strictly focused on its purpose.

Thirdly, and more fundamentally, what matters to the TOA is the theoretical orientation, regardless of discipline. It is the commensurability of theoretical frameworks which is the criterion of collaboration and not the presence of several disciplines. The latter is desirable, but only to the extent that the theories (and hence the methods) can be considered as “close” from an epistemological perspective. One could say that the TOA is not an (attempted) interdisciplinary theory, but “undisciplined”, and pushing a bit too far our argument, it shares neither its methods nor its theory and favours basically the disappearance of disciplines. We underline here a form of incoherence of the “inter-disciplinary” posture.

Back to the subject’s autonomy

The approach and its theory cannot be observed from the perspective of Sociology, but only from a sociological point of view. In this perspective we present an unrepresentative special interrogation of a discipline that knows multiple approaches, including within the sociology of work. We share many views with the TOA, particularly his interest in the organization as a process, empirical research, avoiding the pitfall of objectivism and subjectivism, structures and actions, etc. The common interest for theories of social regulation

(Reynaud 1979) and organizational work (Terssac 2011) reinforces this proximity.

One of the issues that should be discussed concerns the autonomy of the subject in the proposed approach. This concept covers indeed multiple meanings for the only area of work (Terssac, 1992; 2012). It gave rise to an extensive debate on the definition that we will be unable to return. O&W's approach differentiates fundamentally *discretion* of the subject (various preset options, or without prescriptions) and *autonomy* (the ability to produce one's own rules). "Discretion indicates areas of action in a controlled process where the acting operator has to decide and choose in a dependency framework" (Maggi, 2003/2016: Livre II, 16; 45; and about the subject the dedicated third chapter, namely: 90-101). Autonomy overcomes the dependency framework. In the TOA each individual is capable of producing its own rules.

Reynaud (1988) sees social regulation as the result of a confrontation (compromise) between control and autonomy. In this theory the control is strategic and aims to influence from outside on the performers and not just by prescriptions, by regulations or by the margins given to operators: the claim of control is wider and affirmed. Inversely autonomy is strategic: the performers seek to assert their position. It corresponds to a project that grows in a power relationship. For this reason we also believe that despite the heuristic nature of the approach O&W regarding health, and that's what counts in the end, the approach remains locked in a relationship between what is prescribed and real life. "Autonomy provides the solution in cases of programme's inadequacy [...] discretion refers to parts of a programme that are not subject to procedures" (De la Garza, Maggi, Weil-Fassina 2011: 7-8). Autonomy and discretion are "functional" in relation to a pre-established agenda.

For us, it is not useful to distinguish between discretion (false autonomy) and (real) autonomy, since a definition of the action of the performers may be uncertain (is it a choice among proposed options or a self-generated rule?). Then this analytical distinction is subject to validation or challenge by the

regulatory process itself. Discretionary choices can turn within the process into an autonomous rule and vice versa.

Our conception of autonomy is less demanding on its content than on its aim. The use of discretion may be “autonomous” if it fits against the control regulation. The option chosen by the worker may (under certain conditions) not be suitable for the hierarchy. If one can choose formally to take 4 weeks annual leave all of a sudden, the employer may be afraid at some point to have difficulties to meet the demands of customers. Maintaining that allowed choice of a long vacation by the worker may be interpreted under certain conditions as an autonomous action. Moreover, a prescription can be perfectly executed, but facing the aim of the control regulation. Applying a rule to the letter may be a sign and expression of a challenge to control. This type of autonomy is as real as the creation of one’s own rules. So the meeting between autonomy and control is inherently uncertain in its form and in its results. The creation and use of the rules are subject to the power relationship between autonomy and control. We see that autonomy in these cases is not always the ability to produce one’s own rules, but sometimes it is executing according to the rules, including those dedicated to control, in order to assert power. In other words, autonomy is not necessarily a characteristic of the individual, or a functional necessity that could define the substance previously, but only a projected will to oppose the claims of control. This definition is intended to enlarge the scope of what can be considered as autonomy unlike a reading that is too focused on the subject of autonomy, which nonetheless remains important. To harden the line of our position: autonomy in this context is relational and not substantial. It does not refer necessarily to prior capacity or to register tasks or actions that would be by definition “autonomous” nor to freedom from a dependency framework. For us, overcoming the dependency framework of work and business, or just the prescription as is the case for the TOA, is not a condition for autonomy. Instead, autonomy is built in a dependency framework that can be exceeded in some

cases. In return the dependency framework needs autonomy to assert power and to rebuild.

We can finally ask the question concerning the transformation of the labor process, if the autonomy of the subject needs a research device, for example that of the O&W Program to express themselves, to be guided or to transform the system. One might distinguish here the “spontaneous” autonomy of the subject, and the “assisted” autonomy by the O&W Program’s approach. Despite all the space that the TOA gives the subject in relation to other theories, one can examine this dependence of the subject from the researcher in the effective regulation of the process, in learning and knowledge production.

Then, the power relationship from our perspective is not between individuals, but “that which exists between a group and those who want to adjust from outside” (Reynaud, 1988: 11). We know that the TOA provides the individual the same place in its theory than the group. For our part, we reserve the term autonomy to a collective strategy in the world of work. Our research objects (working time, negotiations) showed us that we seldom assert alone our own autonomy in work and in fact there are at least a core of a few people carrying an autonomous project (Thoemmes, 2015). This choice is not only theoretical, but also heuristic. It seems to us that to qualify the autonomy of a sole person and to link it by aggregation to a group makes it more difficult to discover the collective strategies and observe their peculiarity, social links, values and ways of action that form around. For us, autonomy is therefore immediately collective, thus freeing the concept of microeconomic theory and utilitarianism which defines the collective well-being as the aggregation of individual welfare. This latter view continues to exert considerable influence in the social sciences in various approaches. It basically reflects a fear and distrust of the collective and the fact that ultimately autonomy is supposed to be an individual affair.

Conclusion

Our route led us to a presentation of some elements of the interdisciplinary approach of the Program “Organization and Well-being”, to its relationship with the theory of organizational action (TOA), to a discussion of some points that seem problematic. In particular, two key concepts that are interdisciplinary research and autonomy undoubtedly deserve further discussion to understand, if the differences we have tried to establish are real or just the result of a differentiated use of terms. Nevertheless, the problem of definition often refers to differences in the conception of reality. We would also like to state here that the points of convergence with the approach are far more numerous than the differences that we tried to explain. One of these convergences is the need to depart from the approaches who use the argument of authority, their institutional seats and more generally their claim to exclusivity of the analysis of the social. The acceptance of a plurality of views in a discipline as well as the opening posture on the contribution of other potential disciplines to one’s own field of exploration seems fundamental to allow a renewal of theories and empirical approaches.

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