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Transformative agency: The narrative mediation between organizational and individual paradoxes

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The purpose of this paper is to enhance the conceptual understanding of the mediatory relationship between paradoxes on an organizational and an individual level. It presents a concept of agency that comprises and mediates between a structural and individual pole. The constitution of this agency is achieved through narrative activity that oscillates between the poles and transforms paradoxes through the configuration of plots and metaphors. Empirical cases are introduced in order to illustrate the implications of this understanding.

Introduction

To manage organizational change often implies navigating in complex institutional landscapes with many constituencies and many competing claims as to what would count as good reasons for acting, meaningful identities and significant performances. Managers need to oscillate and translate between such incommensurable settings in order to create and maintain positions from where to act. This paper explores into the nature of managerial agency in complex institutional settings.

A long line of studies has already dealt with the complexity of competing demands as a key feature of organizations. This complexity has been understood under alternative headings – e.g. *systemic or institutional contradictions* (Benson, 1977; Friedland and Alford, 1991; Seo and Creed, 2002; Engeström and Sannino, 2011), *dualities and tensions* (Seo et al., 2005) or *paradox* (Cameron and Quinn, 2006; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jay, 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). In a review of this exten-

sive debate, Smith and Lewis (2011) propose to include these contributions under the heading of a more unified paradox perspective. Here a setting is paradoxical when it involves contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time.

This paper addresses a special attention to the question: How are paradoxical institutional contexts realized as conditions for managerial agency – that is for the process of creating and maintaining positions from where to act? Another phrasing of this question can be: How is the mediation between paradoxes at an organizational level and paradoxes as they are experienced in the practice of particular managers?

In recent studies, four assumptions seem to be commonly held (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski et. al., 2013; Jay, 2013): First, a distinction is made between organizational and more individually experienced paradoxes. Organizational paradoxes reflect the fact that organizations take part in different institutional settings, which are reflected into different principles of structuration. At a more individual level, this can be experienced as different commitments, identities, and standards for performance. Secondly, the relationship between the levels is understood as reciprocal or recursive. This means that they mutually and iteratively form each other. Thirdly, the actual interaction is often described metaphorically – e.g. as latent paradoxes “surfacing” (Jay, 2013) or organizational paradoxes “spilling over” into paradoxes of individual role or group identity paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Fourthly, in the case studies the dramaturgical structure is leading the way towards “balance”, “coping”, and “synthesis”. The threshold to mastery is to accept paradoxes and to transform the battle into synergy.

These assumptions present a puzzle. On the one hand, paradoxes on an organizational and individual level are certainly not assumed to be empirically distinct phenomena. Actually, the empirical content of descriptions at each level is highly overlapping. It seems that the same empirically given processes are described under different aspects and in different vocabularies. On the other hand, if this is the case, it raises the question of what it means when we say that the one “spill over into” the other – indicating some kind of influencing. It can certainly not be an external and causal relationship. However,

the nature of the relationship is not clarified beyond the metaphorical. All in all, this raises the question of how structure and “systemness” is actualized in the concrete flow of action (Giddens 1984: 25-27).

This paper is following the clues of the three mentioned studies. However, the ambition is to enhance the analytical language for describing the mediatory relationship between paradoxes on an organizational and individual level. I shall look closer into what it means that latent paradoxes “surface” or organizational paradoxes “spill over”. To do this, I first of all need to conceptualize the mediatory relationship – not as an external relation between structure and agent – but as an internal and constituent feature within the process of agency. Agency is here understood as a process of mediating paradoxes in order to enable action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Next, my claim shall be that this process of agency is realized through the collaborative, narrative activity of managers. In narrative praxis, actors create a web of connections between incommensurable claims and identities – a discordant concordance (Ricoeur, 1984). Especially two features of narratives attract the attention of this analysis: One is the metaphorical structuring which order different claims and identities in time and space (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). This metaphorical structuring is both expressive and constitutive of different kinds of paradoxes. The other is the plot, which outlines the dramatic transformation of paradoxes in the narratively mediated praxis of actors (Ricoeur, 1984). The purpose is to explore how narratives are resources in the becoming of transformative agency – understood as the process of transcending existing and institutionally maintained paradoxes.

In the next section, I shall review the three recent attempts to conceptualize the relationship of organizational and individual paradoxes. Next, I shall develop a model of agency that sensitizes research to the narrative mediation between the two levels. Illustrating this, a narrative study into the mediation of paradoxes is presented. Finally, implications are discussed.

The present discussion

Recent studies have explored the dynamic and intermediary relationship between organizational and individual paradoxes (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski et. al., 2013; Jay, 2013). At the core of this lies the question on how paradoxes arise in actors' dealings with their structural environment.

Sharpening the lens

In their attempt to systematize paradox theory, Smith and Lewis (2011) identify the source of paradoxes in the very process of choosing in the face of a complex environment (pp. 388-390). Any decision implies that one possibility is realized at the cost of other possibilities. One option is drawn to the foreground, while other options are suppressed to a background of what could have been possible. This distinction between the actualized and the potential constitutes fields of tension. When leaders decide what is to be achieved, they also decide what is not to be achieved, and thereby the basis of performing tensions is formed. When they decide how to operate, they exclude alternatives and create the basis for organizing tensions. In choosing whom to do what they constitute a field of potentially conflicting identities, roles, and relations of belonging. Finally, leaders set a temporal perspective that constitutes tension between looking forward or backward, being shortsighted or strategic, reactive or proactive etc. This creates a specter of learning styles. The whole organizational field emerges as a system of interrelated tensions. Contradictory elements are divided into different sub-systems (functions, levels, sub-cultures) that constitute some kind of quasi-spatial or temporal structure. Tensions may be latent ("dormant, unperceived, or ignored", *ibid*: 390). But certain events can trigger their showing up at the surface of attention. These can be the occurrence of scarcity, change or plurality.

Building on this genealogy of paradoxes, it is quite logical to distinguish between different, yet interrelated paradoxes: organizational paradoxes concerning organizing tensions, belonging paradoxes arising from conflicting identities, performance paradoxes expressing conflicting standards of achievement, and learning paradoxes formed by different modes of temporality and learning. Paradoxes crystalize from the basic tensions when the contradictory, yet interdependent relationship between elements persist

over time. However, a paradox is not just dependent of the underlying tension, it is also always relative to the way actors respond to these tensions (ibid: 391-392). A defensive response may be to ignore or suppress the paradox or to separate the conflicting elements by assigning them to different “spheres” (spatial separation) or right moments (temporal separation). These responses can spring from emotional needs for consistency, and the failure to harmonize tensions will make paradoxes grow into wicked problems and dilemmas that overwhelm the capacity to linear problem solving and sound decision making. More active responses become available as soon as actors accept paradox as expressions of basic tensions that actually make us who we are. An active response involves a collaborative search exploring possible connections and adaptive relations between the contradictory elements. This kind of response is mostly nurtured in a climate with a high cognitive and behavioral complexity and organizationally dynamic capabilities.

Looking for pathways

Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) bring this analysis further by mapping actual pathways between different paradox-response cycles. While referring to Smith and Lewis’ definition of paradox, they take a somewhat different course in explaining how paradoxes arise. Smith and Lewis emphasize the aspect of choice – it is in the choosing of objectives, modes of operation, role and division of labor, and time horizons that actors lay the foundation of tensions. In the perspective of Jarzabkowski et al., structural conditions generate the tensions that individuals have to deal with. Of course, this can be seen as emphasizing different aspects of the same phenomenon. But the more structural emphasis leads to the assigning of paradoxes to a hierarchy of levels: A *macro level* of organizational paradoxes, where tension arises from the co-presence of various structural environments. A *meso level* of belonging paradoxes consisting in competing attachments to organizational units, groups, and values. And finally, a *micro level* of performing paradoxes, where individual actors face opposing role expectations and performance standards. The ambition of their paper is to investigate the dynamics of how paradoxes in organizational structure “spill over into” individual and group identity paradoxes (ibid: 246).

The unit of analysis is the paradox-response cycles, where paradoxes are met and reproduced through different types of responses. At each critical point of tension in the case study, the paradox-response cycle comprised all three kinds of paradoxes. Looking into the descriptions, it is quite evident that each kind of paradox is not an empirically distinct phenomenon that can be defined independently from the other kinds of paradoxes. Rather, paradoxes are described in both structural and more anonymous terms or in experiential and more individualized terms. E.g. the introduction of a structural division between organizational units is described as source of an organizational paradox, whereas actors' experience of what this means is the locus of a performance paradox.

The very important contribution of the paper by Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) is to present a descriptive model that sensitizes analysis towards the dynamics of different paradox-response cycles. It is shown how a vicious circle of defensive response cycles can reproduce itself – until a point where actors are exhausted by conflicts and reframe the cycle. Once again, the acceptance of paradox constitutes the turning point between vicious and virtuous circles. Adjustment and balancing are presented as ideal patterns of behaviour.

The process of navigating a paradox

Jay (2013) uncovers important dynamics in the transformation of paradoxes in a hybrid organization. The hybrid organization takes part in different institutional environments, and therefore its performance is highly ambiguous, since it can be interpreted through the lens of competing institutional logics. Paradox “...surfaces *from beneath the waters* and demands navigation when outcomes appear as both success and failure” (ibid: 153, italics added). Actors are constantly involved in making sense of these ambiguous results. This sensemaking is not only a reaction to the flow of events where results appear. Sensemaking, also, generates change and constitutes a continuous and iterative process of navigating the paradoxes. In the studied case, a cross-sectorial energy agency embraced multiple institutional logics stemming from bureaucratic, commercial and civilian contexts. Jay presents a narrative of the agency struggling to transcend more one-sided conceptions of its identity and, in stead, come to terms with its hybrid nature. This process of framing and reframing the paradoxes is mediated by different guiding metaphors. First, the agency is conceived as a “one-stop shop” – giving dominance to the mar-

ket logic. This one-sided framing reveals itself to be inadequate. Results are contradictory, and actors are getting “stuck”. This “stuckness” seems also to be an opening to a richer conception of identity, where the agency is a “laboratory” combining different logics, by assigning them relevance to different parts of organizational activities. This does not stop the conflicting interpretations of performance to appear. Next step in the development is yet a more open conception of the agency as a “catalyst”, where the logics are separated temporally, as an on-going oscillation between the different perspectives.

Jay’s study gives important insights into the dialectical process of framing and reframing a paradox. First, it calls attention to how framings are brought about by metaphorical structures. The “one-stop shop”, “the laboratory”, and “the catalyst” are characterized by a certain structuring of space and time and, thus, these metaphors allow for certain ways of connecting the contradictory elements. Secondly, the narrative of framing and reframing punctuate certain transitions, e.g. “getting stuck”, where stuckness represents both a breakdown and an opening. A drama of paradox transformation is being formed. These insights shall be important clues in the further analysis.

The puzzle of structure and agency

The origin of paradox is placed in the interplay between actors and structures. Emphasizing the agential aspect, Smith and Lewis (2011) points to the process of choosing as constituting the basic tensions that are expressed in paradoxes. These tensions are, in turn, objectified into systems and subsystem that somehow get a life of its own act back on actors. Emphasizing this structural aspect, Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) describe cycles and pathways in how actors deal with structural paradoxes. Jay (2013) understands this dealing as an active and continuous process of sensemaking, where the underlying paradox surfaces and is being framed and reframed.

In all descriptions, there is assumed a recursive relationship between the organizational reality as an anonymous and objective structure and this reality as it is interpreted and enacted by individual actors. This cannot be an external relationship, since each side cannot be defined or described independently of the other. Rather they are two aspects

of the very same phenomenon. That they co-evolve, according to Jarzabkowski et al. (2013), can hardly be an empirical finding but an inner conceptual relationship of the very social practice.

The metaphorical language of “surfacing” and “spilling over” indicates a stratified model of social processes (Giddens, 1984). According to Smith and Lewis, our choices marginalize potentials and, thereby, create fields of tension as unintended effects. These exist as latent systemic structures until some event (of scarcity, change, plurality) re-actualizes the choice originally made (perhaps by other actors at other times). “Surfacing” refers to this re-actualization of a historical choice, while “spilling over” describes the process, where structural contradictions (organizational paradox) become personally meaningful to an individual actor (performance paradox). The one metaphor mediates the transition between latency and salience, the other the personal enactment of structures.

Moreover, the three contributions do not just point to transitions between, on the one hand, latency and “systemness” and, on the other hand, salience and enactment. They also claim some kind of directedness, path dependency or dramaturgy in the way paradoxes unfold and transform. There are vicious circles and virtuous circles, and the shift from one circle to the other is constituted by some kind of breakdown, that is getting stuck or being exhausted in the attempt to suppress or separate the paradox.

In order to account for transformation of paradoxes, we have to be able to describe these internal and mediatory relationships and transitions between structural conditions and individual interpretations. We do not place the individual over against a structure looking for external, causal relations. Rather, we conceptualize structure-ness and individuality as two aspects of the same social praxis. Neither are given or pre-constituted, but are created and maintained through praxis. The metaphors of “surfacing” and “spilling over” point to this, but could also give rise ideas of a sub-stratum of structures exercising causal powers - pressing itself on to the actors.

At least, we need a more analytical language to describe the mediatory relationship. To provide this, I shall make two conceptual moves: First, at I shall propose a concept of agency that comprise and mediate both a structural and an individual aspect. Next, I shall argue that this mediation can be studied as a narrative achievement – where organizational and individual paradoxes are mediated both through the metaphorical and dramaturgical structuring of the stories organizing practice.

Towards a conception of agency as mediation of paradoxes

As a theoretical background, the source of paradoxes can be traced back to the very process of institutionalization. According to Smith and Lewis (2011), a paradox originates from a distinction – made by choice – between an option that is realized and a horizon of other options that are pushed into the background. Phenomenologically, this distinction is exactly what defines the meaning of an act – namely, that it is differentiated from a background of other possibilities, and such distinctions can be stabilized by typifications and schemata making up institutions (Schütz, 1974)¹. Berger and Luckmann (1967) locate this process – not in some distanced perception – but in our practical dealings with the world. In their perspective, institutionalization involves a triple movement: Human actors externalize themselves through action and mediating artifacts (tools, sign systems etc.). The meaning of these expressions is, in turn, objectified into social structures, which develop a life of their own and “act back” (are internalized by) the individual actors. Actors are thus, at the same time, embedded and autonomous.

In this double movement, Benson (1977) identifies two sources of contradictions: First, the on-going practice of actors can clash with institutional structures that form the conditions of legitimacy. What seems effective in a technical sense may not be legitimate in the institutional context (this point is also taken up by Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Secondly, actors may take part in different institutional environments that uphold incompatible norms of legitimacy (see also Friedland and Alford, 1991).

¹ Actually, Luhmann (1984) is making exactly this phenomenological concept of meaning the foundation of his theory of social systems (pp. 93-94).

Referring to Benson, Seo and Creed (2002) expand the perspective by including four mechanisms creating institutional contradictions:

1. What is functionally effective clashes with norms of institutional legitimacy.
2. What originally was a creative adaption to a changed environment becomes a new rigidity.
3. What is legitimate is defined according to competing institutional standards stemming from different contexts.
4. What is legitimate is negotiated in a struggle between different segments and subcultures of the organization.

If this analysis is correct, solely by participating in processes of institutionalization we create and maintain contradictions and tensions, which under certain conditions can appear as paradoxes – concerning organizing, belonging, performance, and learning.

This whole process is created and maintained in actors' dealings with their institutional environment. Two polarized interpretations of this relationship could appear: A subjectivist interpretation, following Schütz, which in some sense pre-suppose a transcendental subject as the identity pole of all perception. Or an objectivist interpretation emphasizing subjects as effects of institutionalized practices upholding an objective logic of their own. To transcend this polarization, we have to understand the relationship between structure and agent - not as a dualism – but as a duality (Giddens 1984: 25-28). Actors are who they are by taking part in institutional forms of life. Institutions are media of the becoming of actors. Nevertheless, no objectified structure could exist outside or independent of particular actions. Structure consists of rules and resources (generalized beyond time and place), which nevertheless, only can exist by being realized in the making of particular social relationships and identities (across time and place). It is from within this duality (or dialectical unity) that we can understand the nature of agency.

Agency as process

Giddens (1984) understands agency as a power, in the sense of a transformative capacity to change the current situation (p. 15). It can be the power to enact decisions or to mobilize bias inherent in the institutional structure. But what does a power of such a nature involve?

Any ability to act must somehow involve establishing a workable coherence across basically contradictory conditions. First, it involves agents to perform judgement in the midst of different institutional environments presenting different structural properties and contradictory demands. As abstract formations, structures claim universality. They constitute rules and resources that represent a societal whole in some particular sense. In terms of economy, society appears as a whole of transactions. In terms of law, as compliant or non-compliant behaviour etc. Each structure authorizes specific rationales and practices as representative of a societal whole. Each, also, present specific methods for mediating contradictory demands – e.g. defining a balance or a trade-off, exercising judgement. This makes agency a highly paradoxical endeavour. Actions are authorized by appealing to some kind of whole. But this appeal can only be defined and maintained from a particular position in the specific act. Abstract wholes do not reside in a Platonic heaven, but can exist only as instantiated and concrete. In this sense, structural properties are realized as institutional features of praxis stretching across time and space (Giddens 1984: 185). This means that structures pre-exist and post-date the lives of individuals, and they claim a general validity that does not depend on the acceptance and compliance of the singular individual. The farther this “stretching” spans, the more structures can appear as a pre-given reality resistant to change. Stratification of levels as “macro” (organization), “meso” (group), and “micro” (individual) could be seen as referring to different “spans of distancing” (ibid: 171). To perform agency means to be able to establish mediation between these general structures and the singular act.

Secondly, agency must involve the performance of judgement in the temporal flux of shifting contexts. Even though structural environments appear stable, they are constantly reproduced and transformed through the on-going praxis of actors. Even routines are, at every moment, enacted for “another first time” characterized by both

continuity and change (Garfinkel 1984: 9). Agency, in this sense, constitutes a passage between what was (the past) and what is becoming (the future). As action proceeds past and present are recursively re-defined. A second basic paradox of agency derives from this circularity of time – that the future is foretold in the light of the past and the past is retold in the light of the future. Agency implies some kind of stabilizing a boundary or passage between past and future (the present moment according to Mead, 2002).

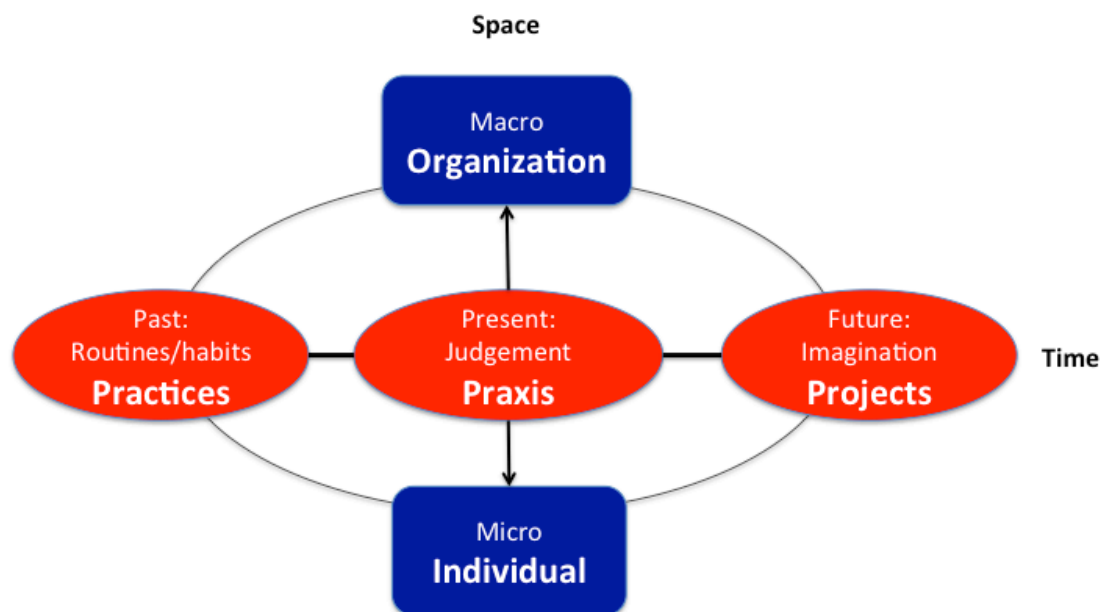
Two very basic paradoxes are at the core of the very concept of agency. The first is that any claim of universality must be particular – being mediated by institutional features stretching across space and time. The second paradox is that past and future recursively define each other – being mediated by the bounding the present moment.

Both kinds of paradoxes might undermine agency. A dilemma arises when different claims are polarized – dragging the actor in opposite directions. A double bind is, furthermore, when a claim raised in on one level is accompanied by the opposite claim raised at another, contextual level – e.g. when managers communicate recognition and trust in a context of control, threats and sanctions (Bateson, 2000; Engeström and Sanino, 2011). The dilemma and the double bind can constitute states where it is not possible to establish a meaningful position from where to go on. These breakdowns of agency resemble the situations described in the above mentioned studies of paradox transformation, where the confrontation of paradoxical values result in a kind of exhaustion or dead lock (getting stuck) which are, at the same time, openings for the acceptance of paradox and more creative responses towards paradoxes.

This fragility of agency points to its processual nature. We cannot place agency as the “opposite of structure”. It is not an inherent ability that empowers an autonomous subject to stand over and against a structure of constraints. Rather, agency is the very social process of creating and maintaining positions from where to act. It is the collaborative mediation of contradictory claims – agency is being distended between past and future and between the universality of structural principles and the particular action, or rather, agency is the very “stretching” making action possible. Thus, there can be no external

relationship between structure and agency. In stead, the contradiction of structure (universality) and action (particularity) is mediated in the process of agency.

Agency as mediating paradoxes is very much captured by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) in their definition of **agency**: “the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments —the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (ibid: 970). I shall distinguish between the spatial and temporal dimensions of agency:



Figur 1: Agency

The **spatial dimension** involves the stretching across institutional environments – between the more generalized structural properties and their instantiation in particular action. It is in this dimension that we can say that an organizational paradox “spills over into” an individual paradox – meaning that contradictory contextual claims are made conflictual premises for individual action. The **temporal dimension** includes the recursive constitution of past and future, where the past is constituted by existing practices (routines and habits) and the future by projects (imagined new courses of action). In this dimension, we can see paradoxes as “surfacing” – that is: past decisions and

compromises being torn up and their inherent tensions being re-actualized. The revitalized field of tensions can be characterized as a zone of construction between the past and the future (Virkunnen, 2006: 46).

Mediating the two (spatial and temporal) movements is praxis, which could be defined as creative re-construction of social arrangements (according to Benson, 1977; Seo and Creed, 2002). Through praxis agency becomes transformative – in the sense that it breaks the given frame of action and takes initiative to create a new (Virkunnen, 2006; Haapasaari et al., 2014)

Thus, agency is not a power or a capability residing “in” a given subject. Rather, it is a relational and temporal engagement that originates from the on-going praxis. Past and future are mutually re-constituted in the flux of praxis – and so are the structuring of the organization and the individual. Now, the question is how the mediation between past and future, organization and individual is achieved - and in what forms it can be studied?

Narrative mediation: Plots and metaphors

Praxis is “stretched out” (distended) towards different temporal and institutional poles that only can exist through praxis. This “distentio animi” is exactly what Ricoeur (1984) describes as the origin of narrativity. Forming a plot is basically an attempt to create a meaningful coherence in what must be incoherent (concordant disconcordance). The plot converts paradox into a living dialectic. In the midst of temporal and institutional complexity, to form a position from where to act demands fragile attempts at poetic synthesis, and this is what narrativity is about.

Hitlin and Elder (2007) distinguish between different forms of agency, and these can be matched by corresponding narrative forms. Pragmatic agency restores the basis of action when habits and patterned behavior break down. Identity agency defends and maintains a certain perception of identity. And life course agency includes the extensive time work of making the life course into more than just a series of accidental occurrences. All three kinds are made possible by existential agency – that is human existence

as an openness towards interpretative possibilities. Following these lines, we could study the narrative work performed by actors in order to restore the basis for action in a problematic situation, to defend a specific self-conception, or to make life a meaningful horizon for the on-going praxis.

The narrative attempts to mediate temporal and institutional paradoxes can thus be the locus of the creating and maintaining of agency (pragmatic, self and life course agency). I shall focus on two main features of the narrative configuration. One feature is the **plot** and dramaturgical structuring of this very drama of paradox transformation. The plot ties the story together in the temporal dimension just as it also brings crucial moments and episodes to the foreground where organizational paradoxes are personalized. The other is the active **metaphorical structuring** of distances and distensions being constitutive of paradoxes (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003). Arranging and re-arranging distances and distensions constitute an ongoing dynamic of paradox transformation. Strategies as selection, separation/splitting, integration and transcendence each have their metaphorical orderings. Each arrangement seem to provide some kind of order but also creates the possibility of its own breakdown. Ignoring or suppressing alternative values (selection) might create a sharply contoured landscape with boundaries between order and disorder, meaning and noise, but this constitutes an inherent vulnerability towards noise and disorder becoming to overwhelming. Separating opposing value into different spaces and moments might resolve tensions, but at the time, it constitutes an inherent vulnerability of double bind and schizophrenia. Appealing to a higher totality might create a sense of coherence and priorities, but it constitutes an inherent vulnerability in the imagination of a meta-position (2nd order, 3rd order or whatever) that is difficult to uphold in the long run. Metaphorical orderings of narratives enable strategies for paradox transformation. But any such order is inherently vulnerable. It breaks down and must be restored. Agency, in this perspective, has a metaphorically driven dialectics of breakdown and restoration. To illustrate this, I shall present case stories that demonstrates how paradoxes in the spatial and temporal dimensions are mediated by the use of plots and metaphorical (re-)structuring.

Case stories: Paradoxes in the practicing of political reforms

A narrative is an attempt to mediate a paradox in order to make action possible. To understand the narrative dynamics of paradox transformation I have followed four public executives during a period of political reform. Each of them is a key figure in carrying out reforms in central and local government within the field of education and rehabilitation. In the course of one and a half year, I have (i) listened to their professional life stories, (ii) interviewed them on the handling of troubles of the change process, and (iii) convened them for sharing stories and a collaborative reflection on what is going on. The point of this study is to demonstrate how their narrative activity is a vehicle for mediating and transforming organizational as well as individual paradoxes.

A striking feature in their stories is a very strong awareness of being a part of a major transition of the welfare society. This transition takes place at its *front end* – in the way the professional practitioners meet citizens. Qualities such as co-production, community building, rehabilitation, empowerment, and inclusion are all something that emerges in local encounters between citizens and the professional at the front end. A focused and reflexive practice is seen as the key that enables these qualities to appear. Being strategic managers, however, there is a long way to the front end. What they wish to influence is the practice of hundreds, sometimes thousands of professionals working at thousands of locations.

This positioning brings paradoxes to life. In the *spatial dimension*, there is an obvious stretch from the back office to the front end. This is pictured by various metaphors, e.g. satirically: management as a prolonged arm that feeds academic knowledge into the welfare professions or as a switch in the ministry that can turn on the light in the classrooms of public schools. This involves a clash between two very different insights: One is that welfare creation is local and emergent, and therefore evades attempts of hierarchical management. The other is that their business is exactly to perform hierarchical management – that is to control processes that seem uncontrollable. As managers, they are authorized by some claim to represent some institutional whole, while they, at the same time, are particular and local actors like everybody else.

In the *temporal dimension*, the control of change becomes a challenge. The “old” welfare society comprises a reservoir of claimed rights and professional values that has an enormous ability to resist the transition to the “new” welfare society characterized by co-production and collaboration. Managers have to make promises for the future in contexts of uncertainty and resistance (promise what cannot be promised) – while, at the same time, maintaining the credibility and integrity so vital in their positions.

The *plots* being mobilized follow, to a large extent, the pattern of hero stories (Propp, 1968; Campbell, 2008; O’Shea and Stone, 2014). This is basically a pattern of (i) how agency is challenged (entering the field of paradoxes), (ii) how it breaks down and is transformed in the struggling with dilemmas (tests and transformations) and (iii) how it is integrated into a new practice and identity (returning wiser). These transitions are marked by formative episodes where organizational paradoxes become very personal and have significance in the life story perspective. Even though the four executives seem to navigate through a very similar field of paradoxes, their strategies have very personal themes that are spun into their life stories – themes of struggling, wandering or developing a voice.

The momentum of the stories is characterized different attempts to structure distances and distensions by use of *metaphors*. The distance to the professional frontline is pictured in different ways that are woven into their personal themes and plots. The metaphorical structuring and restructuring of distance becomes a dynamic in the evolving of the plots.

(i) Accepting the challenge – entering the field of paradoxes

In abstract terms, the four executives provide very similar accounts of the contextual change: “Old” concepts of welfare emphasizing service and compensation have reached a boundary – both in terms of financial austerity and lack of real impact on the lives of citizens. This calls for reconstructing welfare. The four executives speak of a new “paradigm” and “basic transformations” – involving the users in a more close co-productive collaboration with the frontline professionals. However, this general development is personalized in very different manners.

In two of the life stories, the entrance is part of a very personalized quest – involving strategies of selection. A turning point is meeting a mentor that empowers them to take up challenge of transforming welfare in practice: When R1 got the job as a chief executive of welfare in a municipality, it was the first time she experienced trust and unconditional acceptance from her superior. Growing up she was bullied, and she developed a very strong ability to “read” social environments. She studied law and preferred to work in organizations with very predictable social norms. However, she continuously had to cope with environments where the social order was more uncertain and negotiated. She distinguished between the safe and trustful relations of the private sphere and the struggling of the workplace - until she got the new position. At the age of 35, she for the first time felt fully trusted in a professional relationship: *“It was overwhelming, it was the first time in my life I met a boss who didn’t expect me first to prove my worth. He just decided I was worth it (knocks on the table) (...) It was simply so empowering. And it meant that I for the first time could give it full throttle”*.

In the same manner, R3 had broken out of a provincial and socially restrictive childhood environment. Sports and academia became the places to rise and excel. This led to a job in a ministry, where he after a few years became secretary for a new minister: *“This meant everything! That is, it had an enormous impact. It became a wholly different job. I was used as political adviser. Got a wholly different role to the rest of the house, where I became a kind of translator of what the minister thinks at the moment.”* Very fast, he is put in charge of a small staff unit that develops policy proposals and orders contributions from the more specialized offices.

Being empowered to take up the managerial task is, in both cases, a major turning point in their life stories. It marks a divide that separates past and future – being stuck in old and restricted roles from being able to *“give it full throttle”*. Temporally, the new is idealized at the cost of the past (selection). The next episodes that narratives bring to the foreground are the collisions, confusions and chock of meeting practice – or *“reality in all its horror and diversity”* (R1). R1 felt empowered to trust her own observations and to confront the management group of her administration. Dealing with the elderly and

disabled, she observed a practice that seemed based on the assumption that citizens were decaying and it just was a matter of dealing with the consequences. However, the declared ideal was to build up citizens' self-reliance and skills. Being provoked by this observation she chose to share it with the management group: *"I said: I have seen this and I can't understand it! Why do we do it in this way? And then the management group began: Oh, we don't do it in that way! Then I said: But I can see it! And for the next one and a half year, we actually had this long, long, long discussion on what we actually were doing. Did we build on the citizen's resources? Or did we not? Did we write them off and make them into objects?"* The relationship to practice is pictured as a meeting with *"reality in all its horror and diversity"*. She responds to the chock by being insistent in presenting her perception. As she adds retelling the story at a later occasion, the conversation went on *"because I was the one to decide when it was over"*. The 1 ½ year of insistent dialogue becomes the concentrated space and time, where the decisive turnaround is made.

The minister and R3 experience a significant success winning battles in parliament. The somewhat one-sided ideological orientation catches up with them. Some of the solutions do simply not work: *"Almost all evaluations show that a range of prioritized measures and tools that have been sanctioned politically are used for not a damn thing. That is if you ask local professionals and management and so on. The scary example of this is what is called the National Standards, which are targets for each area, and which were evaluated last year or the year before. And in which there was invested a lot of political and official capital – and which experts and professionals were involved in writing, so they could be so good as possible. Then the evaluation comes which shows that frontline professionals do not use them at all (...) We were wildly proud of them (the standards), and (the minister) came with them, they were wrapped and everything...and then...my first sentence was: "This cannot be true - that we use so many resources on something that doesn't matter. Both politically and in government administration". A kind of being annoyed about it. But it has slowly evolved a new kind thinking in me - about: What is it, then, we can do to make tools be used in another way?"* The metaphor is one of presenting a gift to the professions (being *"wrapped and everything"*). However, the gift is rejected (*"not used for a damn thing"*), and this causes an enormous disappointment (*"a kind of being annoyed about it"*). The used language also indicates a touch of irony and a reflexive distance. Maybe

“the giver” has some responsibility. This develops into a reflection that the relationship can be too one-sided – actually oriented towards serving the minister and not the world (see next section).

Quite contrary, in R2’s story, you can hardly find any strongly punctuated turning points. Growing up, he did what seemed to be “in the cards” – not in the sense of a fate but of doing what felt natural. This involved an oscillation between travelling, studying and working. With no seemingly linear plan, he, nevertheless, had a quite steep carrier curve – being a policy developer in central government, manager of an innovation unit in municipality and then, a bit later, chief executive of welfare – with an agenda very similar to R1. Gradually in the carrier, however, he had a growing feeling of powerlessness: *“The higher you go up, the bigger the responsibility, and the less you can change yourself. (...) You experience very fast that even though you have a powerful position, there is a big distance. There is a great loss of heat in the process of the change I want to promote. (...) It is the powerlessness of power (...) Not that the organization is like a train just running on its own tracks. We can change it. But is more like a whirlwind – which we have to frame and govern in order to make it go a certain direction.”* The metaphorical language are more diffuse – it is about “big distance”, “loss of heat” and “whirlwinds”.

Yet another pattern appears in the story of R4. Growing up with “hippies and pedagogues”, values were quite egalitarian and discussions very loud. A strong message was that she should think too much of her intellectual skills, and she willfully planted errors in her homework. For years, she worked to reconcile this conflict and find her own voice. It was almost certain that she should never work with pedagogues and social professions. Nevertheless, she was recruited to a newly established evaluation institute. She worked against the more technocratic approaches where they as “prolonged arm” should feed professions with research based knowledge and tools. For a period, she actually left the institute to work practically in the pre-school sector. Eventually, she saw herself as a kind of translator – contributing to the development of professions by nurturing reflexivity. New chances arose when she became dean of one of the university college education new generations of professionals. The practice of translating was, however, overflowed by violent clashed between teachers and what they saw as New

Public Management. One day she was called to a meeting by a group of teachers and students. It was a demonstration, and they had set fire to barrels and put up banners: “...I thought: *“This is simply like attending something I don’t seem to have met since the ‘80’ies with squatters n’ such” (laughs). It was really massive. And I thought: “Wow, what is it exactly I should do with myself in this...?” Well, then there were rabble-rousing speeches in that yard and, at that moment, I wasn’t supposed respond a lot.*” They entered a lecture hall. She was supposed to stand on a podium with student and teachers sitting up the rows. Eight points of critique were presented – which included the whole management team of the University College, neo-liberal policies etc. Here, she was supposed to respond. She cannot remember what she said but she “came through the day”: *“What I have been thinking a lot about since then is if one should have...if I should have accepted it like I did or if I should have broken out of the situation in some way. But I sensed it that way...without anyone saying so, I sensed that it was really, really important to be there – to dare standing there – and in some way being present in all this.”* This story presents a series of smaller passage points in her development of a voice and an ability to translate between conflicts, even when spoken dialogue is absent, and the only mediation is just “being there”.

Tests and transformations

Entering the field of welfare reforms, the four executives experience a distance between management and professional practice. In order to close this distance different measures and technologies are launched. Yet, also these initiatives reveal distances in new forms and meanings.

For R1, management means to eliminate distance. At first, she tried to introduce a more rehabilitative practice through pioneering development projects. This approach appears too partial and too easily de-coupled. Becoming chief executive of welfare in a larger city, she introduces a much more “total” and “many-sided” approach involving a simultaneous change of services, organizational structure, and economic incentives – *“to cut off every line of escape”*. To facilitate implementation the *Simulator Hall* is established. Here, professionals and users are convened in order to enact and test the service processes. The sessions are monitored in order to adjust procedures and structures. *“...I*

think that it, actually, is the task of an executive to be aware and to ensure that change penetrates into the acts and dispositions of the employee (taps with her finger on the table). First then, the transformation ultimately succeeds." In a sense, the Simulator Hall was seen a representation of real practice. However, it turned out to have a life of its own. Users were substituted by professional figurants. *"The atmosphere changed when real citizens entered the hall, more was simply at stake"*. Rather than a representation of real practice the hall became a *"transitory arena or a transitory platform"*.

While R1's strategy is oriented towards integration (forced merger, according to Seo et al., 2004), R3 is separating the organization into a small unit with an "upward" focus towards the minister and larger units directed towards the "outward" implementation and local capacity building: *"Well, I have tried to organize the department in a way, in which not all of us look toward the minister (...) and a great deal of resources are dedicated to turn outwards towards to world"*. The new minister does not want *"any context-independent policies"* and wants to *"be close to professional practice"*. The challenge is how to reconcile the network-oriented and the hierarchical elements: On the one hand, to form partnerships and networks, and on the other hand, to implement new performance standards and regulations. Especially, a governmental intervention into a national labour conflict between municipalities and teachers was experienced by the teachers as clashing with the ideals of networked governance and gave rise to *"conspiracy theories"* (*"cloak and dagger"*) and accusations of hypocrisy. *"The minister had to fight really hard in cabinet to obtain approval of the network strategy. The other ministers said: "We shall be accused of speaking with two tongues if we go with this"*. In this way, the separation strategy is challenged by the suspicion of hypocrisy.

In the R4's narrative, facing the conflicts of the organization means a "reversal of the burden of proof". Following up on a conversation, she writes: *"In stead of being tired of the employees (☺) I want to place the burden of proof with me and top management and carry out a critical review of how we as management, in fact, support our employees in developing our core services in the right direction."* Later, she explains this further: For a period, she and the management group has found it necessary to "challenge" and "push" people in order to break up the old sense of normality. Now, she finds it just as neces-

sary to focus on the value creation of management. One very important initiative in this new practice is to invite the teachers of the University College to publish articles about the change – to give them a voice and to listen. She believes the reception of the articles in the public will “act back” on the atmosphere at the school. This signifies a movement from “pushing” to “inviting” and “listening”. The strategy is one of creating connections between different narratives.

The strategy of connecting also seems emerging in R2’s narrative. Being almost overwhelmed by financial problems, R2 feels that he is running around trying to repair everything: *“I have speculated a lot about how I am going to come on top of things – because I worry that if I cannot manage this – and sometimes I can’t (laughs) – it is difficult to make my organization follow me. Then, how can I believe that I can make us dare thinking in alternative ways and try out new paths - when all I feel right now is that I most of all try to keep things together, practice as we do it right now, status quo, with gaffa tape, weight and pulleys – and stay somewhat on track”*. It is the budget for specialized social services that is overrun, and there is a lot explaining to do in order to ensure the mandate of management. For R2, the next move becomes one of making visible connections between social services and the future development of the whole local community. He starts involving other members of the management team into forming a vision about the local community and co-created welfare. He suggests a whole new structure of programs that tie the organization together. At one stage, he realized that he has stepped too far into the field of politics, and he has to step back from driving the initiative in order to allow a political process – *“I had to let it go in order to pick it up later”*. During the process he becomes more like a facilitator of political and organizational learning processes.

Returning wiser – metaphors of authenticity

While telling these stories, the four executives also reflect on what it would mean to integrate the paradoxical insights into their daily praxis. What do these insights make of them? What kind of agency does appear?

These reflections very much point to an emerging sense of authenticity as opposed to the experienced distance and separation between management and practice. For R1, this

means actually giving up the need to be “recognized” and “seen and heard”: “...I have got myself so much together now that I dare being authentic. I can tell about the vision and what to do. But I can also tell about what I haven’t managed yet. And I can tell how important...how much I depend on them.” The theme of being authentic is being your self in a large crowd. The story of R4 presents a metaphor of head and body being in out of step with each other. In her new job, “*the body is running ahead of the body*”. She actually has trust in her body doing the right things. At the same time, she remembers periods of her life, where head and body were integrated, and that felt very good: “...where it really gets nice – and I think that I am going there – it’s when my head suddenly can see what my body is doing.”

A recurrent theme in R2’s narrative is reconciling himself with the position of depending on middle management (pushing “*a whirlwind*”). Metaphors are much about “*placing myself in the chair*”, “*being at the table*”, “*having a secure platform*” and “*stating a vision*”. He seems to be looking for a way to accept dependence as a premise for performing leadership. In similar way, R3 explicitly defines authenticity as an ability to “*expose vulnerability*” and, at the same time, “*regaining authority*”. Both seem to be exploring the puzzle of how letting go of power (= the feeling of security and control) can be a way to realize power of a higher potency (= impact).

Narrative mediation: Formative episodes and metaphorical re-structuring

The stories are very much about distances and the overcoming of distances. In order to manage they need to point to a manageable object. In the field of welfare reforms, the object is professional practice. To point out an object involves distance – and distance is established by a separation or a break. Managing becomes the process of bridging this distance. But alas, every attempt to bridge involves establishing new distances.

In the stories of R1 and R3, these breaks are presented in quite dramatic ways marked by quite distinct formative episodes: First, the episode of being empowered by a mentor, and then, the collision into the reality of practice, pictured as a horrific meeting or a gift being rejected. These experience is, again, connected to life story themes of having the courage to be yourself (R1) or leaving the provincial background environment (R3). This

unleashes different structural attempts to rearrange distance. Both the 1 ½ year of insistent dialogue and the Simulator Hall are attempts to create intensified spaces that bring all relevant parties together in order to enact the new approach to services and organizing. This is very a strategy of integration (forced merger). Simulation, however, turns out to be a game of its own and becomes a “transitional platform” in between design and real practice. In a sense, distance is re-recreated within the intensified space. In a different manner, R3 restructures organizational space by a bifurcation of dimensions. The Ministry is restructured according to two dimensions: a unit delivering services “upwards” and units that deliver support and capacity building “outwards”, “towards the world”. This separation, however, creates a new dilemma of how to reconcile hierarchical and more network-oriented approaches (without “speaking with two tongues”).

The narratives of R3 and R4 do not, in the same way, involve dramatic turning points. R3 tells the story of a wanderer who suddenly finds himself in a situation where he cannot manage things himself. He is dependent on others – and experiences this as organizational distance, “loss of heat” and “pushing a whirlwind”. Being pressed by budget overruns, he – at first - loses motivation but then – gradually – finds a new path, developing a practice of connecting narratives in a way that can tie the organization together. R4 oscillates between management and profession – leaving the home of “hippies and pedagogues” – finding her own voice – returning as one who wishes to cultivate a climate of reflexivity. In the dramatic episode reported here, she is caught in a clash of these two environments and is blamed as a representative of “neo-liberalism”. The response is no longer of finding her own voice, but of distributing voices – inviting the employee to communicate. These experiences are narratively connected with herself being separated in a body and a head trying to find a way.

The stories are tied together by plots with strong personal themes – e.g. struggle (R1 and R3), wandering (R2) and finding a voice (R4). In each plot, formative episodes signify situations where the relation to the managed object has to be renegotiated on new institutional premises (e.g. empowerment). The tensions inherent in the relation to the object are re-actualized (“surfacing”) and are threatening to undermine the on-going

flux of agency – and this can be both abstracted into an organizational phenomenon (e.g. an implementation gap) and personalized into a significant life experience (e.g. powerlessness, confrontation and deep learning). The established institutional order is marked by a certain metaphorical arrangement of space and time with some strategy towards tensions and paradoxes (selection, separation, integration). Each kind of ordering allows action to go on for some time. At the same time, they are limited by blindness or one-sidedness towards some complexity and tensions, which are marginalized but introduce themselves in the form of unforeseen trouble. This calls for a metaphorical restructuring (e.g. R3 bifurcating space into an upward and outward dimension). These episodes have a strong significance both in an organizational and personal context.

Discussion: Implications for research

In this paper, I set out to enhance the analytical language to describe the mediatory relationship between paradoxes on an organizational and an individual level.

The most important move was to form a concept of agency, where agents are not placed over and against a structure, but where agency is understood as the collaborative process that mediates between and comprises both a structural context and the individual instantiation. In this perspective, “macro” and “micro” levels are not distinct empirical spheres but different “spans of distancing” (Giddens 1984: 171). My claim would be that this distancing is achieved through narratively organized praxis.

“Macro” and “micro” are vocabularies mobilized in the structuring of space and time. In stead on focusing on “levels” of organization and individual, the narrative exploration lets us recognize them as identity poles between which the narrative praxis moves:

Paradoxes can be *abstracted* – that is described in general an anonymous terms as features of social transformation (e.g. welfare policies). In opposite direction, paradoxes are *personalized* – that is ascribed specific meaning by being woven into the texture of life stories.

This does not, however, rule out causal explanation. It still makes sense to say that a structural change caused a particular person to feel conflicting loyalties. This can, however, not signify a law-like regularity between independent phenomena but rather a

processual achievement. To make sense of the explanation we have to understand what it would be like to be a part of the organizational change – and we have to understand it in terms of a flow of events. In this sense, causal explanation presupposes a narrative understanding (Ricoeur, 1984). A causal explanation is a narrative that has been straightened out into linear relations.

Secondly, this calls attention to the narrative dynamics of paradox transformation. It is remarkable that case studies often follow a dramaturgy of paradoxes maturing and being resolved (e.g. Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Jarzabkowski et al., 2011; Jay, 2011). They tell stories of how people came to terms with paradoxes. In a similar way, the case stories of this paper were contextualized in the schemata of hero stories, which seem to constitute culturally accessible forms for telling about the breakdown and restoration of agency. This raises the question if the idea of paradox transformation is somehow connected to certain kind of plots and dramaturgies. Alternatively, we could easily look for other kinds dramaturgies and genres (Frye, 1971): There could be tragedies where breakdown is not restored, satire revealing hypocrisy and double binds, or comedy transforming paradoxes with a laugh.

Thirdly, these genres could be understood as different ways to play out dramas of struggle and power. The dialectics of metaphorical restructuring of space and time also reflect a struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1992; Pippin 2008). While defining the relationship to the managed object a claim for recognition is raised for a certain position from which to act. Due to the one-sidedness and blind spots of these claims other values and positions are violated – and the suppressed complexity strikes back in the form of non-compliance and unforeseen trouble. This calls for a reconstruction of the relationship on a more nuanced basis – considering complexity in a new way. Different genres of plots present different ways to claim recognition and to transform the inherent tensions of these claims, and this transformation involves and can be studied through the metaphorical restructurings.

A fourth question to be explored is: How can we describe the very ability to create positions from where to act in paradoxical contexts? Giddens (1984) refers to agency as a

“power” (p. 15), whereas I have tried to see it as a collaborative process of narratively organized praxis. Still, it makes sense to ask what it means to be able to “cope with” paradoxes, and how we can train this ability in e.g. leadership programmes. Instead of placing agency as “a capacity” or “a power” residing “in” the individual, the narrative understanding can grasp it as a collaborative praxis - taking place objectively and publicly. The “ability” of the individual could rather be seen as techniques that are, at the same time, personalized (made individually significant) and collectivized (based on inter-connectivity of the community). In training new generation of leaders, we have to be sensitive towards their attempt to navigate in paradoxical situations both in the “class room”, in their “daily practice”, and in the movements in between these two spaces (Majgaard, 2015). Paradoxes bring about both breakdowns and restorations of agency, and nurturing reflexivity about this is an enormous educational resource.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to enhance the understanding of the mediation between paradoxes on an organizational and individual level. Especially, it has addressed the question of what it means that an organizational paradox “spills over into” an individual one and that latent tensions “surfaces” as paradoxes. In order to explain this, the paper presents an understanding of agency as a collaborative process that establishes positions from where to act by (i) actualizing claims from different institutional environments as meaningful premises of action, and (ii) creating some kind of coherence between past, present and future. This involves a narratively organized praxis. Claims from institutional environments are made personal by being inscribed into life stories. Formative episodes of the plot signify moments where agency is reconstituted on new institutional premises. The contours of agency break up, tensions laid to rest by past compromises are re-actualized, and a new structure appears. The dialectics of this process can be studied as a process metaphorical re-structuring of space and time. Each metaphorical structuring enables certain positions to act but also points to its own possible breakdown. The process of agency is, in this sense, an ongoing metaphorical structuring and restructuring of space and time in order to, temporarily, mediate tensions and make action possible. The relation between the organizational and the individ-

ual is not so much a relation between levels as it is a dialectical relation between two moments of agency.

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