

## Process theory and research: Exploring the dialectic tension

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Received 8 November 2005; accepted 16 May 2006

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### Abstract

We contest that although the notion of process is increasingly being applied to the study of organizations, these attempts are hampered by significant methodological shortcomings. We claim that the value of process theory is under-utilized because most attempts to apply process theory end up reverting to conventional non-process methods. We suggest that the cause of this reversion is primarily the challenge of making sense, of fixing the world, propelling us from process into the world of substance. To break free of these limitations we propose an approach that takes the researchers' audience alongside the subject processes rather than attempting to clinically intersect them. We illuminate this paper with our own story vignettes concerning the fortunes of an idea that passes by the name of *value based management* (VBM).<sup>1</sup> These vignettes are meant to both exemplify and disrupt the theoretical narrative.

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<sup>1</sup>Whatever else divides experts on the matter, the various instantiations of the phrase 'Value Based Management' appear to indicate a view that creating value for shareholders should be regarded the primary aim of profit-motivated organizations; that actual cash flows rather than accounting profits should be used to influence management decision-making or assess management performance; and, perhaps less ubiquitously, that these cash flows should be discounted to reflect the time-value of money. Beyond this it would be difficult, if not presumptuous, to assume a precise definition of the idea given the variations and different techniques it has become associated with 'in the wild', i.e. the actual variegated empirical manifestations of VBM. It is difficult to be exact about the origins of the idea of Value Based Management, but it was popularized during the late 1980s and 1990s by books such as Alfred Rappaport's (1998) "Creating Shareholder Value" and McKinsey and Co's (1996) "Valuation, Measuring and Managing the Value of Companies". Having said that, it is recognised that the same phrase has been used to describe the management of organizations on the basis of defined principles, and that this is not the idea being explored here.

## 1. The idea of process

OMT (organization and management theory) has seen a definite ‘gerundial’ movement in vocabulary over recent years—order to ordering (Cooper & Law, 1995); being to becoming (Chia & Tsoukas, 2002); knowledge to knowing (Cook & Brown, 1999)—to the point where it has become uncontroversial to claim that organizations are but “momentary accomplishments that are in continual flux” (McKinley, 2003, p. 148); people, organizations, and ideas are considered mere abstractions or fixings of movement, temporary, identifiable ‘resting points’ (Ford & Ford, 1994; Sturdy & Grey, 2003). Yet, there is little evidence of a clear methodological shift associated with this spread of the gerund. Whilst the case “for the return to a regrounding of theory on the primacy of lived experience” (Chia, 2003, p. 124) has been made eloquently and persuasively, it is far from clear how we as researchers actually go about actualizing this. Clearly there exists a disjunction between the ways in which organizational scholars are ready to see and value the organizational world and the ways they are ready to respond when engaging with this world. To quote Van Maanen (1995, p. 23): “It is a little like recognizing that the explanation of a joke is not itself funny but at the same time realizing that knowing so does not help one construct hilarious one-liners”.

This paper is principally about the idea of process and its relevance to the field of organization and management theory (OMT). In particular we are concerned with apparent methodological difficulties that arise when researchers attempt to apply this idea. What then is this idea of process and how is it significant? The idea of ‘process’ as opposed to ‘substance’ (things or objects) can be discerned in the philosophical works attributed to Heraclitus which have often been contrasted with those attributed to Parmenides. The idea reappears in the late 19th and early 20th century writings of Bergson and James (Chia, 2003; Wood, 2002) but it did not become formulated into a distinct theory until the 1920s when the emergence of quantum theory gave it impetus by undermining the foundations of the substance worldview (Rescher, 2002). Whitehead (1933) employed mathematics and philosophy to propose a metaphysical theory process that effectively usurped the conventions of substance. This ‘Process Philosophy’ has continued up to the present day in, for example, the writings of Charles Hartshorne, Samuel Alexander, C. Lloyd Morgan, Andrew Ushenko, and Nicholas Rescher.

In the next section of the paper we attempt to step down from the heights of metaphysics occupied by process philosophers and develop a social theory of process that combines their insights with those of dialectical materialism, and in particular the theoretical edifice of the Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson (1981). We lay down three principles that guide us through the rest of the paper: (1) that substance can only be properly conceived of as being actioned as process, and consequently, that all substance/action must be seen in the context of converging processes of differing significance operating over different time constants; (2) that research into processes must account for their spatial and temporal distribution; and (3), that the researcher’s frame of reference must be the micro-material present. In the second section we will offer an examination of existing process-based methods in OMT in an attempt to determine how effective they are in supporting the view of process developed in our first section. In the third section we acknowledge the difficulties of establishing a proper process methodology. We explore some of the hurdles that need to be crossed and lay out our own ideas for doing so. We end the paper by considering what we can do with the idea of process in organization theory and research.

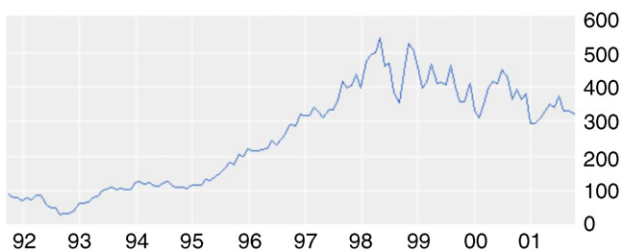
Throughout the paper we interrupt our theoretical narrative with story-vignettes. The ‘voice’ is that of the second author who was intimately involved with the implementation of an idea called *value based management* (VBM) in his organization. We include these story vignettes in order to exemplify some of our principles, thus inviting our readers to appreciate the process experiences of the second author but also challenging both our and the readers’ sensemaking. As we are trying to create a displacement of knowledge rather than a simple accumulation, we offer no straightforward one-to-one relation between the analytic remarks and the vignettes; a situation which may create a certain amount of frustration in the reader.

## 2. Value based management lived backwards

*We signed the deal on the very last day of December and achieved our objective. But there wasn’t much celebration beyond the immediate relief. No one felt proud of what we had achieved. It was hardly a value adding decision to sell the unit and certainly not at the price we settled for. So much for VBM!*

*Indeed if you look back into the immediate past, the idea of VBM is only to be discerned by its absence. The acronym is absent from corporate communications. Managers are being forced to make decisions that contradict the very principles of the idea, and all of this against a rapidly declining share price, the ultimate measure of value creation. I couldn’t help wondering why at the moment when we seemed to need the idea most we appeared to abandon it totally.*

*Go back a bit further and you can find the idea in its last throes. The VBM process council has just been dissolved. The next VBM forum meeting cancelled and the VBM champion relocated to a conventional job in a far-flung business site. The consultants’ contract has been terminated. Business units are still being encouraged to pursue the principles of VBM but under their own steam, and then only as an after-word. Immediately before this winding-up of VBM you can see groups of people all beavering away at ‘implementing’ VBM across the company. There are regular meetings of the VBM forum, pilots being supervised by the consultants, and plenty of presentations to management trying to convince them that this is worth their attention. There are newsletters and websites, sound bites and strap lines. And over and over again there is that graph of the share price charting our fortunes over the last 10 years.*



*But above all there are spreadsheets. VBM is at its most tangible as a spreadsheet. We meet to discuss the various models and techniques, but there are only one or two dissenting voices. “A model is only as good as its weakest assumption”, they mutter. And when*

*managers generate forecasts to convince their bosses that their bit of the business should get the best resources, those assumptions are pretty weak.*

*Now go back even further, past the senior director's workshop where they first role-played at VBM. Look into the meetings of the board as they listen to consultants selling them their solutions. "We wanted to find ways of building on our success. The share price had recovered phenomenally and we needed to understand how we could sustain that growth once all the obvious value destroyers had been sorted out." This is the point at which VBM was imported into the business. It is the point when the books, the trademarks, the advertising gloss got turned into an implementation. "OK, we'll hire you. Let's discuss your fees."*

*Before that point there are numerous branches to the process. The ideas that inspired the board to solve 'this problem' must have come from somewhere. The consultants that got the job presumably practiced what they preached with some other client. The books that got read or referenced in that final presentation were widely available and read by many at the time. There was Rappaport's bestseller on Shareholder Value and McKinsey's fat tome complete with diskettes (later it would be a CD) so that you, the reader, could get straight into VBM-the-spreadsheet. And beyond that, the books that they reference go all the way back to ideas such as portfolio theory, discounted cash flows, etc. Of course you can still read them today if you want, but in 2005 the gloss looks a little worn and the messages don't sound very convincing any more.*

### **3. Principles of process thinking**

In this section we set out a few principles intended to help extract the aspiring process researcher from the worldview of substance and situate him or her firmly within the worldview of process. In doing so we are assuming a particular ontological and epistemological position. Many researchers aim to extract generalizable theories from their studies (e.g. McPhee, 1990; Schwarz & Nandhakumar, 2002). Their position is founded on the assumption that reality is essentially knowable and that appropriate methods exist that can access this reality. We have assumed the opposite, namely that the world is essentially intractable (Iser, 2000; Weber, 2001). Human beings strive compulsively towards a global notion of truth, of a universal and necessary cognition, yet this cognition is simultaneously forever inaccessible to them (Žižek, 2001). It is not simply that we need words to designate objects, to symbolize reality, and that then, in surplus, there is some 'excess of reality', a traumatic core that resists symbolization. Rather this 'excess of reality' itself is an effect of language. All human intervention merely adds more layers of interpretation. As Žižek (2003, p. 70) suggests: "We have reality before our eyes well before language, and what language does, in its most fundamental gesture, is... the very opposite of designating reality: it digs a hole in it, it opens up visible/present reality toward the dimension of the immaterial/unseen".

It appears then that our aspiring process researchers should not be trying to discover any fundamental truths about the world. Perhaps they should regard theory as a set of more or less useful ideas that offer the potential to change the world for the better (Rorty, 1998). But constructive action exists only within a context of meaning and meaning involves fixing, which in turn implies a pivotal movement back into the worldview of substance. Does this not imply that to make sense of the world we necessarily interpret it as consisting of entities and behaviors? So long as process researchers aspire to use their methodologies for sense making they will be forced back into this worldview.

Perhaps the object of process research is properly dialectical, an anti-interpretive movement aimed at challenging the master codes with which we invisibly transform the real through our own allegorical hermeneutic: “A criticism which asks the question ‘What does it mean?’ constitutes something like an allegorical operation in which a text is systematically rewritten in terms of some fundamental master code or ‘ultimately determining instance.’ On this view, then, all ‘interpretation’ in the narrower sense demands the forcible or imperceptible transformation of a given text into an allegory of its particular master code or ‘transcendental signified’ “(Jameson, 1981, p. 43). If so, then our aim should be to avoid sense making and instead to seek out the nuggets of reality that disrupt and challenge our rationalist interpretations. Perhaps, what we need to develop is our ‘first sight’ (Pratchett, 2003, p. 140):

Ye have the First Sight and the Second Thoughts, just like yer granny. That’s rare in a bigjob.

Don’t you mean second sight?” Tiffany queried. “Like people who can see ghosts and stuff?

Ach, no. That’s typical bigjob thinking. First Sight is when you can see what’s really there, not what your heid tells you ought to be there.

What follows is not a comprehensive development of these principles but rather a rough outline in charcoal. Each principle is related to existing classic works (we refer to this way of proceeding as ‘cross-referencing’). Authoring space permits no more than these simple bootstraps.

### *3.1. Principle 1: processes are materially situated*

One of the intransigent difficulties that have beset the achievement of process theory is the ontological problem of materiality itself (see, for example, Rescher, 2002). Although philosophers such as Whitehead (1933) have offered solutions, these have provided little practical impetus to the world of organizational research. We presume to use what is effectively a simple bypassing strategy (Latour, 1999) to overcome this impasse. Material is perceived as substance whether or not this is ‘true’. From a purely social (or perhaps practical) perspective the difference is not important. What is important, however, is to understand that all processes exist as the interaction of agency with materiality. That is to say materiality and process cannot be considered separately, but only together.

The purpose of this principle could be to distinguish better between what is actually happening (materially situated social interactions) and what appears to be happening (the symbolic meaning attributed by the participants or observers of an event). For example, observing senior managers in a meeting talking and writing on flip charts may challenge their claim to be ‘implementing strategic change’. If ‘implementing strategic change’ has any content, then it ought to relate to a temporally and spatially extended process whereby numbers of people (employees and customers) significantly change the way they are behaving. The process researcher must avoid being seduced by the notion of ‘implementing strategic change’ and look instead at the role of the materially situated processes—the words used, documents read and written, stories told and retold. How did this meeting, as the interaction between participants and textual materiality enable what might later be recognized as ‘strategic change’, if indeed it did? The principle of materiality throws into

sharp relief the gap that always exists between what we assume we are doing and what is actually going on.

The ontological principle that the world consists of materially situated processes is central to process thinking. It requires us to stop considering the intrinsic nature of materiality and instead to regard materiality as intrinsic within process (*esse sequitur operari* or being follows functioning). Bruno Latour (1999, p. 71) therefore does not speak of research ‘data’ as something given, but of ‘achievements’: “Phenomena are not found at the *meeting point* between things and the forms of the human mind; phenomena are what *circulates* all along the... chain of transformations” (emphasis in original). Throughout the research process there is reduction (a loss of locality, particularity, materiality, multiplicity, continuity) and amplification (a gain of compatibility, standardization, text, calculation, circulation, relative universality). There is unremitting transformation of material processes with the researcher continuously involved in a processes of fabrication (Clark, 2003).

#### *Material cross references*

Callon and Latour’s (1981) concept of *durable materiality* appears sympathetic with our principle. Yet, the term *durable* creates difficulties. It suggests that it is the materiality that endures and is therefore intrinsically knowable. However, the process researcher needs to avoid the analysis of materiality per se and instead to consider that materiality is only knowable through the processes that interact with it. Durable could be better taken to mean enduring: processes endure while the material they involve constantly changes. The river endures while the water constantly changes (from Heraclitus in Rescher, 2002).

Latour (1999) constantly grounds his works in the materiality of everyday organizational life (see for example his study of scientists working in the rain forests of Brazil in Chapter 2). His anthropomorphic speed bump or ‘sleeping policeman’ needs to be seen not as an entity in its own right, but as a process: “it is full of engineers and chancellors and lawmakers, commingling their wills and their story lines with those of gravel, concrete, paint, and standard calculations. The mediation, the technical translation, that I am trying to understand resides in the blind spot in which society and matter exchange properties (p. 190).”

### 3.2. Principle 2: processes are distributed through time and space

What is happening is enabled by what just happened, and what happens next depends upon what is happening now. History is inescapable. Processes cannot be cut out as ‘input—process—output’, but must be seen as existing within an historical continuum. This does not mean that social history expresses a determinate order, reflecting some totalizing social force, as Marxism would impress on us. Social processes are chaotic, where each iteration (inevitably a localized, micro process) introduces another degree of freedom. The path we take is always constrained but nevertheless unpredictable. This is what non-linear dynamicists call self-organizing criticality: a kind of stochastic fractal (Brunk, 2002). What creates this potential freedom and simultaneously constrains us within it is the material basis of process. Each iteration of the social acts upon the material, modifying it slightly to alter the range of possible future actions (Latour, 1996). Progress is the accretion of ever more versatile materiality, offering the future as an ever wider potentiality. For example, Leonardo da Vinci’s idea of human flight was unrealistic for his own time, yet he is

considered a visionary because he was thinking of future realistic endeavor. His idea only became possible when it merged with Huygens' idea of a propeller and with the idea of a rigid wing supported by an aerodynamic force known as 'drag' (Eco, 1992). Thus the process researcher needs to be sensitive to the simultaneously liberating and constraining effects of history. On the one hand, a fruitful discursive process may be unable to break through to practice because the concrete material it desires does not yet exist or cannot be appropriated in the manner required. On the other, an abundant proliferation of a new material opens out possibilities that were totally unexpected.

It follows from the principle of historicism that processes are distributed through time. To fully appreciate a process, the researcher needs to trace back the events that have delivered the material potential to the moment in question. It also follows that because processes are materially situated they must also be spatially situated. Therefore process researchers also need to consider the form of this distribution. They need to be able to appreciate the vast range of time constants possessed by processes impinging upon almost all situations. The rhythm of production may be hourly or daily but the evolution of production processes takes place more slowly, and the evolution of financial processes more slowly still. Putting boundaries around a subject may seem unavoidable but these will inevitably cut across the flow of a process and cause the researcher to turn away from a line of enquiry that might be central to understanding a problem. The challenge for process researchers is to find ways of working with these boundaries while remaining afloat in the limitlessness of process.

#### *Historical cross references*

Historicism and Materialism are the two halves of Marxism. For Marx, history is the determinant of social development. One mode of production mutates by its own immanent logic into another (Eagleton, 1997). This historical determinism has been unpalatable to many. For example, Popper's (1966) book *Open Society* contains a critical rejection of Marxism and determinism. Marxist determinism reflects the sense of constraint that runs through historicism. If Marx had been writing today, would non-linear dynamics and self-organizing criticality have provided him with the means to maintain this constraint without requiring determinism?

Karl Popper believed that society could be quickly reconstructed from a good library (Popper, 1981). While this intellectual materiality would be essential to any such reconstructive project, it would totally founder without the more prosaic technology of production. How would we make the sort of precision components that underpin modern technology without precision tools? How would we make precision tools without other precision tools? Today's technology is built on top of yesterday's technology and can only be reached through it. Without yesterday's technology we slip right back to the bottom of the ladder to start again from scratch.

### 3.3. *Principle 3: there are only micro processes*

Because processes are materially situated they can only exist at the level of the micro. The macro is only ever the micromanipulation of the symbolic. As Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002, p. 907) argue: "Features of the interaction order, loosely defined, have become constitutive of and implanted in processes that have global breadth; microsocial

structures and relationships are what instantiate some of the most globally extended domains...”. When a researcher observes a situation, being a collection of interacting micro-processes, she interprets it using her own hermeneutic processes. These processes introduce a sense of generality through their re-usable materiality: words and texts that have been used across an indeterminate number of previous similar hermeneutic processes. For example, a researcher may decide to group a number of the people they have observed under the label ‘middle managers’. However much this particular researcher’s understanding of both the observed people and the concept of middle managers may influence this hermeneutic turn, the use of this word enables any number of quite distinct hermeneutic processes in the readers of this research (cf. *Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000*). When we use a word or text to convey what we consider to be a generality, we are hoping that the particular processes this enables in our readers’ minds will evoke a more or less similar response or understanding (*Eco, 1992*).

#### *Particular cross references*

Marx proposed a program for dialectical knowledge ‘of rising from the abstract to the concrete’ in the introduction to his *Grundrisse* (first published in 1857). He distinguished three stages of knowledge: (1) the notation of the particular (this would correspond to something like empirical history, the collection of data and descriptive materials on the variety of human societies); (2) the conquest of abstraction, the coming into being of a properly “bourgeois” science or of what Hegel called ‘the categories of the Understanding’; (3) the transcendence of abstraction by the dialectic, “the rise to the concrete,” the setting in motion of hitherto static and typologizing categories by their reinsertion in a concrete historical situation (in the present context, this is achieved by moving from a classificatory use of the categories of modes of production to a perception of their dynamic and contradictory coexistence in a given cultural moment). (*Jameson, 1981, p. 83*).

Jameson’s work on interpretation (1981) illustrates how social activity is interpretive, and how each interpretive layer moves us towards an increasingly constrained materiality. Each master narrative attempts to embrace a wider meaning with a reduced vocabulary. The ultimate totalizing step reduces everything into one narrative process. All of the richness and variety of the micro is decimated into nothing more than “sound and fury, signifying nothing” (*Macbeth, Act V/ Scene V*): “Every universalizing approach... will from the dialectical point of view be found to conceal its own contradictions and repress its own historicity by strategically framing its perspective so as to omit the negative, absence, contradiction, repression, the non-dit, or the impensé. To restore the latter requires that abrupt and paradoxical dialectical restructuration of the basic problematic which has often seemed to be the most characteristic gesture and style of dialectical method in general, keeping the terms but standing the problem on its head (p. 96).”

Perhaps it is easier to think of the macro as patterns—linguistic patterns made in discursive processes. We are all inside these processes which are characterized by an opposing flow of ideas. In one direction ideas move up an hermeneutic gradient towards ever more abstract, flexible and contested interpretations of the world; in the other they move back down the same gradient in our constant struggle to invent, innovate, and



control. When we observe the world we observe patterns in its behaviors and to these we attribute symbolic meaning. In doing so we enable discursive processes to proliferate and create their own patterns and their own sense of entity (Oswick, Grant, & Keenoy, 2002). To talk about middle managers is to use the words ‘middle manager’ and to tap into the shared history of these words. Each reader understands these words but this understanding can never be the same. There is no reference to any independent middle manager, just an oft-repeated pattern that is more or less similar depending upon the relationship between the discursive process and the concrete process to which the former refers.

*The words ‘Value Based Management’, or its acronym VBM, do not have any general meaning. Each time I meet them I have to be skeptical. I don’t think I have interviewed anyone who gives them exactly the same meaning as anyone else. In most cases they use the words to mean different things, sometimes radically different.*

*When I think about VBM, I try not to think about a concept any more. Instead I visualize a network of interweaving processes that lead back in time to a few formative moments. What ties this network together is its textual materiality—the words that keep recurring. What makes it rich and varied is the particular sense with which this materiality is re-used each time. The moment you assume that VBM has an intrinsic meaning you stop studying the process and flip instead into the worldview of substance. VBM becomes a thing in its own right. The thing that is VBM obscures the reality of this complex network of particular and different interactions.*

### 3.4. Implications

The principles set out above appear simple enough, but they are also fundamentally problematic. They deny us the ability to describe the world as things and they deprive us of the power of generalization. They require us to reject boundaries even though we cannot possibly conduct research without delimiting our scope. Researchers cannot avoid delimiting their studies, but we should not draw these limits arbitrarily, or apply them equally to all aspects of our research. At one moment it may be adequate to go back no more than a few days or weeks or months; in another it may require years, or decades, or even centuries to properly appreciate the changing influences that brought about a situation. In conventional approaches to research the researcher is tied by methods to the factual landscape of her subject. In the brief dance of intersection between researcher and her subject, the processes flowing through the subject provide little more than a pivotal moment about which the researcher ‘convolves’ the processes that flow through research. We shake ‘reality’ hard and out fall the little pieces of ‘data’ around which we can now construct our own allegorical narratives. In attempting to ‘intersect’ organizational processes we effectively obliterate them with the processes of research. Bourdieu’s (1990, p. 11) famous phrase comes to mind here: “The logic of practice can only be grasped through constructs which destroy it as such”.

Process thinking is struggling to achieve an anti-interpretive movement not unlike the works of Marx and others (Deleuze, 1995; Jameson, 1981; Žižek, 2003). Humans cannot un-interpret things: the world comes to us already interpreted by the biophysical processes of our own bodies. All forms of thinking are inevitably interpretive. Yet the more we think about things the deeper the layers of interpretation become, the more solid the discrete entities we create, and the more remote the contextual interconnections that define the open horizons of material interactions. All this serves to reinforce the suggestion that

process thinking is dialectical. It serves to oppose the *thesis* of substance: to give meaning is to fix something, but process is unfixable. Thinking about process deprives us of meaning. Process has an ontology but has no corresponding fixed epistemological moment, except in the destructive moment of challenge to interpretation. We must return to this point in the final section of our paper.

In the second part of our paper we aim to put some of our process principles into perspective, demonstrating how our approach differs from more traditional research strategies. In particular we will examine the family of methods often referred to as longitudinal field research (LFR). Many of the issues we will touch upon—what to look at in the field, what to contextualize (or not), when ‘relevant’ history begins (and ends)—are key matters that confront all researchers, and as such this section should not be seen so much as a ‘critique’ of LFR as a way of structuring our argument against a concrete background of fieldwork. The development of LFR was partly a response to reflections that synchronic research is unable to properly articulate the ‘organization in change’ (Barley, 1990). To combat this, researchers developed diachronic perspectives that could more readily account for change and consequently involved a significant period of research in order to explore sequences of events (Van de Ven & Huber, 1995). In this respect, LFR appears to offer an existing process methodology. Our ‘problem space’ exists within the intersection of a number of often relatively diverse processes playing out over quite different time periods. But how well does it uphold the principles we have established above?

#### 4. The problem with process (methods)

##### 4.1. Problems with boundaries

Longitudinal researchers have to decide what constitutes a significant research episode according to the objectives of their study, the situation in which they find their subjects (Pettigrew, 1990) or the characteristics of the variables they wish to monitor (Monge, 1990). Yet, by inscribing their subjects within a defined time period researchers unavoidably create an epistemological dichotomy. The knowledge collected within a research episode is distinct from the knowledge that lies (both temporally and spatially) outside this episode. Those events that occurred outside the researcher’s gamut may be regarded as contextually significant but are nevertheless treated as epistemologically distinct (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001). An LFR case study often contains a preamble that outlines the subject’s context. Authors promote this preamble as important for understanding the overall situation, while simultaneously undermining it as lying outside the methodological rigor of the research episode itself (Francis & Minchington, 2002; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003). Strangely, these preambles are often provided in a univocal, factual, narrative style where the polyphony, conflict, and ambiguity that mark the main study are strangely banished, as if everyone shares a common view of the past (cf. Pentland, 1999). By extending a research episode, the researcher creates a bolder distinction between information falling within it and that falling outside it. By emphasizing the significance of being there, we diminish the relevance of what happens when we are not. We emphasize the role of the researcher as authentic witness and paradoxically deprive ourselves of being able to access anything beyond.

*Here I am, surrounded by hastily written notes, old interview tapes, glossy documents and plans, the inevitable PowerPoint presentations, box files crammed to bursting, and megabytes*

*of file space. The twinge of guilt I feel is that it is probably nothing like enough data and there seems to be little or no 'system' to my approach. Where can I possibly start?*

*I know when I started being involved with VBM but a lot of things happened before then. Some of my interviewees told me about meetings that happened way back in 1996 when I had just joined the company. I wasn't there and their recollections were probably not that reliable, but these meetings must have been instrumental in enabling the idea to take root. Should I ignore them?*

*I want to understand the role of that little chart of the share price that keeps cropping up everywhere. Clearly it is symbolic of the story that accompanies it, but it also has a much more concrete side. However much it has been abused since, that jerky, wiggly line must have come from somewhere. I know if I follow it I will find myself on the trading floor of the London Stock Exchange and from there who knows where it might lead.*

*Then there is the idea of VBM itself. Where did it come from? We didn't make it up and neither did the consultants we employed. Alfred Rappaport might like us to think that it was his idea and that he conceived of it purely from the logic of wealth creation (see, for example, chapter 1 of *Rappaport, 1998*). However, the idea has much wider roots than this and includes the central idea of discounting cash flows that came into common use in the 50's and 60's (*Arnold, 2000*).*

The process researcher needs to follow the process, back and forth through time and space. The processes impinging on a subject will have quite different time constants: the implementation of a pilot scheme may be over in a few weeks, but the emergence of a need for action may take years. The whole point of process research is to follow the process wherever it takes you and not to stop at methodological boundaries if it seems necessary to cross them. There will always be something on the outside that matters, so why not to cross over and take a look? Unfortunately, most research episodes are methodologically bracketed in time and space from the outset. Perhaps the process researcher could avoid this problem altogether by starting at a single point and working outwards. Look for a suitable situation and try to determine what processes are impinging upon it and enabling it to take place, and then follow them back to new events and further processes. We are not trying to open up a black box sitting within a network of clearly defined relationships. Rather we are exploring a maze of links and paths distributed through time and space. It is a bit like one of those adventure games where each situation is a room or setting with its own props and stories, and with doors and paths that lead forward, backward and sideways to different rooms with different props and stories.

Developing this analogy further: an event can be regarded as a room, with each room containing the evidence relating to that event—documents, recorded utterances, descriptions, photos, spreadsheets, etc. The researcher has to create a pathway out from the room for each process that enables the events within the room. These pathways lead to further rooms representing preceding events in each process. The pathways may be thought of as short for those processes that change relatively quickly, and long for those that change slowly. Research can lead in any direction. As time progresses, the researcher will follow processes forwards as well as backwards and add new rooms. As the research continues, the researcher will develop an understanding of each event. This understanding could be captured perhaps as a narrative or whatever form suits the event and added to the room as further evidence. The researcher's contributions should not obscure what is already there but could be seen instead as a particular perspective. As the researcher extends this network of rooms and paths, she will change her understanding and can return

to each room to update or replace her narratives. By filling each room with appropriate bits and pieces others can follow her explorations. Our researcher is not constructing a network of inter-related entities, she is mapping out processes as interconnected events and in doing so she is looking for the ways in which distributed events have made possible particular situations or prevented other intended pathways from being enacted.

#### 4.2. *The problem of concepts and materiality*

Barley's paper on *Images of Imaging* (1990) contains a readable story in the ethnographic genre of a researcher's attempts to come to terms with a subject world. As an ethnography it fits well with our principles, being largely an account of the micro-material processes that Barley experienced. It is, however, unusual in the literature of LFR. More typical perhaps is Webb and Pettigrew's *Temporal Development of Strategy* (1999). Here the world is expressed exclusively in abstract terms such as industries, institutions, sectors, and markets. Reflecting on our first principle, what is the materiality of the processes involving these concepts? Surely the 'UK Insurance Industry' is a purely discursive construct. It is in effect a name given to the pattern made by particular organizations operating the processes of 'insurance'. The only materiality it has, distinct from the sum of its parts, is textual. When Webb and Pettigrew use a 'typology' of 'strategies' to interpret various newspaper articles about these organizations, the notions of organization and strategy are also discursive (cf. Barry & Elmes, 1997). The newspaper articles they studied reflect interpretive and discursive processes, which in turn reflect popular stories of strategy as much as the actual behaviors of people. The gap between the selling of policies, investigating and paying of claims, and these abstract notions is immeasurable, and is filled by various discursive processes that are quite disconnected from the micro-material reality. In Jameson's (1981) terms, there are the interpretive processes within each group of people (that we often call an organization) with their own master codes reflecting stories they have imported into the group. These stories about their organization—where it has come from, what it consists of and where it is going to—are further re-interpreted each time the story is retold to the outside. The audience of these retellings has its own master codes with which to re-interpret these stories. Finally, in reading these articles for the purpose of research, researchers inevitably have created their own master codes (through the use of typologies, for example) with which to further re-interpret the whole; and then, faced with such a mass of interpretive 'data', they decimate it into little pictures, graphs and charts. Thus they set in explanatory concrete something—social life—which is, in its very nature fluid, diachronic and mobile (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

*In among all these bits of paper I have a copy of a VBM Newsletter given to me by one of my interviewees. It is a large sheet of bi-folded, textured heavyweight paper evidencing the convergence of a number of quite distinct processes. There is the professional process of printing that enabled the newsletter to be mass-produced and also gave it an authoritative appearance. There is the process of authoring through which the author has interpreted his subject, the people around him involved in the 'VBM initiative'. Here the material evidence is less tangible: a chart of share price data; a picture of the Finance Director; a description of a pilot study; an explanation of a technical concept. The material is a combination of the physical (ink on paper) and the symbolic. The process of authoring involved thinking about and manipulating this material.*

*What enabled this process? Considering just the share price data, the author must have collected this from somewhere. Share price charts like this can be accessed on the web from any number of sites. The data is a set of numbers representing the share price at regular periods in the past. Each number was obtained through some sort of averaging process that takes its ultimate source from the prices at which shares in the company were traded on the stock market on a particular day. These transactions were themselves enabled by decisions made by either 'shareholders' or 'trust managers' to buy or sell shares.*

*The chart of share price data opens a window onto a wide and complex set of enabling processes that are intractable to rationalist explanations. This is in stark contrast to the role played by this chart in the process of implementing VBM. The chart has been dislocated from the processes above to become no more than a prop. It appears in numerous forms: this newsletter, presentations, handouts and even sketches. Each time it illustrates the same story of success: how key decisions made by the board overcame the company's problems and led to a meteoric rise in share price.*

*The presence of this little chart is therefore enabled by at least four processes: the process of printing that puts it on the page and puts the page on people's desks; the process of share trading and share price reporting that generated the data from which it is drawn; and the telling of corporate success stories. Without the first there would be no newsletter, without the second no chart, and without the third no incentive to display it. Finally, someone must have assumed that the readers of this newsletter would relate to the chart and to its message. This connects to the process of share ownership, which has also evolved over the last few decades to the point where employees have become significant shareholders and have a pecuniary interest in the company's share price. For this reason, our little chart not only tries to speak about the board's success, but also about the successful creation of wealth for the employee-shareholders.*

The narrative above is far from perfect, but we have tried to tie it down to the micro-material processes. On the one hand the notion of shareholder is an abstraction, but on the other there are people who possess share certificates that enable them to participate in a set of concrete processes that are tied to this notion: attending the Annual General Meeting, receiving dividends, selling their shares. The researcher may not have met a Trust Manager or seen a trading floor but clearly the former exists, and regardless of whether or not the latter exists anymore, people still trade shares in essentially the same manner as they did on the floor. What we think our aspiring process researchers need to do is to continually look for these materially situated roots as the foundations of their research, restore the fragile relationship of immanence to the world, and avoid the conceptual monuments that so often obscure them.

#### *4.3. Does LFR measure up?*

When it comes to exploring the process worldview LFR clearly does not measure up. Researchers in this field talk in terms of pre-defined concepts and notions. They categorize and type. They may stick around for a long time, but they are still just as trapped within their own boundaries as they were with the synchronic methods they were trying to escape. LFR sets off with process in mind but as researchers shape meaning out of their subjects they inevitably pivot into the world of substance. They move from studying their subjects to talking about them with ease, but as they do so they fix them and

consequently obscure them. Clearly the proponents of LFR have started out with the intention of making sense of change over time. Have they failed? Perhaps the answer is both no and yes? No, because the meanings they give incorporate a dynamic that would certainly be missing from any synchronic account. Yes, because surely they are still operating within the worldview of substance. They have to fix things first in order to describe how they change. Rather than studying dynamics they are dealing with a sort of incremental stasis.

## 5. Process thinking and OMT: towards processism

In this final part of the paper we will consider whether or not process thinking can have a role in our field, and if so, what form this might take if it is to remain true to the principles we outlined above. Given that the purpose of most research is to make sense of the world being studied, our growing conviction that process methods are unavoidably anti-hermeneutical would seem to make ‘process’ unserviceable as a concept. The phrase ‘process thinking’, intended to avoid the metaphysical trappings of process philosophy, appears to be an oxymoron. Traditionally we view thinking as sense making, but to think in terms of process would be not to think at all. As Roland Barthes put it rather eloquently: “The naked account of ‘what is’ (or what has been), thus proves to resist meaning; such resistance reconfirms the great mythic opposition between the *vécu* [the experiential, or ‘lived experience’ (or the living)] and the intelligible... what lives is structurally incapable of carrying a meaning and vice versa (L’Effet de Réel, Communications, no.11,1968, p. 87; quoted in and translated by Jameson, 1981, p. 222). Perhaps we have to create a new term, *processism*, to reflect the essence of Pratchett’s *First Sight* (2003) as ‘seeing before thinking obscures the view’. It is perhaps only in moments of genius that such a way of seeing finds expression in a mode of representation. The joy of (modernist) art lies in its showing how something comes to take on meaning, in exploring the genealogy of solidity. As Merleau-Ponty (1964, p. 13) commented on the work of Paul Cézanne: “He wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. He makes a basic distinction not between ‘the senses’ and ‘the understanding’ but rather between the spontaneous organization of what we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences...” In other words, Cézanne never wanted to let the logic of the painting take precedence over the continuity of perception: after each brushstroke he had to re-establish his innocence as perceiver, “forgetting everything” (Doran, 2001, p. 36). As such a task is never entirely possible, he was always dogged by a greater or lesser sense of his own failure; but “what he could not realize was that in failing to paint the pictures he wanted, he heightened our awareness of the visible as it had never been heightened before” (Berger, 2001, p. 227).

As organizational scholars, being the ‘writerly’ creatures that we are, we have of course no recourse to the materiality of paint and canvas as mode of expression. Thus we turn to Deleuze’s concept of ‘text’. Deleuze’s work is very much part of a tradition of philosophy that sees ‘reality’ as constantly in motion and ceaselessly self-transforming. He is less interested in what the stuff of the world *is*, and more interested in what the stuff of the world *does*: “We’re strict functionalists: what we are interested in is how something works, functions—finding the machine. But the signifier’s still stuck in the question ‘What does it mean?’ ... The only question is how anything works, with its intensities, flows, processes, partial objects—none of which *mean* anything”

(Deleuze, 1995, p. 22, emphasis in original). Texts do not mean so much as they function; when properly constructed they are machines that make something happen. The writers Deleuze (1997) admires (such as Kafka and Proust), those who practice what he calls ‘a minor usage of language’, experiment on the real, thereby at once fashioning a critique of power and opening a passage toward new possibilities for living (Bogue, 2003). In this regard, it is accidents and contaminations rather than ‘pure’ forms which are considered ‘essential’, because they are the unavoidable and utterly necessary processes that make and remake the worlds we inhabit. These are Deleuze’s *lignes de fuite* or ‘lines of flight’ which create a kind of movement out of itself to something else—what we can do if we really tried but otherwise choose not to. For Deleuze the crucial question is how to ‘make way’ for what is in-coming from beyond our circle of familiarity. It is important to distinguish such an approach from research hinging purely on a play of language, a view which has become prominent in OMT (see, for example, Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004). For, as long as play or contingency is confined to language, there are likely to be limitations imposed on the degree to which we allow ourselves to be ‘moved’ by happenings outside ourselves and/or our spheres of shared language and culture—or outside the range of the human in general. The aim of our texts should thus not be to produce ‘proof’, piling arguments and evidence; but rather a ‘piling up of insufficiencies’. We should think of our work not as placing knowledge in the cabinet but as displacing it, not accumulating but dispersing.

Traditional research fixes the world in order to define its relationality. As we have already seen, this inevitably involves a pivotal movement away from what is being studied into the discourse of study itself. We, on the other hand, advocate an approach which get alongside the world rather than intersecting it orthogonally. The aim is to reveal the cracks, flaws and contradictions that traditional interpretive work tries so hard to cover over. It is not about providing yet another meaning, it is about exposing where meaning falls down. The role of the process researcher is thus not to collect ‘process data’ (Langley, 1999)—a term which is virtually contradictory. ‘Data’ easily become the fulcrum about which the researcher pivots from the process of interest into the orthogonal discursive process of research itself; in other words ‘data’ become the means by which processes are subsumed into entities. The challenge for the process researcher is to find the conflicts and inconsistencies in a given case that betray the inadequacies of those interpretations arising from it. It is about disrupting these interpretations, a gesture of discontinuity, discovering the lumps and nuggets that are obliterated by them and surfacing these as evidence of alternative paths we have chosen to overlook. It is about undoing meaning so that we can be aware of how inadequately we understand the world and how imperfect our actions within it are. Process researchers are not collecting data but *reminders*: *reminders* that they must look at hard to see; *reminders* that challenge meaning rather than yielding it up, that make the language in which we express ourselves halt and stammer (Deleuze, 1995). Their task remains empirical not merely speculative, but the goal is not to reproduce empirical reality ‘as it is’. Rather, the aim is, through what Theodor Adorno (1991) called ‘exact fantasy’, to ‘over-shoot’ reality, to show the unrealized possibilities within it, yet at the same time to stay close to the phenomenon, thereby not lapsing into metaphysical speculation. ‘Exact fantasy’ is to reveal traces or pre-figurations of material possibilities which have escaped the dominating power of the prevailing reality: it works against the grain of what exists, in the hope thereby of opening up different and better possibilities (Hammersley, 1995).

## 6. Negative endings...

We started this paper with a concern that process thinking, however popular it may have become in OMT, is not really being done any justice. To understand why, we tried to define more precisely what process thinking should involve and came up with a number of key process principles. Process thinking seems set to oppose the interpretive movement implicit in making sense of the world, but it consequently deprives itself of a meaning of its own. We were forced to conclude that the proper pursuit of process thinking denies us the use of categories, typologies, classes, and even the notion of things themselves. We cannot draw boundaries and we cannot generalize. What value can there possibly be in such a form of ‘processism’?

Throughout this paper it has become increasingly clear that there is a dialectic tension at the root of this problem. Process research only becomes liberated when it gives up meaning. But if we take this course of action, what is the role of a methodology that denies us the ability to make sense of what we study? The answer lies perhaps somehow in the negative. Our task is not to find meaning or truth, but to keep finding the places where meaning does not work. We need to create a dialectic movement between meaning and the essentially intractable reality around us. Stated as one more new ‘method’ our approach is of course inherently inconsistent; the best way to grasp it is to conceive of it as the description of an ever-moving process of thought, as a position which includes its own failure. Our thought connects here with that of Gadamer for whom the basic hermeneutic experience (in the strong sense of *Erfahrung*), is the experience that our anticipations of understanding have been shattered. Following Hegel, he sees experience, in the full sense of the term, as the experience of negation (*Nichtigkeit*). Experience is that wherein our previous sense of reality is undone, refuted, and shows itself as needing to be reconstituted. It occurs precisely in those moments where the world ‘talks back’. True experience that delivers insight must lead to an openness to ever newer experience (Grondin, 2002). The kind of transcending of experience required for ‘knowledge’ is in principle impossible in human affairs: “For experience itself can never be science. Experience stands in ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 355).

The problems that we have been concerned with here may be seen as relating to the ways in which research intersects with its subject. The researcher works an orthogonal process that is itself enabled by prior theoretical and methodological processes. These are very often remote from the problem space the researcher is attempting to penetrate. The moment of intersection is relatively brief, in which the material of the subject process is ‘requisitioned’ by the research process and enrolled into already existing roles within the latter. Moments later the two separate and continue on their way towards largely independent goals. Thus the subject becomes integrated into the researcher’s master narrative—the snippet of process becomes an allegorical interpretation that reflects the researcher’s own world view more than her chosen subject. Given the ultimate evasiveness of ‘truth’, perhaps the proper task of the researcher is to lead his or her audience to better (more useful?) appreciations of the processes they are striving to understand. Therefore, it is incumbent upon researchers to find ways of ‘moving’ their audiences towards the micro-material subject in order to see better through the veil of abstract conceptualisations. From this experience our audience should be better able to create, develop or apply ideas that may provide increased usefulness on their own journeys through the world. We thus have to see ourselves as journeying through,



rather than standing over, our material; allowing the world to ‘speak back’ as it were. This will involve unlearning the conventions of ‘writing out’ the unexpected from research accounts, to communicate the joy of *not knowing*...

On a modest level, our vignettes were designed to give readers an appreciation of the fabrication of the VBM processes—to get them ‘alongside’. We refrained from making clear connections between the VBM stories and our theoretical narrative and thus require quite a bit of work from the reader. But then our aim is one of displacement of knowledge, not one of accumulation. These vignettes also show how empirical material can be used to re-open tidily constructed interpretations. But, of course, re-opening them is not an end in itself. And process researchers must deny themselves the option to settle for a final re-interpretation. To do that, they must be able to look over their own shoulders and see themselves being scientists—spinning stories about meanings that may be useful but are always wrong.

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