From entity to process: toward more process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to make a case for more process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change.

Design/methodology/approach – To emphasize the importance of a process perspective on organizational change, this paper challenges the prevalent theorizing approach that treats organizational change as entity and argues that process-based theorizing can help researchers gain a better understanding of organizational change.

Findings – To direct future research toward more process-based theorizing, this paper proposes a systematic four-step procedure for the analysis of qualitative data that helps researchers theorize organizational change from a process perspective.

Originality/value – Overall, this paper contributes to theorizing efforts in the field of organizational change by offering a reflective account on the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails, strengthening the position of process-based theorizing in light of these challenges and providing an outlook on how scholars can develop theoretical insights on organizational change from a process perspective.

Keywords Process, Entity, Qualitative research, Organizational change, Theorizing, Analytical procedure

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The idea that a better understanding of organizational change requires theorizing across multiple levels of analysis has received growing attention in the field of organizational change (Aguinis et al., 2011; Hitt et al., 2007). The key aim of this theorizing approach is to “understand the whole [by keeping] an eye on the parts” (Klein and Kozlowski, 2000, p. 54). In this vein, an entire “movement” (Felin et al., 2015, p. 575) of organizational change scholars engages in “drilling for microfoundations” (Coff and Kryscynski, 2011, p. 1429). That is, a growing number of scholars generate theoretical progress by discovering concepts at lower levels of analysis that predict and explain organizational change (Abell et al., 2008; Felin et al., 2012; Foss and Pedersen, 2016). This trend currently seems to dominate theorizing efforts in the field of organizational change (Mathieu and Chen, 2011), and the growing interest in neuroscientific methods (Becker et al., 2011; Lindebaum, 2016) indicates that organizational change scholars are likely to continue to expand increasingly further into the depths of this phenomenon.
This prevalent form of theorizing is largely based on the assumption that organizational change is an entity, that is, a “thing” that researchers can grasp and label as a unified concept and set in relationship to other concepts (Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). Thus, from this perspective, theorizing organizational change as an entity – which this paper calls “entity-based theorizing” – means identifying relevant “lower-level entities” (Felin et al., 2012, p. 1352) and formulating relationships between these lower-level entities and “organizational change” as the focal entity (Aguinis et al., 2013). Based on this assumption, entity-based theorizing has generated a rich diversity of lower-level entities that explain and predict organizational change (Felin et al., 2015, for a recent overview).

Such entity-based theorizing seems to entail a paradox. It has greatly contributed to theoretical progress and richness in the field of organizational change; however, at the same time, it has led to “a marginalization of research” (Corbett et al., 2014, p. 10) with piecemeal contributions that add little to a better understanding of organizational change (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014). Consequently, the field of organizational change has not experienced paradigmatic theoretical shifts for years (Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014). Because most organizational change scholars have come to accept entity-based theorizing as “proper science” (Bacharach, 1989; Sutton and Staw, 1995), they focus only slightly on the underlying premises in which their theorizing efforts are embedded (Corbett et al., 2014; Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014). However, such reflections are needed to evoke “a fundamental change in the mode of knowledge production” (Corbett et al., 2014, p. 13) that can guide organizational change scholars toward achieving more substantial theoretical progress (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014).

In light of these issues and concerns, the purpose of this paper is to offer a reflective account of entity-based theorizing that directs research on organizational change toward an alternative form of generating theoretical insights. In particular, this paper initially challenges the entity-based approach to theorizing organizational change by systematically clustering and highlighting four challenges that entity-based theorizing entails. Specifically, these challenges relate to an infinite regress of searching for explanatory lower-level entities in the vertical and horizontal directions and an overly simplistic theorization of organizational change that forces the phenomenon into linear cause–effect relationships and underplays interdependencies among lower-level entities. This paper then proposes that “process-based theorizing” – an underutilized form of theorizing that unfolds organizational change as patterns of action and reconstructs the underlying logic of these patterns (Langley et al., 2013; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; Wenzel et al., 2016) – can progress research on organizational change beyond these challenges that entity-based theorizing entails and has unique qualities that enable scholars to advance our understanding of this phenomenon. In particular, process-based theorizing relies on a distinct unit of analysis that escapes infinite regress and helps scholars gain a more complex understanding of organizational change by embracing the “messiness” of this phenomenon. To direct the field of organizational change toward more process-based theorizing in the face of ongoing ambiguity about how to do so (Klag and Langley, 2013; Smith, 2002), this paper finally proposes a systematic four-step procedure for the analysis of qualitative data – from action, talk and reflection to basic assumptions – that helps researchers theorize organizational change from a process perspective.

In this vein, the contribution of this paper to theorizing efforts in the field of organizational change is threefold. First, this paper addresses the lack of reflection in prevalent forms of theorizing that inhibits paradigmatic theory shifts in the field of organizational change (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014; Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014). In particular, this paper offers a reflective account that critically scrutinizes entity-based
theorizing by systematically clustering and highlighting challenges that this form of theorizing entails. Second, this paper reinvigorates and reinforces the need for more process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2005; Langley, 2007; Van de Ven, 1992) by outlining and highlighting the unique added value of process-based theorizing in light of the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails. Third, by addressing the need for further insights on how to navigate process-based theorizing (Klag and Langley, 2013), this paper presents an outlook on how scholars can theorize organizational change from a process perspective.

2. Challenging entity-based theorizing in the field of organizational change

"Entity-based theorizing" refers to the practice of searching for lower-level entities and formulating causal relationships that explain and predict organizational change as an entity. Based on this logic, this section systematically clusters four important challenges that entity-based theorizing entails and elaborates on these challenges in more detail. This section begins by providing an introduction to entity-based theorizing that establishes grounds for clustering the challenges of this theorizing approach.

2.1 Entity-based theorizing: An introduction

The logic of “entity-based theorizing” consists of three parts. First, entity-based theorizing is based on the assumption that organizational change can be conceived as an entity, that is, a “thing” that researchers can describe and label as a unified concept (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Langley et al., 2013; Parmigiani and Howard-Grenville, 2011). Second, to gain an understanding of organizational change as an entity, entity-based theorizing searches for other entities that are located at lower levels of analysis – so-called “lower-level entities” (Felin et al., 2012, p. 1352) – that explain and predict organizational change as the focal entity (Felin et al., 2015, for an overview). Third, to explicate how lower-level entities explain and predict organizational change, entity-based theorizing formulates causal relationships between these concepts (Aguinis et al., 2013; see also Bacharach, 1989; Sutton and Staw, 1995).

Based on this logic, this paper clusters the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails along two dimensions (Figure 1). Given that entity-based theorizing is based on the formulation of causal relationships between entitative concepts, this paper differentiates between challenges that relate to the entities (i.e. the “boxes”) and the relationships between these entities (i.e. the “arrows”) (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Langley et al., 2013). Furthermore, in line with the prevalence of “drilling” for and identifying entities at lower levels of analysis that explain and predict entities at higher levels (Coff and Kryscynski, 2011; Felin et al., 2012), we differentiate challenges that point to vertical and horizontal directions of entity-based theorizing, that is, the search for explanatory entities at lower levels of analysis and at the same level of analysis, respectively [Figure 1(a)]. As illustrated in Figure 1(b), this categorization yields four challenges that entity-based theorizing entails. In the following, this section elaborates on these challenges in more detail.

2.2 Zooming in: How far?

Multilevel theorizing is based on the idea that entities are nested (Hitt et al., 2007). From this perspective, every entity is part of another entity at a higher level of analysis. This also means that every entity consists of entities at lower levels of analysis (Klein et al., 1994; Rothaermel and Hess, 2007). Accordingly, entity-based theorizing largely focuses on "zooming in" (Howard-Grenville et al., 2016); that is, its focus is on searching for entities at
lower levels of analysis that explain and predict organizational change as the focal entity [see Felin et al., 2015; see also (1) in Figure 1(b)].

An important question that arises from this theorizing approach is how far researchers must zoom in to gain a profound understanding of organizational change. As Hodgson (2012, p. 1392) asked, “Why stop at the level of the individual? Why not get down to the neural structures in the brain? Or the biochemistry of the human organism? Or atomic physics?” Thus, given that every entity consists of further entities at lower levels of analysis, entity-based theorizing might drive organizational change scholars into a never-ending search for explanatory entities at ever-lower levels of analysis, that is, an “infinite regress” (Arend, 2015).

Barney and Felin (2013) approached this challenge by commenting that the field of organizational change has a disciplinary limit at the level of the individual. However, in light of the widespread practice of borrowing theory from other disciplines such as psychology and biology (Whetten et al., 2009), the exploration of new methodologies that enable scholars to dig deeper into the depths of organizational change (Becker et al., 2011; Lindebaum, 2016) and calls for bridging disciplinary boundaries to bridge levels of analysis (Molloy et al., 2011), organizational change scholars do not appear inclined to settle for a “reasonable stopping point” (Barney and Felin, 2013, p. 143). Therefore, the question of how far scholars must zoom in to gain a profound understanding of organizational change remains to be answered.

2.3 A never-ending search for lower-level entities?
The nested nature of entities also implies that organizational change does not consist of only one lower-level entity. Instead, every entity is explained and predicted by a set of entities...
that are located at a lower level of analysis (Hitt et al., 2007; Klein et al., 1994). Thus, from this perspective, theorizing organizational change requires scholars to consider several, potentially even numerous, lower-level entities. Accordingly, extant entity-based theorizing has revealed a rich diversity of lower-level entities that explain and predict organizational change (Felin et al., 2015).

Because of the involvement of social processes, organizational change is complex in nature (Roth, 2014; Tsoukas, 2017; Wenzel et al., 2016); that is, the number of elements it comprises exceeds the number of elements that an observer can set in relationship to each other (Luhmann, 1995). Thus, by definition, the complexity of organizational change prevents researchers – as observers – from keeping track of all entities that explain and predict this phenomenon (Wenzel et al., 2016). However, in turn, the selective focus on fewer lower-level entities excludes considering other entities that might also affect the focal entity and, therefore, can generate only a partial understanding of organizational change (Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014). As Corbett et al. (2014) noted, scholars seem to compensate for this issue by adding more and more entities to their explanation of organizational change.

Given that complexity inhibits a full understanding of organizational change in terms of entities, another question this paper asks is whether there is a stopping point for searching for entities that are located at a lower level of analysis. Indicators for theoretical saturation such as Weick’s (1979) categories of accuracy, generality and simplicity do not appear to stop the ongoing search for such entities (Corbett et al., 2014). Instead, as others have noted, the shift of attention to other theoretical concepts seems to result largely from fashion (Abrahamson, 1996) and community-building efforts (Hambrick and Chen, 2008). Although such practices may explain the prevalence and disfavor of theoretical concepts at certain points in time, they do not necessarily correlate with the maturity of theoretical ideas and, therefore, do not formulate a stopping point for searching for lower-level entities that explain and predict organizational change. However, in the absence of such a stopping point, entity-based theorizing would run the risk of another infinite regress in the horizontal direction [see (2) in Figure 1(b)].

2.4 Unidirectional causality?

The formulation of causal relationships – in contrast to telling stories – has become a well-accepted norm of (entity-based) theorizing efforts in the field of organizational change (Bacharach, 1989; Sutton and Staw, 1995; see, however, Cornelissen, 2017a, Dyer and Wilkins, 1991, and Weick, 1995, for opposing views). Entity-based theorizing largely centers on formulating linear cause–effect relationships among entities (Corbett et al., 2014). Thereby, the focus of entity-based theorizing across multiple levels of analysis is on formulating cause–effect relationships between entities that are located at different levels of analysis (Aguinis et al., 2013). More specifically, much of the literature on organizational change focuses on the formulation of linear cause–effect relationships that link lower-level entities up to, and thereby explain and predict, entities that are located at higher levels of analysis (Felin et al., 2015).

As Alvesson and Sandberg (2014) noted, this theorizing approach uses an ever-growing number of simplifying assumptions to formulate linear cause–effect relationships. Theorizing always involves making simplifying assumptions (Bacharach, 1989; Weick, 1979); in fact, “an important motivation behind [entity-based theorizing] is arguably the desire to engage in ‘reduction’” (Foss and Pedersen, 2016, p. E25). However, scholars increasingly observe “tendencies to oversimplification” (Winter, 2012, p. 1402) and express their discontent toward “the simplicity, the triviality, and the general inertia of change management concepts” (Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014, p. 116) that might no longer adequately
reflect the complexity of the focal phenomenon (Tsoukas, 2017). In this vein, Prasad and Prasad (2002, p. 5) deemed such theorizing “somewhat simplistic, ahistorical, decontextualized, reductionist, aphilosophical, and nonreflexive”.

In light of the complexity of organizational change (Tsoukas, 2017), the paper cautions that lower-level entities might not always linearly link up to higher-level entities. In contrast, scholars have highlighted observations of reverse causality between (Hamilton and Nickerson, 2003) and even the mutual reinforcement of (Sydow et al., 2009) lower-level and higher-level entities [see (3) in Figure 1(b)]. These observations support the fact that the attribution of causes and effects and the formulation of linear cause–effect relationships among lower-level and higher-level entities is not always possible. Instead, it appears that, more often than not, the complexity of organizational change inhibits such endeavors (Sydow et al., 2009).

2.5 Independence of lower-level entities?

The formulation of relationships imposes challenges on entity-based theorizing across levels of analysis, but it also raises issues and concerns when considering several lower-level entities that are located at the same level of analysis [see (4) in Figure 1(b)]. Specifically, by focusing on formulating causal relationships that link lower-level entities up to higher-level entities, this form of theorizing largely treats lower-level entities as though they existed and operated independently of one another (Hodgson, 2012). Winter (2012, p. 1405) compared this approach to theorizing with the development of a “recipe”; that is, the search for a list of ingredients “that suffices to [. . .] produce the output described”. In this vein, entity-based theorizing has produced a rich diversity of “ingredients” that, however, remain largely disconnected (Corbett et al., 2014; Wohlgemuth et al., 2016).

However, as Klein et al. (1994) noted, lower-level entities are not independent of one another but interact to produce an outcome at other levels of analysis. For instance, Rothaermel and Hess (2007) found that lower-level entities can substitute for or complement one another in producing an outcome. Thus, from their perspective, lower-level entities do not merely add up; they jointly produce an outcome through their interaction (Will, 2015).

Accordingly, Barney and Felin (2013, p. 145) proclaimed that finding answers to the question of aggregation is the “sine qua non” of entity-based theorizing.

In fact, the question of aggregation is far from peripheral for the theorization of organizational change in which social processes are involved. For instance, Hodgson (2012, p. 1391, emphasis in original) highlighted, “Organizations are more than individuals: without social relations and social positions they would not be organizations. They would simply be aggregates of isolated individuals”. With respect to the recipe-like theorization of organizational change as a list of disconnected entities, Winter (2012, p. 1404) identified another:

[problem: How does the symbolic account in the recipe actually shape its enactment – particularly, via the muscles of the enacting humans, including the muscles employed in the wrench turns, mouse clicks, and sceptical looks, and in the generation of other signals received by other personnel as well as by the diverse physical artefacts in the organization?]

That is, how does organizational change come into being once the lower-level entities are set in motion? Next, this paper argues that process-based theorizing can help organizational change scholars find answers to such questions.

3. Process-based theorizing: An alternative?

In light of the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails, this paper now reflects on the potential process-based theorizing has to move research on organizational change forward.
“Process-based theorizing” refers to the practice of unfolding organizational change as patterns of action and reconstructing the underlying logic of these patterns to gain an understanding of how and why they occur. In the face of the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails, this paper argues that process-based theorizing has substantial potential that the field of organizational change has not yet fully exploited (Figure 2). This section introduces process-based theorizing and elaborates on these issues in more detail.

3.1 Process-based theorizing: An introduction

As Rescher (1996, p. 10; cited in Langley et al., 2013, p. 5) highlighted:

Process is fundamental: The river is not an object but an ever-changing flow; the sun is not a thing, but a flaming fire. Everything in nature is a matter of process, of activity, of change.

This note arguably represents an extreme view of process-based theorizing; however, it paradigmatically illustrates that process-based theorizing implies a different ontological view compared with entity-based theorizing. In particular, process-based theorizing requires researchers to view organizational change “as made up of processes rather than things” (Langley et al., 2013, p. 5). This view does not mean that entity-based explanations of organizational change never consider processes. However, they often reduce processes to entitative variables that explain and predict organizational change (Foss and Pedersen, 2016; see also Wohlgemuth and Wenzel, 2016), that is, “how much” of certain or “how many” entities (linearly) cause organizational change. In doing so, entity-based theorizing does not unfold the (at least partially) unpredictable process of how and why “such ‘things’ come to be constituted, reproduced, adapted and defined through ongoing processes” (Langley, 2007, p. 271); that is, it tends to treat these “things” as a black box (Howard-Grenville et al., 2016)[1].

There are different approaches to process-based theorizing, varying from “weak” to “moderate” to “strong” with respect to the extent to which they abandon entitative vocabulary (see Fortwengel et al., 2017; Langley, 2007, 2009 and Sandberg et al., 2015, for comprehensive overviews). These approaches share the opening of this process black box that entity-based theorizing conceals. Specifically, in entity-based explanations of organizational change:

[...the boxes are always labeled, whereas the arrows are often unadorned by any text, as if they speak for themselves. In process-based theorizing, by contrast, the emphasis is on the arrows, on the relationships and performances that produce outcomes in the world (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1248).]

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This interest is prevalent in most forms of process-based theorizing, such as the use of verbs rather than nouns (Weick, 1979), the focus on doings and sayings that actors perform and conduct over time (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Koch et al., 2016; Wenzel and Koch, 2018), examinations of the constitutive role of communication (Cooren et al., 2011) and the use of process-philosophical accounts to trace back or follow forward flows of action (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Thus, referring to Winter’s (2012) analogy of entity-based theorizing with the development of recipes, process-based theorizing of organizational change does not deconstruct a meal into its ingredients, the ingredients into its constituent parts and so on. Instead, it focuses on what the cook “does”, that is, identifying patterns of action and reconstructing the logic that explicates how and why these patterns occur (Langley, 2007; Langley et al., 2013; Van de Ven, 1992; Van de Ven and Poole, 1995; Wenzel et al., 2016).

3.2 Beyond entities: Processes as distinct units of analysis
By focusing on opening the black box of organizational change, process-based theorizing has a clear-cut unit of analysis – the process that constitutes and produces organizational change. This paper argues that a clear-cut focus on processes can advance theorizing in the field of organizational change in at least two ways.

First, process-based theorizing can escape infinite regress. Thus, it does not infinitely search for further entities that add to explaining and predicting organizational change in vertical and horizontal directions [Figure 1(a)]. Instead, process-based theorizing focuses on episodic patterns of action that have a beginning and ending (Hendry and Seidl, 2003; Langley, 1999) and reconstructs how and why they occur. Given the dynamics of social processes in organizations (Hodgson, 2012), process-based theorizing has a unit of analysis that does justice to the peculiar nature of the focal phenomenon that is of interest to organizational change scholars.

Second, process-based theorizing provides a holistic understanding of organizational change. Thus, it does not aim to add yet another entity to the explanation of organizational change within a given set of boundary conditions. Instead, process-based theorizing relies on the observation that, despite the complexity of organizational change that entity-based theorizing cannot fully capture, “all this can [...] happen because these systems operate recursively” (von Foerster, 2003, p. 313); that is, organizational actors reflexively enact an underlying logic that guides their actions. By reconstructing this underlying logic, process-based theorizing enables scholars to open the black box of organizational change and provide a comprehensive understanding of how and why that change occurs. Such theoretical findings have the potential to facilitate “box-breaking research” (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014) that challenges conventional wisdom and to generate theoretical progress that extends beyond the assumptions of established paradigms (Langley, 2007).

3.3 Beyond linear cause–effect relationships: Embracing the messiness of organizational change
In light of the complexity of organizational change (Tsoukas, 2017), opening the black box of organizational change through process-based theorizing allows researchers to embrace the messiness of this phenomenon that linear cause–effect relationships between entities poorly represent (Langley, 1999). More specifically, this paper argues that process-based theorizing can enrich, extend and change the prevalent understanding of organizational change beyond linear cause–effect relationships between entities in at least two ways.

First, process-based theorizing extends beyond unidirectional causality. Thus, it does not force organizational change into linear cause–effect relationships between entities. Instead,
process-based theorizing enables researchers to unfold patterns of action that constitute and produce organizational change in time and space and gain a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms that explicate how and why that change occurs (Langley et al., 2013; Wenzel et al., 2017). Thus, scholars can observe and theorize the constitution and production of organizational change that linear cause–effect relationships cannot capture (Langley, 1999).

Second, process-based theorizing enables scholars to gain a more complex understanding of organizational change. By avoiding forcing organizational change into linear cause–effect relationships between entities, it opens the view for dynamics that extend beyond linear cause–effect relationships, such paradoxes (Koch et al., 2017; Smith and Lewis, 2011), dualities (Farjoun, 2010; Priem et al., 2018), plurivocality (Boje, 1995), polyphony (Hazen, 1993) and self-reinforcing dynamics (Sydow et al., 2009; Wenzel et al., 2017). Thus, by relying on process-based theorizing, scholars can theorize the complex processes through which organizational change comes into being.

4. Toward more process-based theorizing: An analytical procedure

Because much of the vocabulary in the field of organizational change prescribes theorizations of the focal phenomenon in terms of entities instead of movement and flow (Langley et al., 2013), the transition from entity-based to process-based theorizing is not straightforward. Some scholars have begun to introduce conceptual vocabulary that does justice to process-based theorizing (Feldman, 2016; Langley, 2007). However, the available tools and techniques for theorizing from process data (Dansereau et al., 1999; Langley, 1999; Yin, 2014) still largely rely on entity-based vocabulary. Therefore, not surprisingly, how organizational change scholars can navigate process-based theorizing remains a puzzling issue (Klag and Langley, 2013; Smith, 2002).

To direct organizational change scholars toward more process-based theorizing, we propose an analytical procedure that enables them to theorize organizational change systematically from a process perspective. In line with the need for a “narrative-based style” of theorizing processes (Cornelissen, 2017a; see also Wenzel et al., 2017), this procedure is inspired by discourse-analytical considerations (see Balogun et al., 2014, and Phillips and Hardy, 2002, for a comprehensive overview). Discourse analyses allude to the written and oral use of language in social practices through which actors construct meaning and, therefore, social reality over time. The idea of discourse analyses is that meanings are part of an underlying logic – that is, a “discourse” – that structures and re-creates social practices and, therefore, explicates how and why patterns of action occur. Thereby, discourse-analytical procedures suggest that observers can reconstruct this logic and see “through the eyes of the other” (von Foerster, 1991, p. 63) by observing the actions and interpretations of actors in social systems. Based on these discourse-analytical considerations, we can distinguish four steps for the analysis of qualitative data that comprise both the actions and interpretations of actors and guide organizational change scholars toward the underlying logic in which patterns of action are embedded (Figure 3).

In line with the idea of process-based theorizing that this paper has outlined above, the procedure starts with the identification of an episodic pattern of action, that is, what organizational actors “do”, that describes organizational change as a process instead of an entity. However, the underlying logic not only structures and prescribes a course of action but also excludes alternative actions (Rothmann and Koch, 2014). Therefore, to reconstruct the underlying logic of organizational change, considering what actions organizational actors do not perform is also important. To gain insights into the scope of potential actions
that organizational actors could alternatively perform, researchers must engage with the context (Eisenhardt, 1989) in which this process is embedded.

The second step guides researchers toward the analysis of talk, that is, what organizational actors “say”. Similar to a discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), this step involves the identification of dominant themes that organizational actors discuss. By determining whether organizational actors discuss alternative courses of action, researchers can clarify whether organizational actors are aware of the scope of potential actions that they have available. As several studies (Dittrich et al., 2016; Garud et al., 2014; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013) suggest, some forms of talk can be performative (Gond et al., 2016) because they are consequential for the specific enactment of patterns of action, whereas others are not. Therefore, to determine the scope of action that organizational actors construct based on their underlying logic, it is also necessary to consider potential themes that organizational actors do not discuss and, therefore, systematically exclude from their scope of action.

The third step centers on reflection, that is, how organizational actors justify what they “do” and “say”. Here, the focus is on reasons that organizational actors advance to explain why they follow their course of action. Particularly when action and talk diverge (Brunsson, 1989) or when organizational actors are confronted with alternative courses of action, organizational actors work to legitimize their own and delegitimize alternative courses of action (Vaara et al., 2004). Therefore, to reconstruct the logic of such distinctions, it is also important to focus on the reasons organizational actors provide for not following or discussing different courses of action.

The final step leads researchers to reconstructing basic assumptions, that is, the underlying premises in which the actions and interpretations of organizational actors are embedded. In their distinctions between actions that they do and do not perform or discuss, organizational actors reflexively refer to such premises (Wenzel, 2015). Thus, reflections of organizational actors on the reasons why they follow or discuss certain courses of action and why they do not consider alternative courses of action essentially reflect these premises. By scrutinizing the distinctions that organizational actors make in narrative justifications of what they “do” and “say”, researchers can interpretively infer the basic assumptions that structure and guide their actions and interpretations – that is, the underlying logic in which the observed pattern of action is embedded.

Figure 3.
An analytical procedure for process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change.
5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to make a case for more process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change. To direct organizational change scholars toward more process-based theorizing, this paper challenged entity-based theorizing, which dominates the discourse in the field of organizational change, explicated why process-based theorizing can progress research on organizational change beyond some of the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails and presented a systematic four-step procedure that enables scholars to theorize organizational change from a process perspective. In the following, this paper discusses the contributions of the above arguments as well as the implications for further research on organizational change and its management.

5.1 Entity-based theorizing: A systematic reflection

In the first step, this paper critically reflected on “entity-based theorizing”, that is, the prevalent form of theorizing in the field of organizational change. As this paper explained, entity-based theorizing conceives organizational change as an entity and searches for lower-level entities that causally link up to the focal entity. This paper argued that entity-based theorizing runs the risk of infinitely searching for entities at ever-lower levels of analysis (i.e. in the vertical direction) and for lower-level entities that are situated at the same level of analysis (i.e. in the horizontal direction) to explain and predict organizational change. Furthermore, this paper highlighted that entity-based theorizing might not reflect the complexity of organizational change by tending to force the phenomenon into linear cause–effect relationships and ignoring the interdependencies among lower-level entities.

Because systematic overviews of the findings of entity-based theorizing exist (Felin et al., 2015), the purpose of this paper was not to provide a review of this literature. Instead, the ambition of this paper was to provide a reflective account on this prevalent form of theorizing, which others (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014; Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014) have argued the field of organizational change needs to generate theoretical progress. Although this paper could partially build its arguments on a few commentaries that have raised some issues and concerns about entity-based theorizing in the field of organizational change (Hodgson, 2012; Winter, 2012), this paper extends beyond these works by offering a systematic reflection on this form of theorizing. In particular, this paper complements the previous works on entity-based theorizing in the field of organizational change by offering a systematic overview of important challenges that entity-based theorizing entails.

This systematic reflection on entity-based theorizing in the field of organizational change shows that the shortcomings of this theorizing approach are deeply engrained in the underlying assumptions in which it is embedded. Specifically, as argued, the very conception of organizational change as an entity favors the search for lower-level entities and establishing simplified linear cause–effect relationships, while underplaying the complexifying role of movement and flow. This insight implies that future research on organizational change and its management would do well to engage in more reflexive theorizing, that is, deeper reflections on and more thorough explications of the assumptions in which theorizations of organizational change are embedded. Doing so allows scholars to contribute more than the current piecemeal additions to the field of organizational change (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014) by placing the underlying assumptions of their theorizing center stage and engaging in more profound discussions and debates about the usefulness of these premises and their consequences for theorizations of organizational change. In addition, future works might rely on the clusters that this paper developed to approach systematically the identified challenges that entity-based theorizing entails and find solutions to them. For instance, future research might go on to solve the entity-related
challenge of infinite regress both in the vertical and horizontal directions by developing and defining stopping points. However, as Arend (2015, p. 83) highlighted, this endeavor would be difficult, if not impossible, given that an entity-based solution to infinite regress “can be effectively hidden in the complexity” of organizational change. Accordingly, this paper proposes considering process-based theorizing as an alternative form of theorizing organizational change.

5.2 Process-based theorizing: Toward a stronger position

In light of the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails, this paper argues that process-based theorizing can help scholars exploit the substantial potential to gain a better understanding of organizational change that entity-based theorizing conceals. This paper subsumes and defines “process-based theorizing” as the practice of unfolding organizational change as patterns of action and reconstructing the underlying logic in which these patterns are embedded to gain an understanding of how and why they occur. This paper highlights that process-based theorizing – with its focus on processes – has a distinct unit of analysis that escapes infinite regress and provides holistic and rich insights into the “black box” of organizational change that have the potential to challenge conventional wisdom in the field of organizational change. Furthermore, this paper argues that process-based theorizing can progress research on organizational change beyond oversimplified theorizations of this phenomenon by developing a more complex understanding of it and extending scholarly attention toward theoretical ideas that linear cause–effect relationships poorly represent.

The present paper echoes earlier works that have highlighted the need for more process-based theorizing of organizational change (Langley, 2007; Van de Ven, 1992). In light of the ongoing dominance of entity-based theorizing and the proliferation of entities that add less and less to theoretical advances in the field of organizational change (Corbett et al., 2014), this paper reinforces the importance of process-based theorizing of organizational change. However, this paper extends beyond re-emphasizing the general significance of process-based theorizing. By departing from the challenges that entity-based theorizing entails, this paper outlines the unique value that process-based theorizing can add to the field of organizational change and, therefore, highlights the important role of process-based theorizing in our field.

Taking process seriously has at least two implications for further research on organizational change and its management. First, doing so implies referring to processes instead of entities as the focal unit of analysis. This ontological shift is far from trivial, as it implies viewing organizational change not just as an entitative process variable that black-boxes how it occurs but as a temporally unfolding phenomenon that must be unfolded and explored as such. As this paper’s outline of process-based theorizing suggests, this shift renders paradoxes, self-reinforcing dynamics, polyphony and other non-trivial aspects of organizational change accessible to investigation, thus enabling scholars to explore the under-researched complexities of organizational change (Wetzel and Van Gorp, 2014; Tsoukas, 2017) in more depth. Process-based theorizing also enables scholars to do so because, second, it implies embracing messiness in further research on organizational change; that is, instead of forcing organizational change into linear teleological approaches to change management (Kotter, 2012), process-based theorizing acknowledges the non-linear nature of organizational change (Wenzel et al., 2016) and reconstructs how and why organizational change occurs as it does. Thus, rather than cutting off complexity through overly simplified explanations of organizational change, process-based theorizing makes the messiness of organizational change part of the explanation. However, at this point, it is important to highlight that the present paper does not claim dominance of process-based theorizing over entity-based theorizing in the field of organizational change. Process-based
theorizing has its own challenges, such as identifying episodic patterns of action with a clear beginning and ending (however, see Czarniawska, 2004, and Hendry and Seidl, 2003, for helpful guidance), and future research can take the present paper as a starting point for exploring them. This paper relied on a systematic reflection of entity-based theorizing to highlight that process-based theorizing has a legitimate and important position in the field of organizational change. Thus, this paper hopes to direct organizational change scholars toward more process-based theorizing.

5.3 The process of process-based theorizing: An analytical procedure

To support process-based theorizing in the field of organizational change, this paper proposed a procedure for the analysis of qualitative data that enables scholars to theorize organizational change from a process perspective. In line with the general idea of process-based theorizing, this procedure places patterns of action at the front and center of theorizing organizational change. It provides access to the focal “black box” by reconstructing the underlying logic that explains how and why the patterns of action occur. Specifically, the procedure guides organizational change scholars toward the underlying logic in a stepwise process – from action, talk and reflection to basic assumptions.

The proposed analytical procedure complements other techniques that previous works on process-based theorizing have highlighted. In particular, the proposed analytical procedure is grounded in the overall idea of process-based theorizing and devotes less attention to entities. Thus, whereas existing techniques (Dansereau et al., 1999; Langley, 1999; Yin, 2014) still rely substantially on entitative vocabulary, the proposed analytical procedure extends beyond existing techniques by offering a step toward disposing of entity-based thinking in process-based theorizing. Thus, relying on the proposed analytical procedure implies placing processes instead of entities center stage, explaining organizational change by unfolding patterns of action through which it occurs rather than linking it with lower-level entities, reconstructing the underlying logic in which patterns of action are embedded rather than engaging in an infinite search for lower-level entities and embracing the messiness of organizational change instead of forcing the phenomenon into simplified cause–effect relationships. In light of ongoing ambiguity about how to theorize organizational change from a process perspective (Klag and Langley, 2013; Smith, 2002), the systematic procedure that this paper proposes is tailored to the needs of process-based theorizing, adds to a better understanding of how organizational change scholars can navigate process-based theorizing and provides a useful template for theorizing organizational change from a process perspective.

Using the proposed analytical procedure implies attributing greater importance to stories and narratives in further research on organizational change. Thus, the proposed analytical procedure imports the broader challenge of qualitative research, that is, that its outcomes are not generalizable to broader statistical populations; instead, it provides an in-depth understanding of organizational change that is only “transferrable” across contexts to a certain extent (Langley, 1999). Thus, organizational change scholars who do not seek answers to the questions of “how” and “why” but rather to “how many”, “how much” and “to what extent” will most likely find the proposed analytical procedure – and most likely also process-based theorizing more generally – unattractive. However, once process-based theorizing is accepted as having a legitimate and important position in the field of organizational change, the role of stories and narratives in our field must also be redefined. Although organizational change scholars largely reject stories as “theory” (Cornelissen, 2017a; Sutton and Staw, 1995), the analytical procedure reinforces the point that research on organizational change needs “[b]etter stories, not better constructs, to
generate better theory” (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991, p. 613). Thus, in contrast to the increasing popularity of using qualitative methods for entity-based theorizing at the expense of unleashing the explanatory potential of stories and narratives (Cornelissen, 2017b), the proposed analytical procedure uses stories as a vehicle to reconstruct the underlying logic that explicates how and why organizational change comes into being. However, the proposed analytical procedure does not let stories stand alone as “theory” but rather assigns an important role to stories in the process of theorizing (Weick, 1995) organizational change from a process perspective. In doing so, the procedure aims to contribute to the field of organizational change by offering a means of managing the transition from entity- to process-based theorizing.

5.4 Practical implications

Although this paper’s primary aim is to contribute to research on organizational change, a conception of organizational change that takes process more seriously also has several practical implications. First, acknowledging the processual nature of organizational change implies that organizational change initiatives are not just a temporary issue. Rather than initiating organizational change in response to potential or actual opportunities and threats, organizational change can and, at times, has to be managed on a continuous basis. Such an approach to change management allows managers to be continuously alert to signs of counterfactual stability (Schreyögg and Kliesch-Eberl, 2007) and, thus, initiate counter measures against path dependence (Sydow et al., 2009) before it is too late.

Second, a process-based understanding of organizational change implies being open for and developing more complex change strategies that do justice to the messiness of organizational change. Conceiving organizational change as a messy process rather than a controllable entity that can be “managed” by manipulating a number of factors (i.e. lower-level entities) raises managerial awareness of the simplicity of textbook solutions. In doing so, it draws managerial attention to the erratic character of this process that requires managers to not only tentatively make, but also revoke and revise, change decisions based on situational affordances.

Third, understanding organizational change from a process perspective also implies accepting that deliberate change interventions are just one part of organizational change. In addition to the gradual revision of managerial change intentions that the tentative and erratic character of organizational change implies, a process perspective on organizational change deepens managers’ appreciation of the fact that organizations can also change emergently (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985), that is, independent of managerial intent. Thus, from this perspective, the dynamics of organizational change may unfold even when managers do not explicitly dedicate their attention to them. Given that the teleological management of emergent, non-teleological change initiatives seems to limit the prospects of successful organizational change (Joas, 2005), managers are well-advised to provide organizational actors with freedom to engage in emergent change initiatives and account for these in their tentative change decisions.

Note

1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting these contrasts between entity- and process-based theorizing.
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