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Alternative Perspectives on Organizational Behavior: Sociological Theories on the Social Organization of Arts (max. 6000 words incl. abstract and references)

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Biographical notes

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Abstract

In our presentation and corresponding publication “The Social Organization of Arts,” we depart from the belief that the value of organizational theories has to be ranked according to their capacity to offer recipes for explaining organizational processes and structures in the arts. Instead, we offer an equivalent conceptual orientation for seven alternative perspectives on behavior in and by arts organizations, and thus on cultural management. This balanced comparison is not evaluative but epistemological, which presupposes an appreciation of each distinct perspective. Our contribution to the academic discourse on arts organizational behavior will not only be an advance in general theoretical knowledge but also a contextual understanding of theory building and theoretical innovation.

Keywords

social theoretical foundations, sociological theories, organizing arts, contextualization

Introduction

Practical cultural management operates according to the perception of concrete problems and the associated concerns. Broken down to simple logic, practitioners face questions like “We want to achieve this and that; what is the best way to proceed?” or “We have this or that problem; how do we solve it?”. As the concrete situation of each project and problem has particular aspects, managerial action is situational and casuistic (Miner, 2002). Based on this pragmatic understanding, we interpret the relationship between practical cultural management action and science as *broken*. By this, we mean that science or theory does not monitor, correct or improve action or practice, nor does practice *necessarily* require theory in order to exist. We characterize this relationship as broken to indicate that there are special situations where both areas, theory and practice, can communicate more strongly with each other and also benefit from this.

This view does not claim to be true, but to be reasonable. We believe that in practical realm, reflection takes place in various forms and circumstances. Sometimes reflection is integrated in action, sometimes practitioners take a step back and reflect alone or with others about what happened aiming to gain some valuable insights (Schön, 1983). In both cases reflection is prestructured – though not determined – by the general beliefs, conceptual knowledge, practical experiences, normative and emotional engagement with the concrete happenings//events. At this point, we come forward as social science scholars and proclaim//believe//argue that social sciences and humanities have the potential not only to offer cognitive tools and conceptual orientation – ways of “seeing-as” (Wittgenstein, 1953, part II xi: 193e), ways of speaking and analyzing experiences (Wittgenstein, 1953, § 476, § 637f.) –, but also to stimulate a critical revision of existing concepts and perspectives (Nordenstam, 1983).

Alternative Perspectives on the Social Organization of Arts

There are many interesting topics for theoretical study. Why the social organization of arts? First and foremost, we emphasize the social embedding of human activities. We believe – hopefully without all too strong professional bias – that from the 1970s onwards, sociology has made a rich contribution on how contemporary societies, especially western democracies with a liberal capitalistic system, organize the production, dissemination, consumption, classification, valuation and conservation of arts. Here we explicitly refer symbolic interactionism, field theory, systems theory, production of culture approach, neo-institutionalism, cultural institutions studies, and network theory. These sociological theories are closely associated with general social theoretical perspectives, so it is fair to claim that there are good reasons to look at managerial action and organizational behavior from a more general view point (Clegg and Pina e Cunha, 2019).

Cultural management as practice and as topic for analysis and reflection only makes sense if we attribute to the practitioners at least some degree of agency. Individual and collective agency is situationally shaped by access to material and immaterial resources, constraints of all kinds, competences and skills, and many other environmental aspects. Sociological theories are valuable for understanding the *complexities* and *interdependencies* that frame individual and collective agency; social theories may additionally help to understand the *sociality* of the practitioners’ experiences and understandings.

There is a great variety of sociological perspectives on organizing the arts. Some theoretical approaches have been rather deductively developed; others are more inductive theories. Some focus on order and regularity, others are more interested in understanding the conditions of deep changes and disruptions. Further, some theories are primarily interested in individuals who work together to realize a project, so they are closely related to the sociology of occupations, while other theories are primarily interested in the formation of trans-subjective structures that seem to affect the conditions of organizations. Some theories are formulated in a sober style; in other cases, a critical attitude towards certain topics plays a role in the formulation of theoretical arguments. We feel that it is worth conveying an understanding of the intrinsic rationality of the various sociological theories and their particular epistemic potential.

Comparison of Seven Different Sociological Theories

We do not have the space here to present the major sociological theories of the social organization of arts but can only offer short abstracts of each theory before proceeding with the comparison.

1. *Interactionist approach*: Howard S. Becker (1982) looks at art as the result of collective action. Behind every single artist there are interacting collectives that participate in the creation, distribution, consumption and (e)valuation of artworks. Collective action demands shared conventions, which are a precondition for cooperation and participation in art worlds. Becker’s interactionist approach integrates the sociology of occupations, the sociology of knowledge and organizational sociology into the sociology of arts.

2. *Theory of Structural Fields*: According to Pierre Bourdieu (1996), modern differentiated societies consist of distinct fields, i.e., relational arrangements of social positions, resources and dispositions. These fields are created by social power, domination and battles between antagonistic positions. Individuals acting in these fields are neither free actors nor passive elements. They rely on their habitual beliefs and take certain risks according to their practical sense and their alliances in a given situation. Bourdieu developed his field theory on his empirical reflections of the production of arts.

3. *Post-Parsonian Systems Theory*: Niklas Luhmann (2000) investigates the formation of modern art and argues that the self-determination and self-reference are pivotal characteristics. This development goes hand in hand with the emergence of an art system that operates in an autopoietic way. The underlying idea is that modern societies allow social orders to emerge from established boundaries between different social systems based on a functional differentiation. Contingency, i.e. the unpredictability of artistic developments, is a characteristic feature of the social organization of arts.
4. *The Production of Culture Perspective*: Coming from industrial and organizational sociology, Richard Peterson and his colleagues regard arts as result of multiple interrelated activities in which intermediaries play a big part. Their mediations between the microlevel (artistic work) and the mesolevel (organizations, markets) impose a significant mark on cultural production and consumption. Yet all activities are framed by further conditions at the macrolevel, such as policies, economic and industrial structures, technology and occupational roles (Peterson and Anand, 2004).
5. *Sociological Neo-Institutionalism*: The key term “institution” refers to explicit norms and implicit rules, taken-for-granted beliefs and widespread cognitive patterns, which together make social situations and behavior intelligible. The neo-institutional view on organizing arts emphasizes these aspects to question universal concepts like rationality, functionality or social structure. Neo-Institutionalism offers valuable insights into the life of organizations by developing some new concepts like isomorphism, legitimacy, and institutional decoupling (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).
6. *Cultural Institutions Studies*: This interdisciplinary approach combines sociological perspectives and practice theory with cultural economics and management studies. It investigates the transformation of cultural goods into commodities, looks at the role of museums in societies, describes the transformation of music markets, analyses the role and effects of public art funding, and studies artistic creative processes (e.g. Kirchberg, 2005; Tschmuck, 2012; Zembylas, 2004). Additionally, Cultural Institutions Studies gives attention to the role of arts managers and arts organizations in establishing regimes of competence and steering (e)valuation processes.
7. *Social Network Theory*: Social networks are temporary and fragile products of social connectivity and embeddedness as well as sites of communication, coordination and flexible adjustments to social environments. Social network theory aims at explaining organizational hybridity and the contingency of social events. Semantic network analysis complements this goal by interpreting meaning-giving as a relational process incorporated into networks (White, 2008). Using empirical data, this approach offers lucid insights into the social dynamics of the networked organizing of culture and the arts (McLean 2017, Brkić 2019).

For a better understanding of our comparative perspective, we mention that we do not use a theory of correspondence to argue that some sociological theories are closer to social reality, or are coming closer to a ‘truth’ than others are. On the contrary, we regard all these theories as complementing *sociological models*, or to use Nelson Goodman’s (1979) words, as different “ways of worldmaking.” Such models are creative in the sense that they generate different views on social events and developments by emphasizing certain aspects and silencing/oppressing/covering up others (Black, 1981). Our comparison will be therefore not evaluative but rather epistemological. We aim to convey understanding how these theories generate different views on related topics, especially on organizing the arts in contemporary western societies.

All these theories have been developed from the 1970s onwards, and share certain basic understandings. All are context-conscious and thus underline the pivotal role of social environments in the emergence, formation, increase and decrease of social phenomena in the arts. They are socially constructed in the sense that they understand classifications like arts or non-arts, high arts or low arts in an anti-essentialist way. Further, they all require social differentiation and consider distinctions and boundaries between belonging and not-belonging, and inner spaces and outer spaces as important. Finally, they distance themselves from methodological individualism. However, they differ on other topics.

- They estimate the role of power and resources in artistic activities and social relations quite different and therefore they have developed very different ideas about artistic autonomy and domination, about social structure and contingency, evaluative regimes and artistic change.
- Some of them pay little attention to the role of artistic materials and technologies, and how they afford new developments and social change.

- They link micro-, meso- and macro-levels, i.e. small-scale and large-scale phenomena quite differently, that is to say they follow different social ontologies.
- They refer to intersectional categories like gender, race, age with different intensity while some of them tend to ignore these categories.
- They take a different stance towards methodological issues, e.g. methodological individualism, or towards empirical methods.

Conclusion

The presentation of and reflection on these theories has the purpose to increase our understanding of the contingencies and the fuzziness of social affairs in managing the arts. Although most of the sociological theories we have discussed claim to explain the social organization of arts, we think that readers should not conflate sociological theory and social practice. Sociological theories have their epistemic value, not in explaining or even foreseeing social phenomena of organizing arts but in positing alternative ways of making meaning of social phenomena. Sociological theories of organizing and managing arts provide us with cognitive tools and conceptual orientation to cope with and to make sense of the social factors in creating and changing artistic worlds. With only a few exceptions, the works of scholars of one field (e.g., sociology of arts), and the other field (e.g., arts organizational and management studies) rarely overlap. However, an inclination for a transdisciplinary cooperation comes from practice: artists, arts managers, and cultural intermediaries are outspoken in their political and moral criticism. Think, for instance, of the critique of conflicting economic and artistic interests, of excessive exploitation and precarity, the fight for self-determination and for sustainable development goals. Think of the push for feminist, post-colonialist and anti-racism objectives, not only but also in arts. Our theoretical discussion of the social organization of arts focuses only on mostly established perspectives. We have left some topics open, among them the formation of artistic styles, and the relations of organizing the arts and the many crises unfolding. Organizing the arts in contemporary times has to pay close attention to the consequences of climate change and the urgency to mediate and implement sustainable practices, the need to react to global geopolitical pressures, and the critical reaction of the arts on these global changes. We would like to invite the readers to consider the many questions we have raised as an invitation to further develop the theories and empirical research on the social organization of arts in these problematic and dynamic local and global times.

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