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Reflection and Mindfulness in Organizations: Rationales and Possibilities for Integration

Abstract *The notion of reflection has featured strongly in Management Learning in recent years. While there is an important body of knowledge on how organizations can foster reflection-on-action, less seems to be known about how they can promote reflection-in-action. We suggest that reflection-in-action is closely linked to the phenomenon of mindfulness and we outline what existing research on mindfulness may teach us about understanding and organizing reflection-in-action. We believe that integrating the perspectives taken in these two streams of literature is important for a clear understanding of why some organizations seem to learn 'better' than others and why some initiatives to promote reflection and learning are more successful than others.*
Key Words: *learning; mindfulness; reflection; routines*

Introduction

Understanding the ways in which organizations can promote learning is of crucial importance in what has been referred to as a knowledge-based economy (see Spender, 1996), and the intellectual contribution of *Management Learning* to this understanding over the past 40 years has been significant. But it would be an irony for a journal dedicated to learning if its editors and contributors rested on their laurels. In an organization—or journal—that focuses on learning, any reflection upon the past would arguably be incomplete if it did not include a reflection upon possible ways to learn and improve. In recent years, what reflection means and how it can be organized has emerged as one of the main

themes in *Management Learning* (e.g. Cope, 2003; Elkjaer, 2001; Korthagen, 2005; Raelin, 2001; Ramsey, 2005; Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002; Vince and Saleem, 2004). This importance, we believe, justifies our own reflection on the question: What is it that we know about reflection in organizations, and how can future contributions to *Management Learning* go about inquiring into this topic?

In this short essay, we take stock of the literature on reflection and how it has contributed to our understanding of management learning. Focusing on the organizational dimension of reflection, we argue that while there is an important body of knowledge on how organizations can foster reflection-*on*-action, less is known about how they can promote reflection-*in*-action. We suggest that reflection-in-action is closely linked to the phenomenon of mindfulness and we outline what existing research on mindfulness might contribute to our understanding of how to organize reflection-in-action.

Having looked at what has been done in the past, we then suggest what may be done in the future. It seems to us that a comprehensive understanding of learning in organizations would benefit from an analysis of different forms of reflection and mindfulness and of the ways in which these forms interact. This, we believe, is important if we want to understand why some organizations seem to learn 'better' than others and why some initiatives to promote reflection and learning are more successful than others.

The essay is structured accordingly. We dedicate the first section to the literature on reflection, the second to mindfulness and the last to the rationales and possibilities for integrating these perspectives.

Reflection and Organization

Reflection, in a broad sense, denotes a practice of inquiry that is concerned with past, current or future phenomena, such as decisions, actions, processes and events. Reflection means engaging in comparison, considering alternatives, seeing things from various perspectives, and drawing inferences. As such, reflection constitutes a major element of learning from experience (Boud et al., 1985; Kolb, 1984; Usher, 1985), especially when it comes to critical, 'transformative' types of learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Senge, 1990) that challenge previous ways of thinking and acting instead of just adapting them slightly (Cope, 2003; Raelin, 2001). Drawing on John Dewey's notion of inquiry (Dewey, 1949 [1938]) and Donald Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983, 1987), various authors have emphasized the role of reflection on as well as in managerial practice (Cope, 2003; Elkjaer, 2001, 2004). Reflection is distinguished from both intuition (implicit 'insight', see Korthagen, 2005) and 'knowing-in-action' (Schön, 1983). Moreover, Schön's work in particular and other research based on his concepts have mainly addressed the individual practitioner's reflection rather than looking at reflection from an organizational point of view. However, more recently published research in *Management Learning* (Elkjaer, 2001, 2004; Korthagen, 2005; Naot et al., 2004; Raelin, 2001; Vince, 2002; Vince and Saleem, 2004) has drawn attention to inter- and supra-individual practices, such as regular quality circle meetings and/or a 'reflective culture' that foster collective reflection within organizations. In addition, organizational reflection has also

been characterized as collective *critical* reflection of organizational roles, practices, routines and power relations (Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002), in the sense that such reflection may lead to emancipatory action (Reynolds, 1998).

A closer look at the literature shows that organizational reflection is mainly conceptualized as shared, collective reflection within organizations. Korthagen (2005), for example, defines a 'reflective organization' as one in which people reflect systematically; that is, on a continuous and organized basis. Taking a somewhat broader perspective, Elkjaer (2001, 2004) argues that organizational reflection implies 'reflective learning' supported by organizational routines, practices and cultures; in other words, under conditions that prepare and enable professionals to sense uncertain situations and act upon them by way of inquiry (Dewey, 1949 [1938]). Such organizational conditions comprise, for example, training programs that address the needs of diverse organizational members, involving problem-setting tasks rather than the acquisition of predefined knowledge, and providing opportunities to publicly discuss doubts about current practices. In a similar way, Raelin (2001) speaks of a learning dialogue (public reflection) as constitutive of the organizational dimension of reflection. Thus, organizational reflection arises from reflection in the co-presence of others.

Furthermore, a 'reflective culture' is one that allows for voice and criticism without fear of retaliation. Vince (Vince, 2002; Vince and Saleem, 2004) addresses the organizational dimension of reflection most explicitly. Referring to Reynolds' (1998) notion of 'critical reflection' and Raelin's (2001) concept of 'public reflection', he contends that reflection becomes 'organizational reflection' as soon as entrenched organizational dynamics and established power relations come under public scrutiny. Thus, organizational reflection is the collective capacity to question assumptions. As such, it implies an ongoing inquiry into the nature and consequences of social power relations within organizations. This is enhanced by a 'structure that reflects' (Nicolini et al., 2004); that is, by practices that mobilize dialogue and help changes to take root in the organization. This might include, for example, peer consultancy groups, role analysis groups, communities of practice and group relations conferences (Vince, 2002). Furthermore, Vince and Saleem (2004) stress the role of emotions, showing how patterns of caution and blame inhibit processes of collective reflection.

The literature on organizational reflection has largely concentrated on organizational practices that induce reflection-on-action. These organizational practices, such as training sessions or meetings, are routines that take place outside of, rather than within, ordinary ongoing operations. At the same time, the ideas of a 'reflective culture' and 'critical reflection' may be seen as attempts to broaden the focus to include reflection-in-action. It is at this point, we believe, that the literature on mindfulness might serve as a supplement to the literature on organizational reflection, insofar as the former deals with mindfulness in the context of ongoing operations.

Mindfulness

In parallel to organizational reflection, the concept of mindfulness has been originally developed as an individual concept, with mindfulness being defined

as an individual learning process characterized by a heightened awareness of the specific circumstances in a given situation (for example Brown and Ryan, 2003; Chanowitz and Langer, 1981; Langer, 1989, 1997; Langer et al., 1978; cf. Langer and Moldoveanu, 2000). From these origins in psychology, it was transferred to the organizational level in the context of research into error-free, reliable performance in high-reliability organizations (Weick, 1987; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001, 2006; Weick et al., 1999). Drawing from different perspectives on mindfulness (Argote, 2006; Ashforth and Fried, 1988; Fiol and O'Connor, 2003; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Louis and Sutton, 1991; Rerup, 2005; Vogus and Welbourne, 2003; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001, 2006; Weick et al., 1999), we can define mindfulness as a state of mind or mode of practice that permits the questioning of expectations, knowledge and the adequacy of routines in complex and not fully predictable social, technological, and physical settings. It is important to understand that mindfulness does not exclude or oppose the idea of routines, but may in fact build upon routinized action (Rerup, 2005; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006). In this respect, it can be regarded as an *organizational* phenomenon that, while grounded in individual mindful behavior (Weick and Roberts, 1993), also builds upon organizational mechanisms. Such *collective* mindfulness is realized on two different levels: the level of direct interaction in dyads or small groups, and a more general level which comprises the rules and routines that help organize mindfulness.

Mindfulness in Interaction

Achieving collective mindfulness depends on communication. 'Heedful interrelation' (Weick and Roberts, 1993) may take place spontaneously, for example in reaction to an unexpected event. Often, however, it is supported by interactive routines, which agents carry out quite habitually. In mindful high-reliability organizations, as Weick et al. (1999: 87) put it, 'there is variation in activity, but there is stability in the cognitive processes that make sense of this activity'. These cognitive processes are cognitive routines of evaluation which are repeatedly applied in varying situational contexts to detect and cope with unexpected events or crises. The mutual enactment of these cognitive routines comprises, on the one hand, questioning one's own knowledge and actions and, on the other hand, questioning of knowledge and action of others (Brauner and Becker 2006; Wegner 1986; see also Weick and Roberts, 1993). Mindfulness in interaction is based on activities and routines that explicitly aim at providing opportunities to question expectations and behavioral routines and to evoke awareness of context in interaction. These routines may be termed 'interactive routines' because they are realized, or applied, in dyadic and/or small group interactions. This is exemplified by the kind of mutual checking and questioning practices that can be observed between nurses and doctors in anesthesiology departments (Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007; Jordan, 2008). The purpose of using checklists or standard operating procedures is to produce *specific* answers (for example, whether a medical device is ready for use), whereas interactive routines have an additional aim: to discover something unexpected. By implying *I might be wrong somehow*, interactive routines also further mindfulness and, in turn, reflection-in-action.

Routines that Organize Mindfulness

On a more general organizational level, mindfulness can be conceptualized with reference to organization-wide rules and routines that regulate interactive routines and individual mindfulness. Referring to Louis and Sutton (1991) who argue that mindfulness is triggered by some element of surprise, we may say that rules and routines that foster mindfulness (and reflection, respectively) somewhat paradoxically seek to institutionalize surprises and instability rather than stable structures. On the one hand, stable rules and routines build necessary resources for mindful action (e.g. as multiple-action reservoirs that can be creatively combined, see Bigley and Roberts, 2001; Levinthal and Rerup, 2006; Schulman, 1993; Zohar and Luria, 2003). On the other hand, these routines need to be complemented by routines that aim at introducing instability and ambiguity, making organizational members aware of diverse action repertoires and inducing mindful application of routines.

While this may in part be achieved indirectly by routines aiming at reflection-*on*-action, studies on mindfulness in high-reliability organizations focus specifically on organizational strategies that inject this openness and ambiguity into organizational structures and routines more directly. For example, ‘underspecified decision structures’ (Weick et al., 1999) may be instrumental in limiting the detrimental effects of fixed structures depending on established hierarchies in ambiguous and complex situations. Mindful organizations combine routine processes with pockets of underspecified decision-structures (Weick et al., 1999). They, therefore, engage in continuous efforts of structuring. Thus mindfulness on the organizational level means *organizing mindfulness*. Another strategy for institutionalizing surprises is for organizations to introduce routines that oblige agents to continuously adapt to new circumstances. For example, continuous job rotation and on-the-job training may encourage novices to learn to adapt to various and varying teams, tasks and environments (Jordan, 2008). By enhancing learning and/or adaptive behavior at work, these routines foster the very ability to learn (Lillrank, 2003: 227), much like Bateson’s (1972) ‘deutero learning’.

Reflection and Mindfulness: Towards an Integration of Perspectives

While there are apparent parallels between research on mindfulness and on reflection, there are also some notable differences. Both have been concerned with how organizations can promote mindfulness and reflection, respectively. In this context, mindfulness can be seen as a prerequisite to reflection-in-action: it denotes a state of mind or mode of practice that allows practitioners to reflect on their actions as they go along. Accordingly, research on mindfulness has mainly looked at routines and practices that realize or enable that kind of reflection-in-action. Among these are interactive routines of mindfulness and routines such as job rotation or heterogeneous team composition that institutionalize surprise, (Weick, 1987; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). They also include guidelines for the flexible structuring of practices, e.g. guidelines for the implementation and change of procedures (Bigley and Roberts, 2001; Schulman, 1993). Research on

reflection has focused more on strategies and measures to enhance reflection-on-action, such as training, coaching and project work practices (e.g. Elkjaer, 2001; Korthagen, 2005; Ramsey, 2005; Vince, 2002). To some extent, it has done this from an explicitly critical perspective, considering how power structures and conflicts of interest in organizations may hinder or constrain emancipatory reflection (Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2002).

Because both streams of literature have made important contributions to how reflection can be organized, we believe that there is a rationale for integrating their perspectives. The degree and quality of learning within an organization can be regarded as a function of the different forms of reflection and of their interactions. Hence, if we want to understand why some organizations seem to learn more effectively than others and why some initiatives to promote reflection and learning are more successful than others, it is important to look at the relative importance of different forms of reflection and on the ways they interact.

Such an empirical approach requires, first of all, conceptual differentiations. Based upon the existing literature on reflection and mindfulness, we have offered a systematization of the different concepts: individual reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action; collective reflection-in-action; interactive routines that help realize collective reflection-in-action (e.g. mutual questioning); organizational routines that enable or foster reflection-in-action (e.g. job rotation); and organizational routines that realize reflection-on-action (e.g. strategy review meetings).

An obvious first implication for empirical research concerns the relative importance of these different forms of reflection within organizations. Do organizations differ with respect to the relative importance of individual, interactive, or organizational routines for reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action? And if yes, may such differences be related to task characteristics, organizational culture, or other phenomena in the organizational context? Little is known about such cross-sectional differences and their drivers.

A second line of inquiry might concentrate on studying interactions between different forms of reflection. Are there any 'positive spillovers', for example, in the sense that routines of reflection-on-action also foster individual reflection-in-action? Or are there any negative interaction effects, such that the existence of 'distinct spaces' for reflection (i.e. specialized routines) reduces individuals' need to reflect in their daily practice? Similarly, 'routines of reflection' may themselves become so taken-for-granted or infested by political interests that they systematically fail to enhance *critical* reflection (Vince, 2002; see also Messner et al., 2008 with regard to organized criticism). These issues are important and examining them would help provide a 'big picture' on the quality of reflection and learning within an organization.

As we have argued in this essay, the conceptual differentiations and previous empirical findings from both research on organizational reflection and research on mindfulness could be fruitfully mobilized when addressing such empirical issues. The remaining task would then be to identify the research sites that promise interesting results.

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