



The paradox of action in management: understanding and issues

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EDITORIAL

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EDITORIAL

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THE PARADOX OF ACTION IN MANAGEMENT: UNDERSTANDING AND ISSUES

Action is at the heart of our concerns as researchers and practitioners. It sounds like an obvious truth, but in fact, it's not as simple as you'd like to think. It is not enough to talk about action so that action exists. We can even argue that action is the poor relation of theoretical and practical thinking in the managerial approaches of organizations. More particularly, the question we must ask ourselves is: How can action be approached?

The answer to this question conditions actually all the research activities, from epistemic posture to mobilized research methodology. Two scenarios are to be considered from the viewpoint of a continuum.

The first case refers to the most conventional attitude. It is clear that the relationship with action at the level of researchers and practitioners is most often implicit. This implicit aspect refers to a simplistic perspective of action: action is mainly seen as the consequence of decision. This way of perceiving action is not without impact on both research and practice. Such simplification of action corresponds in fact to a linear perception of the relation between decision and action. Action is therefore dependent on decision, or probably literally locked up within it. So let's talk first about the paradigm of decision. This paradigm fits within the tradition of classical natural sciences (Avenier, 2009) and is initially linked to three notions: reductionism, simplification, and linear causal explanation that appear as the foundations of classical natural sciences. The notion of rationality is also encountered through these three foundations. Thus, whatever the type of mobilized rationality (formal, substantial, theoretical, practical,...), decision is considered, implicitly or explicitly, as the starting point of action (Lorino, 2005). The linear conception of the decision-action relationship has conditioned research studies on

organizations to a large extent. This has been lately evident for example in entrepreneurship through the keen interest in research dealing with entrepreneurial intent where we try to explain how the entrepreneur goes from envy to action, through decision. Linearity is clearly and unchangeably viewed as the certainty that the future comes after the present. In fact, action is paradoxically described in the conventional approaches of researchers and practitioners. How can we understand that action is fundamental when reflections mainly fall within the paradigm of decision? The paradox of action also reaches the methodological aspects. In fact, from the perspective of classical natural sciences, the observer is an excluded third party so as not to bias the collected data. By adopting this principle of excluded third parties at the level of research on organizations, we recognize that it is not possible to accompany the actor in action for fear of biasing the obtained results. Thus, we will have to work either ahead of action to understand the motivation that will generate action, or below action, once it is over so that to see the outcome. In both cases, the link that a researcher will be able to make with action consists of the practitioner's declaratory statement. More precisely, the researcher never finds himself in connection with action. In this context, we can then argue that the results of conducted research seriously lack confrontation compared to action as such. From a certain angle, it is even surprising that the precautions adopted by the researcher to ensure high quality results are not affected by the lack of confrontation between discourse and action. To a certain extent, we have ultimately protected the discourse of practitioners by providing access to action and its explanation.

The second case leads us to raise the following question: "What do we know about action in the field of management?". The answer we can quickly make is that we know what we are able to see today, no more no less. We may think we are like a drunkard looking for his keys under the lamp because it is the only place where there is light. Is it possible to move beyond the frame? to see other things? to see otherwise? We believe the answer is clearly yes, but it nevertheless requires changing our pair of glasses, our attitude to knowledge. There are studies which invite us to do so. They are certainly unknown and/or scattered, this is why we must use them to move our knowledge towards the perspective of ecology of action. We believe, like others, that it is possible to develop knowledge about action through action. To answer the initial question: How can action be approached? it is possible to mobilize a whole segment of research on action, intervention, engineering, etc. If we take a closer look at these research studies, we can see that the problem lies mainly at the level of practice, where the researcher will invest in one way or another to find a solution to the given problem. In this research perspective, the researcher is in action with the practitioners. It is this privileged moment that should be underlined in our research. More specifically, we should partner with David (2000) in believing that intervention research is a research posture that encompasses all other postures. From this point of view, management research has a lot to learn from all human and social sciences. Even better, we should invite researchers to develop a form of scientific excursionism, as Martinet (2000) advocated at the time. From an epistemological point of view, our relationship to knowledge evolves. It is no longer a matter of positioning oneself in an ontological perspective, where the real is knowable, where it exists outside of

people, but rather in a phenomenological perspective where only the human experience is knowable. We thus move from a positivist epistemological posture to a constructivist epistemological posture. From this perspective, action should be considered as a human experience alongside other human experience. Pragmatically, we insist on the fact that to know action, it is necessary to approach the experience that people acquire of action. For this end, it is possible to approach experience at different levels: before, during and after action. It is not a question of limiting ourselves to knowing action only when it is done, but of contrasting it with the experience that a person makes out of it. Eventually, it is the human experience that must guide our approach to action and not the linearity between decision and action. A whole research avenue is therefore made available to us, prompting us to examine the way in which we must approach the managerial experience of the organization's actors.

For this first issue of *Projectique* 2018, we invited Professor Philippe Lorino to share with us his understanding of complex action. He particularly highlights the construction of management around two competing organizational paradigms: the organization perceived as an information processor and the organization perceived as a system of collective action. He invites us, among other things, to free ourselves from the first paradigm, from Taylorism to Simon's limited rationality, and move towards pragmatism. Philippe Lorino is one of those who, for several years now, have proposed a renewed perspective of management based on action. His work represents a very interesting research framework for all those who lost interest in traditional approaches to management.

Readers will find in this first issue of *Projectique* 2018 five articles dealing with various topics but always related to the complexity of organizations and the renewed insight to address them.

In this issue as well, we will find the contribution of Romain Pierronnet who uses Quality to suggest an innovative interpretation of the university. More specifically, he suggests considering quality assurance practices as a revealer of the transformations experienced by French universities leading to consider the university as entrepreneurial. In the following article, Cécile Fonrouge is interested in the development of these places which are fab labs in the organizational landscape in order to discuss the emergence or not of an alternative figure of entrepreneurship. She shows in particular that if the entrepreneur in the conventional sense does not correspond to people who frequent such places, it is no less true that a subversive dimension of entrepreneurship is highlighted. Jeanine Billet proposes in her article a longitudinal research method to address the entrepreneurial act of a family handicraft business. As we have previously argued (Schmitt, 2015), it is worth noting that a single case can be a source of local knowledge that should be addressed from a perspective of general knowledge. The innovative results suggested by the author make it possible to unlock interesting perspectives in entrepreneurship. Following up on an earlier presentation at the *Projectique* conference in Bidart in October 2017, Nicole Saliba-Chalhoub and Christophe Schmitt seek to extend the complex action through the lens of teaching. They raise thoughts on global studies. Highly mobilized in the Anglo-Saxon world, global studies are to be considered as a change of framework to approach teaching through

key concepts such as transversality, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. Finally, the contribution of Ruphin Ndjambou concludes the diversity of this issue by focusing on the impact of logistical performance on the large-scale distribution in Gabon. In a more conventional form, he suggests exploring an important topic from a scientific point of view in a new territorial context of such point of view, namely Gabon. The outcome consists of strategic dimensions to be taken into consideration.

Enjoy reading this first issue of *Projectique* 2018.

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