

By revisiting the classics in organizational theory, questions around the formality and informality in organizational theory and practice will be developed by Prof. Dr. Veronika Tacke (Bielefeld University) and discussed at a 4-day seminar jointly organized by the Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg and Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research, Stockholm University and Stockholm School of Economics.

For registered participants only. The number of participants is limited; PhD students and participants who register for all four occasions are prioritized (see Outline and preliminary schedule PDF). To announce your interest to participate at the seminar contact linda.soneryd@gu.se by 15 February. In your email it should be clear whether you are a PhD-student, affiliated department/University and if you can participate at all occasions or only some of them.

Prof. Dr. Veronika Tacke (Bielefeld University)

Rethinking formality and informality in organizational theory and practice

Outline for a PhD-seminar in Sweden (Stockholm: April, 2-3, Gothenburg: April 23-24)

The concepts of formality and its counter-concept, informality, which together once gave birth to the sociology of organizations, are neither much pivotal in current theoretical thinking on organizations, nor do they empirically still appear as relevant as they have been in organizational communication once. Even if they did not vanish effectively from organization theory as well as from day to day organizational operation, the distinction of formality and informality appears somehow 'old styled' today. In view of important developments after Weber's writing on bureaucracy and rationalization, the concept of formality (formal rationality) has been "unpopular" (Stinchcombe). This seems to be one of the reasons why sociologists tended to highlight formality's dysfunctions (Merton), sized the meaning of formal rules down to a resource in micro-political gaming (Crozier/Friedberg), or transformed formality into an institutional 'myth', decoupled from organizational day to day activities (Meyer). Correspondingly, sociologists more or less implicitly presumed the 'informal' being the alternate, the 'better' world, thus concentrating on these or other 'social' phenomena, including trust based networks (e.g. Powell), while at the same time leaving 'formality' to contingency approaches and management theory, where it became nothing but a 'variable' (e.g. Mintzberg).

The seminar will discuss these theoretical developments in the light of its biases and possible consequences. They may become visible in particular on the ground of a prominent but less-known theory of organization, which Niklas Luhmann developed in his earliest writings. In his book on “Functions and Consequences of Formal Organization” (1964, still in German only, to be introduced by lecture) he set up a comprehensive and vivid theory of the organization, which is based on the distinction between system and environment and at the same time focused on the difference between formal and informal expectations, however without falling either into the trap of the unpopularity of formality or the attractiveness of informality (it was decades later that Luhmann ‘transformed’ his original theory of organization into a much more abstract and much less vivid ‘autopoietic’ organization theory that refers to self-referential decision making only).

Processing his own professional and empirical experience from administrative organizations, Luhmann’s early book is his most colorful sociological description of organizations (comprehensively reflecting the theoretical state of the art at that time). At the same time it has been the starting point of his rethinking and rewriting of general sociological theory (critically reformulating Weber and Parsons). Having started as a lawyer by profession, the idea of formality developed here in view of function and consequences, this early book apparently also reflects formality in positive law. This is to say: Like in law, formal rules in organizations are argued to be valid only under certain conditions, which are binding, but contingent, they fulfill their basic function (procuring ‘expectational certainties’) on the basis of social, factual and timely dimensions of their generalization (so they are valid for all members, even those not co-present in a situation; they are specifiable nevertheless for different tasks and particular situations, and they do not change simply by deviation and evolution – but may be changed by way of formal decision). The particular and restricted function of formal structures already implies that the social system, in which they are valid, also includes “other” expectations. This is not only to say that “elementary” expectations do always “survive” or come up even under condition of formalization. Rather, the particular function of formalization – to stabilize a system of expectations and adapt it to environmental complexities – makes informality an indispensable and unavoidable part of the system’s structure. Even “feasible illegality” can be an informal solution within the system’s coping with environments.

Regarding the relevance of the distinction of formality and informality, the suspicion underlying the seminar is that organization theory has “lost” one of its powerful instruments of understanding and describing organizations. This appears in particular true in view of current organizational changes, including those that seem to depart most from classic ideas of formal organization. ‘New’ organizational forms and even the ‘network’ revolution seem to make the old-styled distinction of formality/informality dispensable today – but maybe only at first sight.

It might prove that the consequences of some more current organizational developments get out of sight when dropping classic tools and turning to more popular theories, arguments and concepts of organization.

It might be asked, moreover, whether there is some kind of 'new' formality, expressed in a variety of technologies of accounting and corresponding techniques of inspection. From the point of view of a quite ambitious concept of formality, the seminar may discuss not only 'what's really new' but, if so, which consequences a 'new' formality can be expected to have. What does it mean in view of an 'old' formality and the particular functions it was expected to fulfill as well as the related forms of informality? And is there perhaps also a 'new informality'?

Finally it might also be discussed whether sociology by denoting formality's unpopularity has contributed not only to the disappearance of formality from organization theory but indirectly to its vanishing from organizational practice too.

Preliminary programme

April 2nd, 11:00 – 18:00 (Stockholm)

April 3rd, 10:00 – 17:00 (Stockholm)

April 23rd, 11:00 – 18:00 (Gothenburg)

April 24th, 10:00 – 17:00 (Gothenburg)