Motivation

Innovation has for several decades been recognised as a critical asset for societal, organisational and economic growth (Arad et al., 1997; Adams et al., 2006); but the processes through which innovation emerges are still discussed from a variety of different perspectives, that do not necessarily align. A wide range of innovation literature argues for linear processes that unfold through sequential stages of development (Cooper, 1990; Crawford, 1991; Burns and Stalker, 1961), that can be managed (Goffin and Mitchell, 2005; Snyder and Duarte, 2003). Such arguments are often based on quantitative innovation studies that seek to define tendencies and arrive at the causes of them (Yin, 2003), by statistically analysing data, in order to compare variables. In doing so, there is a need to standardise results through definite labels (Huberman and Miles, 2002). The results of quantitative studies are therefore commonly presented in support of making normative recommendations, which leads to an expectation that innovation processes can be generically described; thereby supporting the argument that they emerge in a linear form and can be controlled towards envisioned goals, regardless of the context in which we aim for growth and development.

Viewing innovation as a linear process presents some challenges. One is that researchers writing about innovation tend to discuss the ideal ways public and private organisations should innovate, rather than how they actually do this in practice (Fonseca, 2002). And although we find increasing discussions arguing for the non-linearity of innovation processes (Van de Ven et al., 1999; Fonseca, 2002), there is a distinct lack of studies highlighting the everyday activities of organisations from a micro-level perspective (Chanal, 2004), because even researchers who conduct empirical investigations have had limited involvement in innovation processes as they continuously unfold in practice (Crossan and Apaydin, 2010; Anderson et al., 2014). The prevailing argument in innovation theory is, thus, that innovation emerges through well-planned steps that organizational managers can plan for and lead towards strategic success. I argue that this is not helpful when we take offset in the Danish society, where we attempt to co-create across sectors and organisations, which each has particular agendas, interests and understandings of development and growth.

I argue that the predominant perspective does not take into consideration the complex, social and context-dependent factors of innovation processes. I assert that such perspectives tend to neglect that the emergence of innovation is a result of conscious and unconscious interactions between stakeholders each attending to own agendas, interests and intentions in carrying out their everyday work. Together they form relations that are influenced by power, identity, and contradicting purposes and KPI's. Given such a foundation, I argue that innovation processes cannot be detached from everyday local stakeholder interactions that form and are formed by the larger organisational and societal ambitions. This effectively challenges the notion that innovation processes can be 'managed' through designated courses of action. Based on this motivation to better understand innovation processes from a micro-level perspective, my dissertation explores the research question: How does participatory innovation, perceived as complex responsive processes of human relating, emerge through everyday organisational life?

Structure and Methods

This dissertation consists of six main chapters (Introduction, Theoretical Framework, Methodological Grounding, Paper Synthesis, Discussion, Conclusions), four scientific journal papers that are currently accepted with revision, and one self-authored book chapter in the Routledge International Handbook of Organizational Autoethnography, which will be published in May 2020.

In my PhD research I have taken a qualitative, ethnographic approach to study innovation processes within a larger European manufacturing company, particularly in a cross-organisational department developing technology components. I followed an abductive process of inquiry, characterised by responsiveness to ongoing field experiences within the organisation. Through different forms of ethnographic inquiry, I navigated the complexity of everyday organisational life, which has resulted in a continuous reconstruction of my understanding of the organisation.

I take such an approach in order to mobilise empirical insights in real time and to develop a creative balance between my own research assumptions and the informants' situated understanding of their own innovation practices (Bansal et al., 2018). Basing my study on such contextual embeddedness offers new ways of understanding innovation processes through rich context-sensitive insights (Antonakis, 2017).

In a process of making sense of the empirical insights, which seemed to emphasise the company's innovation processes from a non-linear, social, political and complex perspective, I kept finding myself confronted by informal stories that emerged in the interactions between the stakeholders at different organisational levels. These informal conversations emerging in the "shadow" prompted me to search for ways to explain innovation processes in their organic, human-centred flow. This led me to the concept of complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey et al., 2000; Fonseca, 2002), which also challenges the concept that organisational processes can be objectively and generically described (Stacey et al., 2000; Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001; Larsen and Bogers, 2014).

Through my scientific publications, I present inquiries into multi-stakeholder innovation by drawing parallels between organisational innovation processes and the concept of complex responsive processes. The publications each explore the non-linearity of innovation; together, they nuance established innovation research by suggesting that processes of innovation cannot be separated from other organisational activities and that complex stakeholder dynamics inevitable affect the emergence of innovation.

Theoretical implications

In my research, viewing the empirical encounters through the lens of complex responsive processes raises the question of whether there might be other, more helpful, ways to discuss the emergence of innovation processes, than reinforcing the impression that they can be prescribed and executed in sequential stages based on organizational managers' visions for the future. The main concern is to understand the complexity within which organisational stakeholders navigate. I prompt us to

challenge systemic thinking in innovation research, by acknowledging the social and improvised movements through which processes of innovation emerge. Significantly different from traditional management theory, which describes organisations as controlled systems, complexity theory acknowledges that organisations and their strategies can only be understood through emerging patterns that relate to what people do and how they influence and are influenced by others. For that reason, Innovation, from a complex responsive process perspective, emerges as new meaning without necessarily being dependent on the modelling of frameworks, that are intended to 'manage' the process of innovation. These frameworks become ways to communicate intentions, rather than ways to bring predictability to an otherwise uncertain process.

Practical implications

On a practical level it is central to discuss what organisational stakeholders actually do in dealing with innovation processes, instead of what they 'should be' doing. In accepting that the organisational and societal reality emerges from complex, local interactions between people, I come to challenge the conception that it can be designed in particular ways, and that stakeholders are able to control those. My research implies, that rather than providing public and private organisations with static models that can be directly implemented in a linear form, we need to enable stakeholders to understand the unpredictable nature of innovation and support them in navigating the uncertain and unknown, while they also attempt to shape the directions the development. This entails moving beyond the conception of always acting rationally based on controlled plans and processes. Innovation managers should, thus, be ready to stay with the uncertainty, despite anxiety provoked by challenges to their feeling of control; this involves overriding the natural urge to finalise things and get going (Stacey, 2007). Lastly, they will be required to think of themselves as taking part in the patterns/processes that emerge, by remaining sensitive to emerging themes; openly address these; and be honest in articulating that, while they cannot predict the development of those themes, they play an important role in shaping them through the recognition of others.

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