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Uncertainty – An event-based approach

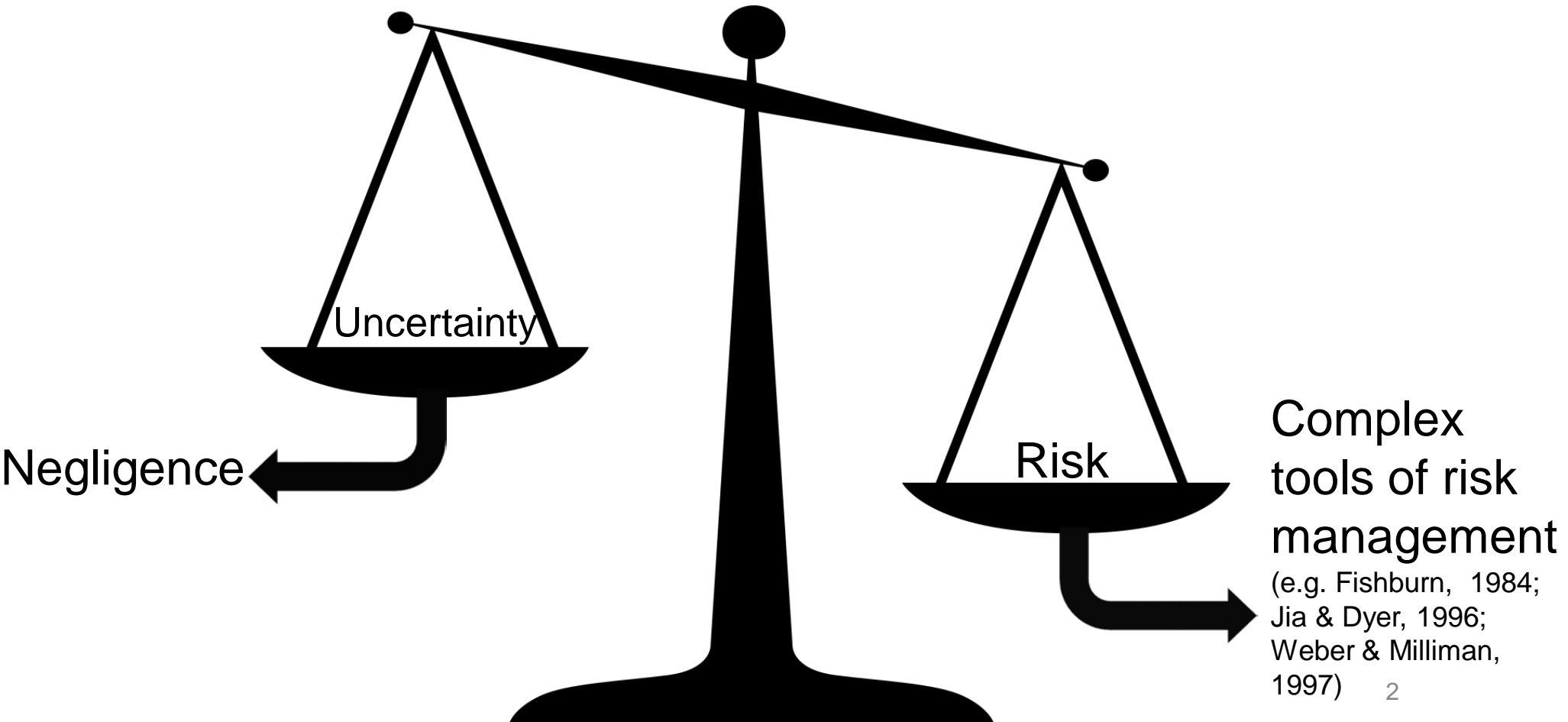
Presentation at the 5th Meeting of the Research Network “Field-Configuring Events: Time, Space and Relations“

Uncertainty in the academic discourse

Knight (1921): Risk vs. Uncertainty

→ Imbalance

→ Due to calculability: preference for risk



Uncertainty in the academic discourse

Conceptualizing Uncertainty

Dominant thought:

Uncertainty as a specific “state of the world“

(Faulkner, Feduzi & Runde, 2014)

- World as fixed phenomenon with risky and uncertain situations
- Uncertainty as informational deficits (e.g. Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Milliken, 1987)
- Decision theory: Uncertain situations → no information/probabilities for different environmental states > decision rules as managing tools

→ Static conception: uncertainty **as a given** (objective or subjective) circumstance of life

Uncertainty in the academic discourse

Revision needed

Too narrow a conception, neglecting

- genesis
- processes of becoming and change
- events
- surprises

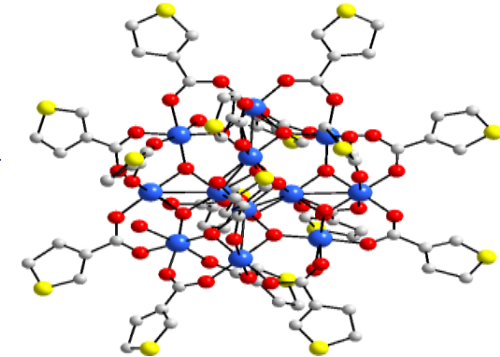
➤ **In search of a dynamic conception!**

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

Complexity as point of departure (Luhmann, 1995, 2009)



Reduction



- Organizations have to reduce complexity to become able to act; Reduction by selection on the basis of self-referential maps
 - Translated into a bundle of expectations
 - Consequence: Complexity differential between inside and outside
- **Collective Sensemaking as underlying process** (Weick, 1995, Maitlis & Christianson 2014)

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

A processual view

- Environment remains complex
- Capricious developments among connective elements
- Inevitable selectivity brings about discrepancies between expectations and real-time events (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011; Cunha et al., 2006)
- Expectations run danger of getting disappointed (Luhmann 1995)
- Flow of unexpected events (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007) , discontinuities and surprises
- Adaptive selection, ongoing sensemaking > new disappointments

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

Conclusion

- Uncertainty resulting from complexity reduction
 - Two basic implications
 - (1) Enacted uncertainty. Uncertainty no longer a given circumstance but rather a result of foregoing activities
 - (2) Dynamics: Ongoing process of sensemaking and disappointments
- Eventbased conception of uncertainty

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

Coping with (event based) uncertainty

- No final problem solving > ongoing coping practices

Evidence from previous studies

- HRO practices
 - Relying on experts / suspending hierarchy
 - Mindfulness
 - Obsession with failure
- Crisis management
 - Prioritizing
 - Drop your tools
 - Urgency routines
 - Improvisation

> Underdeveloped: organizing

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

Organizing > Temporary organizational patterns

Evidence from previous studies

- Dynamic delegation of leadership (Klein et al., 2006)
- Fast-response teams (Faraj & Xiao, 2006)

New perspectives (ICU study)

- Temporary problem solving arenas
- Oscillating leadership

Reconceptualizing uncertainty dynamically

Organizing > Temporary organizational patterns

- Coping practices correspond with event based uncertainty conception
- Problem solving practices focus on:
 - Immediate response patterns.
 - Primacy of Ad-hoc reactions.
 - Adaptive practices (sense-discrediting).
 - Spontaneous teaming up, etc.

Total adaptability?

- Does an event based uncertainty perspective imply relentless organizational adaptation?
 - > Problem: Dissolving organizations
- A differentiated perspective is needed.
 - There is no organization without stability (borders)
 - Interplay of adaptability/learning and stability
 - Major Point: Changing or counterfactual stabilization of expectations (Schreyögg & Sydow 2010)

Thank you!

Temporary problem solving arenas

- Forming around unexpected events
- Variation in size, texture, time of existence
- Fixed core and fluctuating periphery
- Formation according to “whatever works“ principle
 - Excessively playing/utilizing the hierarchy
 - Drawing on personal contacts
 - Drawing on networks
 - Cross linking (lateral) groups
- Gathering, dissolving, regathering in accordance with UE’s needs

Oscillating leadership

- Interplay between formal leaders and informal, arena attributed leaders
- Leadership migrates between participants in accordance with attribution
- Leadership attributed according to various perceived features helpful to UE (expertise, experience, power/formal weight etc.)
- Informal leaders dependent on formality (no legal means to enforce decisions)
 - Setting decisions into action
 - Taking over responsibility
- Formal leaders also dependent on informal leaders' good will (usually no legal means to enforce participation)

Looking for an epistemological pathway

Uncertainty research so far

Theoretical approach to uncertainty	Research problems
Decision theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uncertainty as state of the world: Unexpected events excluded by definition• Artificial conditions
Psychology/neurology (experimental settings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Artificial conditions• Short-term experiments• Non-processual perspective
HRO research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Phenomenon driven• Prevention oriented• No clear unit of analysis• Theoretical generalizability?
Rare events research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ex post reconstruction (interpretatively overlaid)• Exceptional events (theoretical generalizability?)• No sensemaking in situ

➔ No sufficient entry for researching unexpected events

Looking for an epistemological
pathway

Instead: Event based conception of uncertainty

- Practice-based approach to uncertainty as unexpected events
- Practices as intertwinement of thinking & acting (Orlikowski, 2000, 2002) allow for studying sensemaking as it unfolds in unexpected events
- Practices as sensemaking themselves (Barnes, 2001; Orlikowski, 2002)
- Allowing for researching regular and not exceptional unexpected events

Looking for an epistemological pathway

Advantages of the practice perspective

Theoretical approach to uncertainty	Superiority of practice lense (problem solution)
Decision theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Patterns to deal with unexpected events (not risk)
Psychology/neurology (experimental settings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Processual• Empirical, non-artificial encounter
HRO research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Specific unit of analysis• Reaction patterns (no prevention)
Rare events research	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In situ investigation (processual)• Repetitive, established patterns

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