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***Studying the Processes of Change in Organisations: Comparative
Longitudinal Studies and the Construction of Theory from Narratives***

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Abstract

The focus of the paper is on the methodological problems of developing theory that arise when researchers conduct the study of organisational process and change through 'punctuated longitudinal case study research'. The paper proposes a strategy for addressing methodological issues connected with the development of narrative accounts as part of the study and theorising of process. We argue that the collection of process materials in the form of both synchronic and diachronic data enables researchers to develop a temporally rich database that allows them to construct plausible accounts, addressing the issue of dependence on respondents' historical recollections. We extend Polkinghorne's concepts of 'analysis of narratives' and 'narrative analysis', to the study of organisations and demonstrate how researchers can use these approaches to theorise from their materials. The strategy is based upon the authors' experience of conducting comparative, longitudinal studies but can be adapted for cross-national studies of organisations.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to respond to the call to develop methodological strategies that address the challenge of working with and theorising from process materials in order to understand how and why organisations change, innovate, adapt or indeed fail (Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). The pressures of globalisation and technological change have led to an increase in interest among scholars in the usefulness of process theory to understand dynamic phenomena such as processes of learning, innovation, and change in organisations (Langley, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia 2002; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

In the context of International Business (IB), interest in cross-national case studies of organisations has increased in response to the internationalising activities of firms e.g. the rapid proliferation of international joint ventures (Yan, 1998, p.773) as organisational forms and their significance as internationalising strategies (Guillén, 2003; Parkhe, 1996; Si and Bruton, 1999).

However, for IB research to progress, it is important that researchers assess the appropriateness and rigour of the methods that they use to investigate and theorise about management and organisations (Scandura & Williams, 2000) and acknowledge how method and theory shape and influence each other. Researchers who are interested in studying process face a number of particular methodological challenges in developing theory from the ground up. They must try to develop methods that can capture the nature of temporal dynamics and the rich patterns of process and change that occur over time in organisations. The methods must also be of sufficient rigour that they enable researchers to develop an understanding of the significance of events and the generative mechanisms, create valid explanatory knowledge (Tsoukas, 1989) and theorise about the role of key actors in devising, enacting and institutionalising new practices and processes (Lawrence, Winn & Jennings, 2001).

The focus of the paper is on the methodological problems of developing theory that arise when researchers, who are not anthropologists or ethnographers, conduct the study of organisational process and change through 'punctuated

longitudinal case study research' i.e. when the research design takes the form of sustained focus on, but infrequent field visits to, organisational settings over an extended period (Burawoy, 2003; Foster, Scudder, Colson & Kemper, 1979). The contribution of the paper is a strategy for addressing the methodological issues connected with first: the development of narrative accounts as part of the study of and theorising of process and second: the problem of reliance on respondent retrospection in case study research. We argue that the collection of process materials in the form of both synchronic and diachronic data (Barley, 1990) enables researchers to develop a temporally rich database that allows them to construct plausible first and second order accounts of the unfolding of a particular event or implementation of a practice both across and within organisations, explicitly recognising and addressing the issue of dependence on respondents' historical recollections. We adapt and extend Polkinghorne's concepts of 'analysis of narratives' and 'narrative analysis', to the study of researching organisations, not only to more clearly understand the methodological process whereby researchers construct narrative accounts but also to demonstrate how researchers can use these approaches to theorise from their process data. The strategy is based upon the authors' experience of conducting a comparative, longitudinal study but can be adapted by IB scholars for cross-national case studies of organisations.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the relevant methodological literature, concentrating specifically on the relationship between

process, time, longitudinal studies and narratives and the challenges that face researchers in capturing and theorising about process. This is followed by a description of the research project that forms the basis for the paper. We then move onto to develop the narrative framework for analysing and theorising from the research materials, there is then a section that considers the methodological limitations of using this approach. The concluding discussion summarises the advantages of the proposed approach and highlights key implications for conducting process-oriented longitudinal research for IB.

Capturing process: longitudinal field studies and narratives

Process research can involve examining phenomena such as feelings, relationships and thoughts but the primary aim is to develop an understanding of how events have unfolded over time and why they have evolved in a particular way. Process data are by their nature 'messy' and their fluid character means that making sense of them poses a constant challenge for the researcher (Langley, 1999). Process data flow through organisational structures, processes and time, affecting how they may be observed and recorded and how the resulting data may be analysed (Langley, 1999; Pettigrew, 1990). In addition, the qualitative process data that a researcher is able to capture are also often incomplete in nature, consisting of fragments told from different points of view and often collected after the events have taken place (Boje 1991; Brown, 1998; Golden, 1992).

In order to examine process in organisations more directly, scholars have called for more longitudinal studies of organisations (Eisenhardt, 1989; Mintzberg, 1979; Pettigrew, 1990; O'Connor, Rice, Peters & Veryzer, 2003; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). However, longitudinal studies remain very rare in the field of organisation studies (O'Connor et al., 2003), especially comparative cross-national studies (Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron, 2001). Investigating processes of change and time in organisations pose particular problems for researchers (cf. Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence & Tushman, 2001; Glick, Huber, Miller, Doty & Sutcliffe, 1990). As Butler (1995, p. 925) notes, time is fundamental yet relatively neglected variable in organisational analysis. Time in organisations exists with dual aspects, as chronology and as social construction; and therefore events and processes have to be studied within the context of the particular social system (George & Jones, 2000; Pettigrew, 1990; Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron, 2001). Also, theoretically sound studies of processes of change need to be based on an understanding of change within a context of relative organisational stability (Pettigrew, 1990; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990) so the antecedents and outcomes of a change have to be investigated as well as the temporal dynamics and process of how the change emerged. However, if the unit of analysis is a continuous process in context rather than a change episode or event then it can be a problem to discern when a change process actually begins or ends (Pettigrew, 1990). The temporal embeddedness of events varies according to duration, intensity and relevance so the real consequences of an event may take

time to emerge and be understood (Glick et al., 1990; Langley, 1999; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002; Staudenmayer, Tyre & Perlow, 2002). The existence of different organisational time cycles can also act to influence group and individual time cycles in other parts of the organisation in various subtle and complex ways the significance of which may not be apparent to the researcher (Ancona & Chong, 1996; Goodman, 2000).

Ethnography offers one way of examining the internal dynamic of unfolding organisational process, but it is not without problem. Even when researchers are present in the organisation, it is difficult to study the subjective significance of the social rhythms, rites, and politics that underlay the unfolding events of organisational process. The subjective interpretation of the respondents involved and the time point of the observation affects the researcher's judgment about a change. Prolonged immersion in the field also raises its own challenges in respect of studying process, for example, maintenance of political neutrality in the field (Adler & Adler, 1987; Barley, 1990; Mitchell, 1993) and understanding organisational reference groups (Lawrence, 2006). Ethnographic studies usually offer direct processual insight for only a relatively short period in a localised organisational position, so that they operate within limited contextual, spatial and temporal horizons. Moreover, ethnographic research can also be guided as much by drift as design so assuming such a methodological stance is actually no guarantee of 'success', no matter how long the one stays in the field (Van Maanen, 1979).

Other factors also act to deter researchers from conducting longitudinal studies, for example, the actual conduct of process research is also often constrained by the institutional realities of academic life. Even though qualitative research has its methodological attractions (Miles, 1979), the practical problems of coordination, time commitment, expense and publication have discouraged many academics from pursuing comparative longitudinal qualitative research projects (e.g. Adler, 1983; Ancona et al., 2001; Birkinshaw, 2004; Boyacigiller and Adler, 1991; Marschan-Piekkari & Welch, 2004). Since many researchers are full-time academics with other commitments, they cannot usually spend the sustained period immersed in direct observation usually regarded as the *sine qua non* of the ethnographic approach (Barley, 1990; Boje, 1991; Foster et al., 1979; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Reeves Sanday, 1979; Van Maanen, 1979). Organisational field studies are therefore often necessarily 'studies of convenience and opportunity', designed to minimise their impact on teaching, resources and goodwill (Ancona et al., 2001, p. 647). Thus, many organisational researchers are inhibited from the study of change and process (Ancona et al., 2001; O'Connor et al., 2003), with one of two consequences. Either they succumb to normative pressures to undertake multivariate studies that minimise the temporal dimension of process (Mohr, 1982) and subsequently under-theorise research constructs for studying change (Abbott, 1990; Mitchell & James 2001); or, if they are able to develop such studies, it is often in the form of a longitudinal study based on intermittent visits to research sites.

As discussed above, using a 'temporal lens' is difficult enough when the researcher is present in the field (Ancona et al., 2001, p. 647) but if the researchers are often absent when important changes occur then it is an even greater methodological challenge to gather consistent accounts on processes of change that have happened. (Glick et al., 1990, p. 301). The realities of the methodological and practical problems discussed above illustrate some of the reasons why longitudinal studies, especially those that have a comparative and/or cross-national dimension, are so rare in IB studies. If this is the case, then the challenge is to develop a research design that can make a contribution to maximising the theoretical insights that are possible within the reality of the methodological constraints identified above and aim to produce theories of process that have more methodological rigour. In the next part of the paper, we briefly review the literature on the narratives and process research.

Narratives and process research

Conducting intensive fieldwork on process in organisations, whether longitudinal and/or comparative in nature, requires researchers to organise and make sense of complex and fragmentary data before they can start to theorise about process. Many qualitative researchers are therefore attracted to constructing narrative accounts to make sense of their 'raw' process materials, which consist largely of respondents' stories of events, actions and choices (Langley, 1999).

The term 'narrative' has been used in a variety of ways. It can describe field notes or interview data in the form of written descriptions, a data organisation device, a body of data that has been collected for analysis and interrogation of themes or the form of the final research report (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers working in the ethnographic tradition have long used narrative as a descriptive device, but, in recent years, other scholars have become interested in exploring narrative as a particular type of discourse: the story form. As narrative constructs, stories contain a chronology of events, reports of remembered events, and the human responses to those events. Narratives maintain the complexity of human action; they connect situation, choice and motivation with chance happenings and are arranged by the author/respondent/speaker into a meaningful temporal sequence (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives that are first-order accounts derived from interviews will have, at least in the mind of the respondent, their own internal logic or 'plot', because people 'frame events into larger structures of meaning which provide an interpretive context' (Bruner, 1990, p. 64). However, these accounts are powerful because they are not just representations of past events; they also include an evaluation of them, conveying the respondent's moral attitude towards the events and an assessment of the actions and relevance of the protagonists in the story (Linde, 2001, p. 162-163).

The process of sensemaking, whereby a respondent constructs stories for the interviewer about particular events or choices, comprises a combination of recollection based on memory, and the application of retrospective rationality through which the respondent's current position and views affect the post-hoc interpretation of her/his past decisions and actions (Weick, 1995). However, the emergent nature of this social process can lead to problems with accuracy, because retrospective accounts that involve the attribution of intentions and motives can be particularly prone to cognitive biases, faulty memory and political rationalisation (Golden, 1992; Miles, 1979). The process of sensemaking is also affected by the societal, contextual, and interpersonal elements of the interview situation itself because the interview is the product of relation and interaction. The final construction is as much a product of this complex social dynamic as it is the product of accurate replies and accounts (Alvesson, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 647).

For many organisational researchers, narratives are not just types of explanation but are the most appropriate form for representing the temporal process of actions and events in organisations (Brown, 1998; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Van Maanen, 1988). As narratives embody sequence and time, they are naturally suited to the development of process theory, encoding different kinds of data that are relevant to a wide range of organisational phenomena. Moreover, process explanations that draw on narrative data remain particularly close to the phenomena they purport to explain (Pentland, 1999). As Pentland (1999, p. 716)

notes, narratives not only provide researchers with a wealth of materials but they are also a reflection of shared meanings in organisations and ways of talking about organisations (Weick, 1979). For example, an important part of socialisation for new organisational members is the process of learning how to tell stories about the organisation, thus demonstrating their successful acquisition of tacit knowledge and organisational values (Linde, 2001, p. 162-163). Narratives reveal organisational processes and, at the same time shape them, because they are constitutive of the social world (Brown, 1995). For the researcher, the very process of using an explicitly narrative approach is a constant reminder of the importance of and necessity for self-reflexivity in organising materials and theorising about organisational life (Alvesson, 2003, Chia, 1996; Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004).

The research project

The research project that forms the empirical source for discussion in this paper is a comparative longitudinal study of four former state-owned enterprises in the (now) Czech Republic that started in 1992. The four enterprises are all located in the mechanical engineering industry, and extensive details of the enterprises can be found elsewhere (e.g. Clark and Soulsby, 1995; Soulsby and Clark, 1996; Clark and Soulsby, 1996). Vols and Jesenické Strojírny are large heavy engineering enterprises, located respectively in the small town of Volna and the medium-size town of Jesenice. They manufacture and supply industrial machinery on a one-off

scale and as part of turnkey construction projects. Their industrial partners were traditionally and in large proportion in the former Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) countries, and various third world client states. The third enterprise, Montáže Jesenice, which was a part of Jesenické Strojírny until 1989, assembles heavy plant on construction sites. Agstroj, the fourth enterprise, is involved in the manufacture of agricultural machinery. Unlike the others, its main clients used to be outside the CMEA region. Its economic success under the previous regime led to major state investments in its productive capacity in the 1980s, and on its main production site in the large city of Stromesto. Since the project started each of the companies have experienced varying degrees of success as the managers have sought to survive the forces of globalisation and adjust to the new requirements of a western-style market economy. Slovak companies have now acquired Vols and Agstroj and a German company has acquired Jesenické Strojírny, only Montáže Jesenice remains in Czech ownership. As a consequence, our research project now encompasses a cross-national perspective as we are studying the effects of Slovak and German management styles on the companies.

The original purpose of the research study was to identify and explain the changes in organisation structure and management practices since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Conducting case study research in a transforming society offered a rare and exciting opportunity to study rapid organisational change under conditions of societal transience. Our goal was to build up fine-grained, qualitatively rich cases studies of the enterprises (Geertz, 1973) in order to trace

the key events in the change processes and to understand the role of top and senior management in the institutionalisation of new structures and practices (Hambrick, 1981). This intensive approach reflected our research interests and preferences and shaped our methodology, in that the search for depth restricted the number of enterprises we could examine (Glick et al., 1990; Leonard-Barton, 1990; McPhee, 1990; Monge, 1990). Over the course of the project, we have jointly shared the task of managing the project and collaborated in data collection, interpretation, writing and dissemination, developing a shared conceptual language (O'Connor et al., 2003).

The project took the form of a 'punctuated longitudinal case study' and began with an initial field visit to each enterprise, these were conducted in 1992 (two), 1993 and 1994. The primary research method for developing the case studies was semi-structured interviews (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003), supplemented with daily informal field notes and meetings and the recording of emergent themes and impressions. We also gathered extensive secondary materials about each of the organisations in the form of organisation charts, annual company reports, videos, photographs, leaflets, photographs, and other organisational artifacts. Following the initial two weeks of intensive fieldwork, the research process continued through a programme of re-visits and interviews that have occurred at least every two years to update the field materials. Over the course of the study, over two hundred directors and managers have been interviewed, many of whom have been re-interviewed on later occasions. After the first field visit in 1992, the research strategy evolved to incorporate the study of the historical contexts of the

enterprises as well as their internal characteristics. It became evident that the social and economic embeddedness of enterprises within their communities and their pre-1989 cultural and welfare roles still had very important resonances for managers, influencing managerial decisions (e.g. Clark and Soulsby, 1998). In order to understand the community context and influence, we widened the pool of interviewees to include representatives of the local authority and senior managers of other enterprises.

Theorising process and narrative choices: analysis of narratives and construction of narratives

The particular contribution of this paper is a strategy for addressing two problems of process research: developing and theorising from narratives and the accuracy of retrospective accounts. We argue that the collection of qualitative materials in the form of both synchronic and diachronic data as part of each field visit is an essential part of the research strategy. It provides the basis for the construction of narratives and for the possibility for tracing the development and accuracy of respondents' retrospective accounts. In the case of our research, this visit-revisit pattern, punctuated by long periods of absence from the field, allows narratives to be gathered from different parts of the organisation at different times during the process of change. In particular, the process captures two types of information: the diachronic data reflects the respondents' theorised understanding of events and actions linked through time; the synchronic data provides the respondents'

account of the current situation. By collecting data that are both diachronic and synchronic, it is possible to address methodological issues of reliability and validity through the reduction of retrospective inaccuracy and to focus on the emergent qualities of process within a longitudinal context of known change. The figure below illustrates the iterative nature of the process of collection of materials at each stage of the field visits.

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The development of a database consisting of both synchronic and diachronic materials (Barley, 1990) gives the researcher a choice of narrative options for analysing and theorising from the data. In temporal terms, synchronic data do not have a historical dimension, but are situated in a particular time with no direct sense of development or emergence. The researcher collects data from the respondents through interview questions about the respondents' feelings or views about a current situation e.g. some change in their role or position in the organisation, or a change in the organisation. In contrast, diachronic data contain temporal, information about the sequence of events, actions and the subsequent effects of actions, for example, the respondents' career choices or key events in their lives. The interviewer takes a narrative approach and collects data in the form of 'storied narratives' for example, about the respondents themselves, influential figures from the past or present, stories about organisational events.

As such, the narrative approach differs from other types of qualitative research that collect synchronic data from respondents (Polkinghorne 1995).

Interrogating the materials: narrative construction and narrative analysis

In this paper, we adapt and extend Polkinghorne's (1995) concepts of '*narrative analysis*' and '*analysis of narrative*' and which we re-term as '*narrative construction*' and '*narrative analysis*'. Building on the process of collecting diachronic and synchronic data (Barley, 1990), we use them as narrative mechanisms to address problems of tracing process, developing theory and the accuracy of retrospective accounts.

The 'narrative construction' approach is based upon the collection of events and happenings, the elements of which are then organised and synthesised into an explanatory story or case study. The researcher develops a plot in which the data comprehensively and comprehensibly accounts for an unfolding process that culminates in a denouement (Polkinghorne, 1995), for example, the strategic decision to divisionalise an organisational structure. Using narrative reasoning, the theoretical outcome is a first order story or case study that provides a reasoned and plausible explanation of how purpose, decisions, events and chance are connected through time in an organisation (Pentland, 1999; Van Maanen, 1979). This case study can then be compared and contrasted with other

organisations in the study and second order meta-narrative account can be constructed by the researcher.

‘Narrative analysis’ is a descriptive narrative approach (Polkinghorne, 1988), where the researcher interrogates the diachronic data collected in the form of the storied narratives and documents from respondents. The researcher uses a paradigmatic mode of analysis (Bruner, 1986) to look for common themes or conceptual manifestations across the stories. The analysis results in descriptions of themes and their relationships that hold across the stories or taxonomies of stories, characters, or settings, with the concepts being either inductively developed from the data or concepts from existing theory being applied to the data to see whether instances can be found (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13). In comparative and/or longitudinal studies, these descriptions, in turn, can also be organised into a second order meta-narrative account by the researcher.

Through the iterative process of collecting both diachronic and synchronic data and other materials as part of every field visit an extensive and complex archive of real-time and historical materials, including the original interviews, field notes, internal and external documents, reflexive notes and case studies is created. Researchers can then utilise either or both narrative options to theorise patterns of process both within and across the organisations. By drawing on these two narrative-analytical methods, researchers can move from the surface structure of first-order empirical data to a deep structure of theory. It is possible to develop a

single, nuanced account from the empirical noise of multiple, partial, subjective, and even conflicting respondent accounts, 'discovering' an underlying pattern of events and its 'generative mechanisms' (Pentland, 1999; Tsoukas, 1989). The construction of such overarching narratives serves to develop levels of analytic generalisation (Yin, 2003) and theoretical plausibility (Weick, 1989), thereby increasing methodological confidence in theorising organisational process (Brown, 1998; Pentland, 1999). Using this approach the process of inductive theorising is traceable to a stream of first-order diachronic narrative accounts and synchronic data from the respondents. The following examples from our research study demonstrate how useful this approach is for conducting case study research. The rich longitudinal quality of the field materials allowed us to explore the pre-1989 historical antecedents of processes of decentralisation and divisionalisation within the organisations in the 1990s. In particular, we were able to consider the role of economic, institutional and strategic choice factors in explaining why managers were so attracted to adoption of the multi-divisional form (Clark & Soulsby, 1999a). Based upon our materials it was possible to construct second-order narrative accounts that explained the managerial processes underlying the differing restructuring phases within in each of the enterprises (Clark & Soulsby, 1999b). Using this approach, we were able to examine top management team (TMT) turnover, the database allowed us to consider both the TMTs' demographic effects on organisational outcomes and the micro-processes underlying these effects. The twin methodological strategy of combining demographic and processual analyses generated an enriched

account of top management, adding layers of narrative data and processual explanation to address well-rehearsed problems in TMT studies (Clark and Soulsby 2007; Lawrence, 1997; Pettigrew, 1992). We were also able to examine processes of post-communist managerial re-legitimation and trace the emergence and consequences of new functions such as human resource management in the organisations (Soulsby & Clark, 1996; Soulsby & Clark 1998).

Retrospective accounts

As a project develops, the temporal richness of the materials increases as the field materials collected and analysed from the later visits are added to the diachronic and synchronic materials generated from the earlier visits. This combination of sources gives an important multi-faceted quality to the database because different perceptions and views of various respondents about proposed and actual changes to the organisations can be compared and contrasted through analysing the diachronic (narrative and non-narrative data) and synchronic (past and latest) materials collected in the series of visits and revisits. The researchers can always go back to the source materials and by comparing respondents' contemporaneous accounts with the historical accounts given by respondents they can trace developments in the original ideas, track the historical event sequences, attributed motives, etc and identify discontinuities and continuities in narrative plots. Researchers can also revisit their own field notes

and their second order accounts from each visit and track changes in their own ideas and inferences recorded over the course of the study, thus maintaining a continuous process of reflexivity both in and out of the research setting.

This development of temporal layers, combined with the multi-faceted focus derived from the collection of different respondent and researcher accounts, together constitute an important safeguard against the methodological limitations of qualitative longitudinal research that is wholly dependent for its temporal dimension on respondents' retrospective accounts and materials from a single 'snapshot' visit. When process theory is derived solely from historical data, it is only as valid as the ability and willingness of respondents to remember events at all, to recall them accurately and not to distort what might have been highly politicised organisational events (Golden 1992; Huber, 1985; Leonard-Barton, 1990). Moreover, whilst some studies show that participants do not forget key events (Huber, 1985), others (Golden, 1992) indicate that a turbulent context, as in our research, can affect the accuracy of recollection. Another significant limitation of research based only on retrospective accounts is that the respondents may not recognise an event as important at the time of interview (Leonard-Barton, 1990, p. 250). Using this methodological approach, researchers can examine the primary and secondary materials (such as actual and proposed organisation charts and company financial statements) and track the historical antecedents and consequences of processes of the change as they have unfolded over the period of the study. In addition, the different perceptions and

views of key actors about proposed and actual changes to the organisation and changes in their own roles or careers can be compared and contrasted because of the collection of both diachronic and synchronic materials in the interviews.

Limitations of the approach

The main limitations of using this approach to longitudinal research lie in two areas first: in practical terms, the management of the database and second: the nature of theorising and writing itself. Over time, as the database becomes deeper and richer, the problems of managing it and maintaining familiarity with the richness of the materials inevitably become more challenging, with consequences for the process of theorising (Miles, 1979; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). After a number of visits, it inevitably requires more and more time for the researchers to re-immense themselves in the accumulated collection of materials from interviews and other sources in order to explore the narratives, identify themes and construct first and second order meta-narratives. This problem obviously becomes more complex in degree when comparing one organisation with others in the search for patterns (Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). As the project unfolds, the researchers needs to recognise that more time will have to be committed to this intellectual task as well as managing the more pragmatic challenges of longitudinal field research, i.e. maintaining links with the research sites and organising updating visits. In addition, the researchers will also have to build in 'co-coordinating and collaborating space' to manage the normal

pressures of academic life that can act to distract or de-motivate team members from remaining fully committed to the project. This is especially important when the team is located in different institutions or countries or come from different backgrounds (Easterby-Smith & Danusia, 1999; O'Connor et al., 2003).

The second issue lies in the nature of narrative analysis and construction. The construction of first and second order narratives is central to this approach to process theory, but there are complex and 'messy' methodological issues that underlie the apparent orderliness of theorising through narratives. The self-reflexive researcher is aware that the very process of constructing a meta-narrative will impose an over-arching plot that can reflect their interests or impression of themes. The process of writing is not an "innocent practice" (Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. viii) and "language reveals but also conceals" (Spence, 1982, p. 54). The process of interpreting materials and constructing narratives is a political act (Emihovich, 1995), which inevitably selectively silences some voices (Bal, 1997; Brown, 1998; Pentland, 1999; Riessman, 1993; White 1981) in the process of configuring personally preferred (Gabriel, 2000) or theoretically more coherent second order accounts (Brown, 1998; Pentland, 1999). The traditional convention of presenting the results of research in a dispassionate, authoritative and objective way also acts to impose an authorial structure on the narrative account, smoothing over the real gaps, disparities and disagreements (of the respondents and the researchers) in the research materials (Spence, 1986). However, notwithstanding these methodological

realities, we argue that the approach put forward in this paper builds in processes that allow the reflexive field researcher to check and trace the development not only of process in organisations but her/his own 'progress' or contribution in the development of the narratives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to respond to the call for developing methodological strategies to deal with the difficulties of conducting comparative longitudinal case studies of organisational process and change in International Business. In developing a systematic proposal for studying and theorising process in organisations, we have drawn on our sixteen years of experience of conducting fieldwork research within a transforming society. Reflecting upon the way in which the project has evolved has thrown into perspective possible methodological strategies for overcoming problems of studying processes of change in organisations. We believe that the approach outlined in this paper can be extended to the comparative study of the international activities of firms e.g. joint ventures. The reflexive and iterative nature of a punctuated longitudinal study directs the researchers to address the process of gathering materials and the issues of analysing, interpreting, and theorising from first order narrative accounts, non-narrative materials and the construction of plausible narratives.

We have argued that the generation of diachronic and synchronic interview materials in the field during the initial visit and the subsequent re-visits is essential to the quality of theorising. As a project unfolds, researchers can address the problem of accuracy in retrospective accounts because the previous accounts of respondents can be traced. It is also possible for the researchers to reflect upon and assess the accuracy and development of their own impressions of process and change. The process of collecting both diachronic and synchronic materials means that researchers can use both narrative analysis and narrative construction approaches to interrogate the first order accounts and other organisational materials in order to explore the deep structures of process across and within organisations and construct second order accounts based on a rich understanding of comparative process in organisations.

All organisational research takes place within social and institutional contexts and involves difficult lessons and compromises for the reflexive researcher. However, despite the possible problems discussed above, we would argue that approach presented above is a pragmatic methodological strategy for IB researchers of process who cannot immerse themselves in organisations after the initial field visits because of the reality of the constraints of academic life. If the approach developed above is used reflexively and rigorously, within the parameters discussed, we believe that IB researchers can undertake cross-national longitudinal studies of process in organisations and meet the challenge of

immersion in the data, which is the fundamental requirement for the development of theoretical insights (O'Connor et al., 2003).

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Figure 1 Constructing process from diachronic and synchronic materials

