

Two forms of meta-reflexivity - positioning in the core of staged dialogue

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the notion 'meta-reflexivity' as such and meta-reflexivity connected to positioning. My hypothesis is that meta-reflexivity plays a central role when managers embrace uncertainty and change and turn alterations into possibilities.

During the last 3 years the public sector in Denmark has gone through extensive alterations concerning management and organization due to the reform of the Danish public administration (municipal reform). The reform meant a reduction of the number of communes and counties from 271 communes and 14 counties to 98 communes and 5 regions, which means that plenty of fusions have taking place. My case is a project of leadership development running 11 months starting in 2006 and ending in September 2007. The project-programme was intended to in one and the same process both to develop leadership and communication and the necessary tools of management such as management by contract. The programme was running parallel to the upcoming of the new organization.

My focus is twofold: Clarification of the notion meta-reflexivity and seeking an answer on the question "when managers as autopoietic systems participate in leadership development in what sense are staged dialogue to be considered forms of positioning?".

My starting point is the Maturana-Luhmann notion of the 'autopoietic system': If man is an autopoietic social system, how is one to understand meta-reflexivity? I develop my understanding of the notion of meta-reflexivity by way of Luhmann's idea of observation - observation as 'denoting by distinction'. My analysis ends up with a distinction between *sight* implying a horizontal distinction and denoting the observed; *observation* implying the same horizontal distinction and further a vertical distinction between observer and observed; and *reflexive-observation* implying both the before mentioned distinctions and further a reflexive distinction between observer and observation.

Second, from the Maturana-Luhmann perspective I deduce two strategies leading from mono-contextual thinking to poly-contextual thinking. The twofold perspective is further developed by Barge's distinction on meta-reflexivity as two different reflexive practices: One understood as an epistemological intellectual activity and one understood as a so-called authoring activity. This distinction is further developed by the John Shotter distinction between the professional objective, formal way of presenting an insight that works in cognitive terms of understanding and the conversational way that operates in a participatory perspective emphasizing presence and relations.

Third, to answer the question in what sense staged dialogue is to be considered a form of positioning I show how the Rom Harré concept 'positioning' applies to staged leadership development. As an insight gained from my case-analysis of certain scripts made for the sessions in the programme and inspired by the Bronwyn and Harré distinction between interactive positioning and reflexive positioning I make the distinction between two ways of positioning: One by way of spoken words and one by being invited to participate in sessions structured by a certain set up that positions the participants in various ways – positioning by set up.

Positioning by set up raises some problematic issues concerning ethics, recognition, empowerment and power exercise.

Foreword

My hypothesis is that meta-reflexivity plays a central role when managers embrace uncertainty and change and turn alterations into possibilities. My subject is meta-reflexivity in a context of leadership development.

Context

During the last 3 years the public sector in Denmark has gone through extensive alterations concerning management and organization due to the reform of the Danish public administration (municipal reform) that was decided politically in 2004. The reform meant among other things a reduction of the number of communes and counties from 271 communes and 14 counties to 98 communes and 5 regions, which means that plenty of fusions have and are taking place.

I am part of a fusion of 8 public organizations. This is a process concerning some 5000 employees. One might say that this process of alteration already began by the public articulating of the reform in the media and it certainly gained speed by the political agreement in 2004. The preparation through local planning took place in 2005-2006 and gave birth to the new organization in January 2007.

The first steps in planning were to establish an administrative steering committee and a secretariat. Next thing were to decide what form of organization the new commune should have. From there on the aim was to establish the different staffs that was needed to support the practical fusion: Five different divisions: One for economic and budget, one for IT, one for HR, one for Development and a staff to serve the directors and the political level. The next steps were to establish a row of professional divisions or sectors focusing on the duties and tasks that the new public organization was assigned to. The organizational form is intended to prevent bureaucratic self-sufficient 'sectorism' by making each division so small that they have to cooperate to get business-success according to the overall purpose. The model should promote co-creation vertically and in particular on a horizontal level. The appointment of the many managers took place during 2006. The physical fusion took place in December same year.

Case

My case is a project of leadership development running 11 months starting in 2006 and ending in September 2007.

The project-programme was not intended to implement a ready-made model of management. The intention overall was in one and the same process both to develop leadership and communication and the necessary tools of management such as management by contract. The programme was running parallel to the upcoming of the new organization. The idea being that with so many new managers and managers in new roles it was important that there were fora where frustrations, reflections and consulting could go on in a somewhat unbiased atmosphere and at the same time making it possible for the managers to develop their own leadership. The launch of the programme demanded the managers develop their leadership while simultaneously participating in the everyday turmoil of fusion.

This ambition gave a very exciting interplay between form and substance, the substance being the managers' everyday challenges and the form being systemic methods of dialogue and reflection. The idea was that if everything around you is changing because of the fusion there is some stability in applying systemic methods and stick to them. At the same time it was regarded as an investment in future leadership to introduce the systemic perspective on leadership early.

The programme included almost 230 managers recruited from all divisions representing four different managing levels all of which represented in almost every session due to the principle of letting as many levels of leadership represent in each session as possible. The intention was to facilitate that the managers became familiar with colleagues and their business and thereby to break down some of the mental walls that might create obstructions to the fusion. When more levels of management were brought together it was possible to resolve at least some of the confusion that the fusion created.

The programme followed two leads: Sessions and networks. The 230 managers were mingled in ten groups each of which assembled four times in sessions of two days. The programme finished with an all-together day focusing on inter-divisionary cooperation and co-creation on a horizontal level. Besides that each participant joined a network group that met between the sessions.

Focus developed

In this paper I would like to develop my understanding of meta-reflexivity in relation to the notion 'meta-reflexivity' and in relation to how staged meta-reflexivity influences on managers' individual reflection. My starting point is the notion of the 'autopoietic system' (Luhmann 2003a), a notion I just take for granted in this paper. Luhmann's Maturana inspired theory of living systems implies three types of self-referential autopoietic systems: living systems, psychic systems and social systems (Luhmann 2003a:66). If man is an autopoietic social system in the Niklas Luhmann sense, as is characterized by 'self-referential closure', that is, a recursively closed organization, that simultaneously incorporates a capability to create openness by communication (Luhmann 2003a:73), how is one to understand meta-reflexivity or 2.order observation? This analysis connects to the understanding of observation by Humberto Maturana (Maturana 2004); second as a tentative development of that, I unfold the perspectives of Kevin Barge (Barge 2003) and John Shotter (Shotter 1999) on reflexivity, that is, the twofold understanding of reflexivity as an individual intellectual affair and a social authoring affair; thirdly, as a development of the Shotter-Barge-perspective I show how the Rom Harré concept 'positioning' applies to staged leadership development. I involve my case in form of scripts for applied sessions, as well as I involve perspectives from Barge (Barge 2003), the analysis of which resulting in a tentative heuristic for strategic positioning in a leadership development context.

To be more precise on focus: Besides aiming at further clarification of the notion meta-reflexivity I ask the following question: When managers as autopoietic systems participate in leadership development in what sense are staged dialogue forms of positioning?

I'll begin by making some points about the views of Maturana on meta-reflexivity - a distinction between three levels of 'reflexivity':

1.order No reflexivity	2.order Reflexivity	3.order Meta-reflexivity
Submerged in praxis	Submerged observer of a praxis or of own praxis	Reflexive observer of own observation of a praxis or own praxis
To do	To do and to observe How do they do? How did I do?	To do and to observe How do they or I do? How do I observe?
"Somebody who is simply looking out the window I would not consider to be an observer. (...) most of the time in our lives we do not operate as observers; we just carry on (...)" (Maturana 2004:35)	"Whenever we observe something, we are all standard observers (...)" (Maturana 2004:36)	"Becoming aware that one is doing the observing, and then being aware of being aware that it is oneself who makes the distinctions, one attains a new domain of experience." (Maturana 2004:36)
No distinction	Distinction	Reflexive distinction

The Luhmann perspective on observation

I'll develop my understanding of the notion of meta-reflexivity by way of Luhmann's idea of observation. According to Luhmann observation is always a social system's own construction (Luhmann 2003b:59). In the scheme above the 1.order level or the 'just carry on' level implies that there is no distinction between the observer and the observed, that is, between system and environment. The 1.order level of observation denotes thereby the tacit dimension of social processes - the agent as totally absorbed in praxis. But according to Luhmann even on such a 1.order level there has to be a distinction between observed and 'possibly observed' as long as there is such thing as sight. Sight implies a distinction on a horizontal level, so to speak, sight denotes the seen as observation denotes the observed. To denote, however, implies making a distinction. Luhmann's concept of observation is therefore 'denoting by distinction' (Luhmann 2003b:56).

To denote is to draw a distinction and simultaneously choose the one side of the distinction. These two steps always occur together. So, according to Luhmann observation is always to denote the one side within a frame of distinction. As such, every observation is necessarily connected to a distinction in the sense, that the observation can only see what the distinction permits (Kneer & Nassehi 2004:103).

The Maturana inspired 2.order level in the scheme builds off cause also on 'denoting by distinction'. But, furthermore, to be a standard observer, that is, a submerged observer of something also implies a distinction on a vertical level between the observer and the observed. The observer induces a distinction between system and environment, a distinction between self-reference and other-reference (Luhmann 2003b:57). But there is no distinction between observer and observation. This could be explained by the Luhmann approach: No observation can denote both sides of the difference and therefore no observation can observe itself in the moment of observation. Such a self-observation would imply simultaneously using the difference both to denote and to observe the process of denoting. But to observe the very same difference that constitutes the observation is impossible - using a distinction is the blind spot of all observation (Kneer & Nassehi 2004:104).

Every observation suffers in this way from lack of transparency in the moment. To observe the difference demands another point of view. Within the Luhmann understanding of observation it could be an observer who afterwards within another observation operation observes his first observation or it could be another social system that simultaneously observes the first observation

(Kneer & Nassehi 2004:104). It is always possible that another observer observes an observation, and in this way there is no privileged viewpoint.

It characterizes the 1.order observer that he is not-able-to-see-that-he-cannot-see-what-he-cannot-see. The 2.order observer is on the other hand able to see that he cannot see what he cannot see (Kneer & Nassehi 2004:105). And this is exactly the point of the Maturana inspired 3.order level above. To be a reflexive observer takes a distinction between the observer and the observed as well as between the observer and the observation; this last distinction is a reflexive distinction. The observer knows how he observes, that is, he knows he induces a specific distinction. I'll sum up by supplying the scheme above with the new insights:

1.order No reflexivity	2.order Reflexivity	3.order Meta-reflexivity
Submerged in praxis	Submerged observer of a praxis or of own praxis	Reflexive observer of own observation of a praxis or own praxis
Sight	Observation	Reflexive observation
Horizontal distinction and denoting the seen.	Horizontal distinction and denoting the observed. Vertical distinction between observer and observed.	Horizontal distinction and denoting the observed. Vertical distinction between observer and observed. Reflexive distinction between observer and observation.
Luhmann 1.order		Luhmann 2.order

The possibility of meta-reflexivity

The importance of 3.order observation is that it makes it possible to gain reflexive insights on the structure of observation, so that it is possible to make corrections. A 3.order observer is making his own view relative because he understands sight and blindness as two sides of the same coin following every observation - if the difference were another the observation would be another. Another way to put this is to speak of difference in contexts (Kneer & Nassehi 2004:106). The 1.order observation is mono contextual, whereas the 3.order observer is poly-contextual, which means that the specific observation always is a contingent construction.

There are two strategies leading from mono-contextual thinking to poly-contextual thinking - as mentioned above: Either an observer successively positions himself as an observer of his own earlier observation or a different social system simultaneously observes the observation operation. This, I think, corresponds to the understanding of meta-reflexivity by Kevin Barge: In his paper on reflexivity and managerial practice Kevin Barge distinguishes between two different reflexive practices. One understood as an epistemological intellectual activity and one understood as a so-called authoring activity (Barge 2003:2). Reflexive practice considered the same as self-reflexivity is defined as the individual conscious critical reflection on the beliefs and perspectives that inform thinking and acting. This understanding of the individual as some sort of a distanced observer or reader of situations is firmly integrated in the academic tradition. Different perspectives are gained by adopting different theoretical lenses (Barge 2003:5). This is:

*“Reflexivity as an interpretive activity emphasizing the reading of stable texts.
Selecting appropriate frames, theories, and perspectives for creating alternative*

interpretations of a stable text and developing an accurate, complete, or insightful interpretation of the text.” (Barge 2003:19)

According to Barge, however, reflexivity is also to be viewed as a relationally responsive activity where the observer reflects the impact of his own participation in situations on the way of being with others (Barge 2003:3). The point is that the observer always is a practical author as the way he responds to others co-creates relationships. Reflexivity is therefore also to be regarded as an ontological activity.

“The understanding of reflexivity is thereby broadened from being primarily an intellectual activity to include ways persons conjointly produce conversations in organizations.” (Barge 2003:3)

My point is that the observer who successively positions himself as an observer of his own earlier observation is performing the form of reflexivity Barge describes as an individual intellectual activity. When the observer is a different social system it is reflexivity as Barge describes as relationally responsive activity. This line of reasoning can be deepened by the John Shotter distinction between aboutness-writing and witness-writing (Shotter 1999). Shotter identifies two styles: The professional objective, formal way of presenting an insight and the conversational informal style. The professional way works in cognitive terms of understanding. The conversational way operates in a participatory perspective emphasizing presence and relations. Shotter sums up the characteristics of the two: Monological-retrospective-objective writing from outside involvement versus dialogical-prospective-relational writing from within involvement (Shotter 1999:10). Monologue manages without the other whereas dialogue implies reciprocity and open-ended working within living moments.

When interviewing managers, Barge explores that they describe reflexivity in both terms. They describe reflexivity as self-reflexivity in the sense of critical assessment of the context and their own role in producing it. And they also describe reflexivity in relation to the way they act with others within their conversational praxis. Barge recommends that reflexivity be viewed “as an ontological-based form of relational practice, which incorporates epistemologically-centred elements of intellectual critique” (Barge 2003:2). This implies that managers primarily should view themselves as agents, agents in relation to other participants, and only secondarily as individuals exercising intellectual critique.

Positioning in the core of staged dialogue

Kevin Barge understands management as a relationally responsive activity in which “managers, along with other organizational participants, try to create a sense of place and situate themselves in relation to others.” (Barge 2003:5). In the same perspective focus for positioning theory is on how praxis constitutes and positions the speakers and hearers. As such positioning is largely considered a conversational phenomenon (Bronwyn and Harré 1990:2). The theory concerns conventions of speech and action that are “labile, contestable and ephemeral” as Rom Harré puts it (Harré 2004:5). “Positioning Theory is to be seen in contrast to the older framework of Role Theory. Roles are relatively fixed, often formally defined and long lasting” (Harré 2004:5).

Bronwyn and Harré distinguish two forms of positioning: Interactive positioning in which what one person says positions another and reflexive positioning in which one positions oneself (Bronwyn and

Harré 1990:5). It might be tempting to continue the twofold-perspective, that is, consider the reflexive positioning as corresponding to the individual intellectual reflexivity and interactive positioning corresponding to the social authoring notion of meta-reflexivity. To me, however, it seems as though both forms of positioning correspond to the ontological-based form of relational practice. To engage in an open-ended dialogue is to locate oneself as participant in jointly producing stories that position the other and reflexively oneself. The forms are entwined. It seems to me that a statement always points in both directions simultaneously - explicitly or implicitly. My point is that interactive positioning is always also reflexive - sometimes tacitly though. Reflexive positioning on the other hand seems to me directly to correspond to the epistemologically centred intellectual critique, which explicitly in an afterwards rationalizing positions the reader and the participants, though not necessarily spoken out loud.

Meta-reflexivity among managers according to Barge should have as its primary focus reflecting on how one as manager positions oneself and others in localized conversations (Barge 2003:20). When the focus persons in Barge's research respond to his questions they explicitly and implicitly offer plenty of possible strategies on how to position in conversations. Analysing them in relation to my case exposes several different though entwined strategic leads that to my mind altogether could serve as a tentative heuristic for positioning in a leadership context. The heuristic contains as a whole 8 leads to promote meta-reflexivity: Context-marker, Observer position, Multivocality, Self-reflexivity, Co-creation, Affirmative irreverence, Inquiry, Safe space. As I understand Barge he thinks positioning in terms of 'the spoken words'. But analysing my case I also reason positioning in terms of the specific structure in staged dialogues, that is, sessions structured by a certain *set up* that positions the participants in various ways. I'll give an example of 'positioning by spoken words' and three of 'positioning by set up'. Both interactive positioning and reflexive positioning are at stake as well as 2.order and 3.order observation.

1) Setting the context is creating a frame for conversation that clarifies purpose and task of conversations. It invites certain conversations and discourages others by establishing clear responsibilities and setting clear agendas (Barge 2003:14-15). As a 'context-marker' in my case the chief executive opens the first assembly by setting the context and thereby clarifies the expectations that he has to the participants. To clarify expectations in this way is to position the hearer in a certain way (my italics) and sometimes reflexive oneself: 1) All managers should engage in developing a cohesive organization characterized by *cooperation and co-creation* and employees that *speak well* of the organization. 2) The programme implies *developing* leadership as such in the organization and for *each single one as participant*. 3) Eight different cultures are represented and the good qualities of them should be part of the new organization while bad praxis should be excluded, that is, all *have to abandon ways of doing things*. 4) The programme is launched because the organization is under construction and all are in a search and *learning* process. 5) The organization needs the participants to *be open* about the challenges they confront personally and professionally. 6) The programme facilitates co-creating arenas, where the participants *speak openly* about resistance and frustrations, while simultaneously *engage in seeking possibilities and solutions*. 7) The programme is a huge process involving almost all managers in the organization and each one of them is *responsible* of making the programme meaningful and grasping the elements needed to become a successful manager.

Setting the context as in this example is a way of positioning the participants as responsible agents that cooperates and co-creates while developing their own leadership in a learning process speaking

openly about challenges, resistance and frustrations and simultaneously engaging in seeking possibilities and solutions implying for some abandoning a certain praxis.

2) Multivocality implies being open to different contexts. It implies the understanding and accepting that every situation can be described in numerous ways and one should avoid becoming enchanted with a single description. (Barge 2003:16). In my case an example of staged 'multivocality' is a way of positioning the participants in a set up that fertilizes being sensitive to different voices, for instance a so-called 'circle set up' including seats surrounding plenty of pictures on the floor (metaphors). Each participant is asked to choose one picture as metaphor for the organization a year from now. Every participant is interviewing each other and afterwards presents the colleague in the circle. The questions are among others 'how does the picture convey your hopes and dreams for cooperation in the organization?', 'how are the principles in the model of organization visible in the picture?', 'how does your hopes and dreams affect your praxis?' In the circle everyone listens in a solemn atmosphere to the many stories while implicitly the whole set up fosters a co-created story of an organization of multiple voices and tasks.

This session both convey positioning by spoken words and positioning by set up, the set up positions the participants as 2. order observers and some of the questions positions them as 3.order observers.

3) Constructing an observer position is creating a new role within the ongoing flow of conversation. (Barge 2003:10). My example of position the managers in a 'observer position' starts by inviting the managers to engage in a collective coaching process involving exercises in formulating linear and circular questions (Karl Tomm:1992). The process begins by placing all in a circle reflecting on the character and effect of the four types of questions categorized under the headlines linear and circular questions. As focus person the chief executive shares a challenge he meets in his everyday praxis and the participants gather in trios to generate the four types of questions following the Tomm circle – one type in turn. In the succeeding assemblies including all level of management the focus person is one of the division managers. The questions of a certain type are posed in plenum and the focus person reflects and answers if able. Having posed the four types of questions the session ends by a reflection among all participants on questions like 'what have you heard, seen?', 'what does this tell you that is important for the focus person?', 'how does this connect to your praxis?'.

The overall purpose of the session is to develop an understanding of leadership as a way of facilitating that solutions are created by the multiple competences in the organization. This implies exercises in positioning oneself as a *neutral, curious, appreciative, challenging* manager. This involves positioning by spoken words. But to engage in such a collective coaching is simultaneously to be positioned by the set up as a 2.order observer of colleagues and as a 3.order observer of oneself - as well as one is positioned as an object observed by colleagues.

Conclusion and perspective

By my Maturana-Luhmann inspired approach I have clarified the notion ‘meta-reflexivity’ in relation to 1.order and 2.order levels: 1.order: Submerged in praxis- applying a horizontal distinction and denoting the observed. 2.order: Reflexively submerged - applying both the horizontal distinction and a vertical distinction between observer and observed. 3.order: Meta-reflexive transparency - applying the horizontal distinction and the vertical distinction but furthermore a reflexive distinction between observer and observation. 2.order and 3.order observation are in the core of staged dialogue.

Then I unfold the twofold perspective on meta-reflexivity building on the two Maturana-Luhmann strategies leading from mono-contextual thinking to poly-contextual thinking: The observer as an observer of his own earlier observation or another observer simultaneously observing the observation operation. The twofold perspective is developed by Barge’s two forms of reflexive practices: The epistemological intellectual activity approach and the authoring activity approach, a line of reasoning taken up by Shotter as well: The professional objective, formal way of writing and the conversational way that operates in a participatory perspective. Both approaches are relevant in organizations but focusing on cohesiveness, sharing insights and fostering responsibility I’ll suggest choosing the road of the participatory - working from within situations as we did in my case-project.

Bronwyn and Harré presents two forms of positioning: Interactive positioning and reflexive positioning. Though it is tempting to continue the twofold perspective I suggest that both forms correspond to the participatory relational practice my point being that interactive positioning is always also reflexive – explicitly or implicitly. And I suggest reflexive positioning corresponding to the epistemologically form of meta-reflexivity. By way of case-analysis I make my own distinction between ‘two ways of positioning’: One ‘by way of spoken words’ and one ‘by way of set up’, that is, by being invited to participate in sessions structured by a certain *set up* that positions the participants in various ways. Both forms of positioning are relevant for staged dialogue – both are in the core of dialogue. One is not to underestimate the impact of the set up.

‘Positioning by set up’ raises some interesting issues concerning ethics, recognition, empowerment and power exercise I intend to deal with in later studies. Some participants might not feel that they voluntarily choose to participate in the announced process. Whether to participate or not, whether one feel a need for sharing ones views in public or not is not always a choice of the participant but just a demand to comply with. Secondly, being invited to participate in a certain set up sounds harmless and perhaps the session as such “recognizes the importance of valuing different voices within situations and working with person’s interests in a genuine and respectful matter” (Barge 2003: 21), but the consequences of participating is perhaps for some not quite distinct – and perhaps it is only during the sessions they discover what kind of process they are participating in and what the costs might be. Some might dislike what they experience but will find it difficult to abandon the session.

If it should happen that the ‘being invited to participate’-way of positioning transformed the authoring practice into an oppressive one, and the set up thereby declines to simple manipulation then it is an example of how the dark side of the omnipresent power exercise prevents empowerment. For me working as an internal consultant this is a serious matter.

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