

Institute for Systemic Management
and Public Governance



University of St.Gallen

Reflexive Systemic Research Heuristic

- a system theory perspective on the field relation

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Overview – Research as a system

Intro: crisis of research in the field

- observers are observed
- research is a social process
- field relations are fundamental

Goal: to conceptualize the dynamically evolving field relation in research

Agenda:

1. Point of departure
2. Model Overview
3. Four dimensions of communicative practice within a fragile process
4. Illustration: revisiting the crisis and other lessons learned
5. Summary and limitations
6. End

see also: Tuckermann & Rüegg-Stürm (2011), FQS 14

Point of departure

1. Importance of reflexivity in interpretive studies (e.g. Weick, 1999; Alvesson et al., 2008), regards:

- others' perspectives (Alvesson & Skölderg, 2000)
- one's own material, interpretation (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2008)
- publishing, academic relation (e.g. Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993)

→ **Assumes that data is already there**

2. Field relation: foundation of research from which data emerge (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006)

- a dynamic, fragile and reciprocal **process** (Langley, 1999; Iedema et al., 2004)
- these are **rich anecdotal reflections** (e.g. van Maanen, 1982; Barley, 1990)

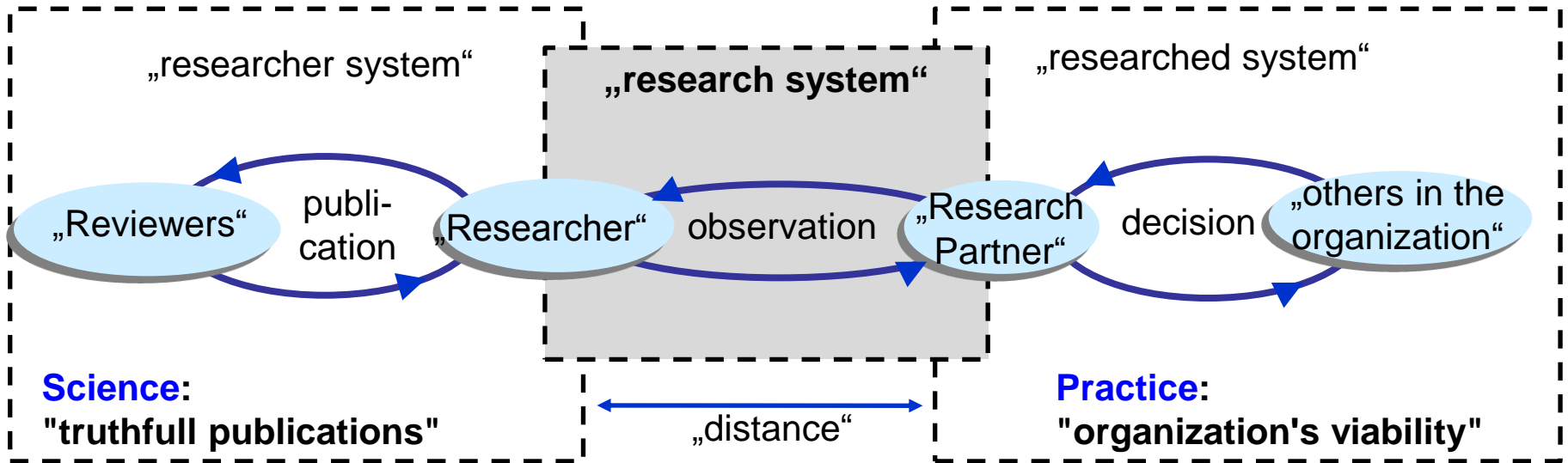
→ **But: hardly any conceptualization, and that is my aim here**

→ Starting Point: Social Systems theory (Luhmann, 1984, 2000)

- practice and research described in the same terms: communication
- science and research are part of the researched
- Research = observe the observer: how, and why do organizations do what they do?

Research System: RSR-Heuristic

RSR-Model: Reflexive Systemic Research Heuristic (Wimmer, 1992; Fuchs, 1999)

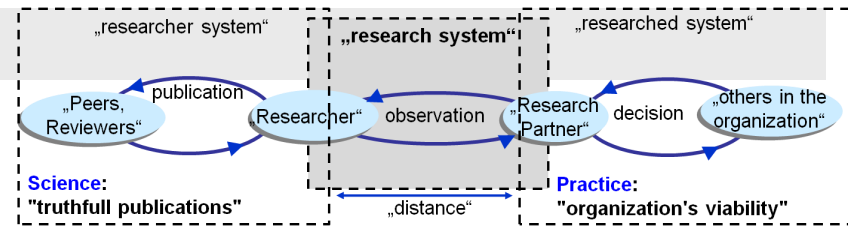


Field Research as a "research system":

- interaction system, i.e. temporary coupling (see Hendry & Seidl, 2003)
- two types of actors: researchers and research partners
- regards "second order observation", that what is latent in the organization (in the blind spot of the organization's daily operations)

Four practice dimensions in a fragile process

Why may such a conceptualization be helpful?



1. Highlights field **research as a fragile** process

- between two **actors** with **different** perspectives, practice, and orientation
- **situated** within the specific situation of the involved at the time
- **mutual observation** of researchers and research partners

2. Allows distinguishing **four domains of practice** that blend into each other:

- **organizational** practice
- **research** practice of data gathering, and of interpretation / analysis
- **relational** practice (establishing, stabilizing, terminating research system)
- **academic** practice (getting published)

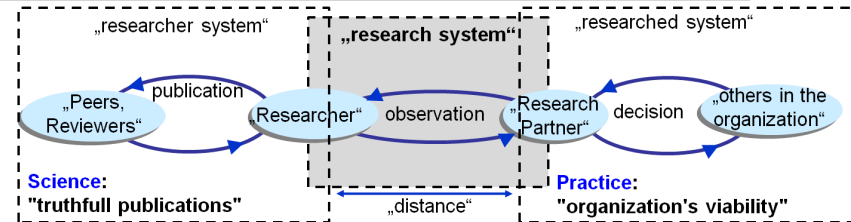
→ implies that the **research system is the locus of data**, not: the organization

- **Insights**: descriptions of descriptions, no access to organizational reality
- **Ambiguity** of insights: related to organization or the observing (Luhmann 1990)

→ modesty

Illustration: re-visiting the crisis in terms of RSR-Heuristic

Making sense of the crisis in the field research:



1. ... with view on **the observed** (organization):

- resonance with the situation: uncertain hospital merger, fragile executive board
- their focus on the factual, analytical dimension, rather than the process dimension

2. ... with view on **the observing** (research system):

- dilution of attempts to perceived instrumentalization for an important decision
- unintended co-construction of "the project" team, despite its heterogeneity
- our subtle feedback: facilitating, and questions to participate as equal discussants

→ Both **sources of uncertainty** (and potential irritation) can be **mutually related**:

- incidents in the research system → insights on the organization
- incidents in the organization → transferred to the research system

Illustration – other lessons learned in my case in terms of the RSR-Heuristic

1. Access Dilemma:

- Researchers as organization experts avoids potentially threatening "professional practice" but **triggers expectations for support** particularly during change initiatives

2. Observation and Intervention:

- Asking (**observing**) questions **may trigger reactions**, decided by the partner, not the researcher → minimizing doesn't work (see Morgan, 1983)

3. Complexity of Research Partners:

- **Distinguishing research partners** (see project team): according to their expectations and their potential impact on the research system (see Schein, 1997)

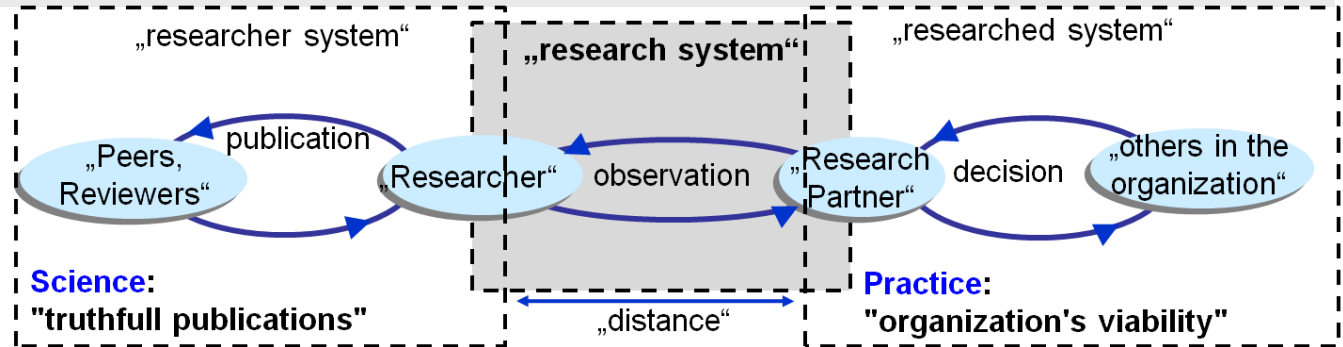
4. Double Exposure in Member Validation

- By presenting data, interpretations, and potential explanations to the practitioners, **both expose themselves** (Iedema et al., 2004)
- **Alternative insight**: a difference that makes a difference (Bateson, 1983) between what's known and what's new (von Weizsäcker, 1986), but may lie in the blind spot of the organization

5. Finding an End (and a beginning):

- **Idiosyncratic**, a decision that could be reached at a different point in time

Summary & Limitations



Reflexive Systemic Research Model:

- **systematic reflexivity:** brings the observer back into the picture systematically
→ 4 inter-related practice domains (organization, relation, research, academic)
- **location of field research:** research system, not: the organization
→ ambiguity, contingency of insight, status of findings: descriptions; research generative
- **rigor-relevance:** less a bridge, but a relation of (mutual) irritation
→ practice decides relevance, science decides "truth/non-truth"

Limitation:

- **of social system theory:**
emphasizes communication, marginalizes materiality and embodiment (→ "psychic systems")
- **of the model:** developed in the context of longitudinal research
- **it is just the map – not the territory, thus....**

End...

... enjoy your journey ...



... and thank you for your time ...

RSR-Model: Implications for research in the field

Implications of the RSR-Model:

- **Location** of field research: the research system, NOT: the organization
 - Insights: descriptions of description, interpretations of..., without direct access to organizational reality as such
 - Ambiguity of insights: related to the organization, to the research system, the person?
- **Blindness** of field research: Research is an observation, thus blind to its own distinctions in operation
 - Reflexivity throughout the process
 - Research as a dynamic process of inter-related practices
- **Rigour-Relevance-Gap**: no bridge, but potential (mutual) irritation
 - Practice decides on the relevance
- Potential starting point to work on **methodology** within **social systems theory**

Research System: Empirical Illustration

Method: contextualist case study of process research from ca. May 2004 – Dec 2006

(Pettigrew, 1990; Langley, 1999)

5 Change Initiatives within one hospital:

Developing Strategy Report:	3 months (+ sub. away-days)
Merger of two hospitals:	22 months
Introducing a new labour law:	24 months
Developing the Centre for Palliative Care:	12 months
Introduction of Fast Track Surgery:	18 months

Data Analysis: narrative approach (Langley 1999; Pettigrew, 1990)

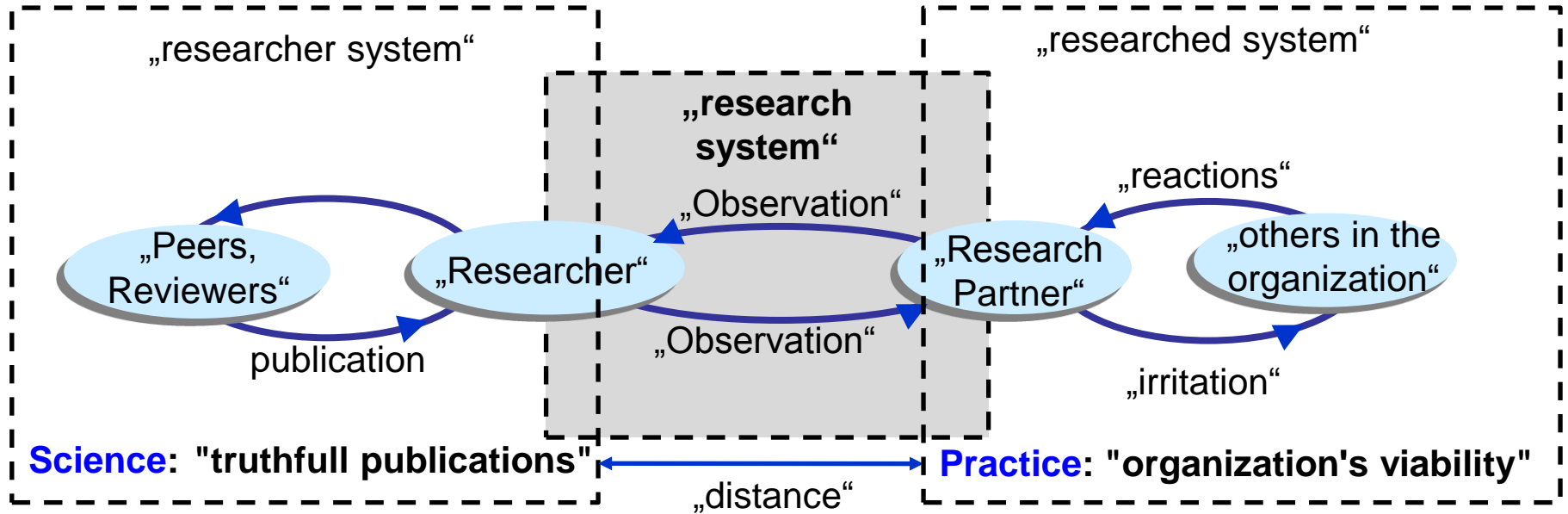
- Developing single **case studies**: event sequence
- **Validation** with peers, literature, and practitioners
- Cross-case analysis: **patterns** and their **inter-relations; stories on the side**)

Four Themes emerging:

1. Autonomy
2. Agenda Setting / Raising Awareness
3. Deciding
4. Implementing

Research System: RSR-Model

RSR-Model: Reflexive Systemic Research Model (see Wimmer, 1992 for consultancy)



Science: "truthfull publications"

Practice: "organization's viability"

Field Research:

- "interaction system"
(temporal coupling)

Research System:

- Components:**
- temporary coupling (episodic, Hendry & Seidl, 2003)
 - (at least) 2 actors (social dimension)
 - on a topic, unit-of-analysis

Element: → communications, observations