
Call for Papers

Sub-theme 58: Organizing in an Era of Riskification

Convenors

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Presentation

Contemporary organizing takes place in an era of “riskification” (Hardy & Maguire, 2016) – a period in history when risk plays an increasingly prominent role in organizational life as well as in the relationship between business and society. On the one hand, risk analysis has spread as an established scientific discipline (Aven, 2016), providing codified principles, methods and frameworks to inform the actions and governance of organizations of all types (Power, 2007; 2016). On the other hand, our “risk society” (Beck, 1992) is pushed to its paroxysm by the pressing “grand challenges” of the 21st century (George et al., 2016), as systemic issues such as global pandemics, climate change, geopolitical conflicts, social exclusion and looming ecological/societal collapse exacerbate the urgency to collectively frame and take action on risks to much of what humanity values. While existing organizational, social and critical perspectives on risk provide significant insights into the implications of these trends, riskification challenges existing conceptualizations of risk and offers opportunities for exciting avenues of research.

Empirically, risk discourse now provides principles for organizing and managing in general (Power, 2007). As “ideas about risk and risk management have come to play a key role in the very idea of organizing and organization itself” (Scheytt et al., 2006: 1336), managers now engage with technologies, supply chains, regulators, employees and other stakeholders as “risk objects” (Hilgartner, 1992) that may disrupt their organization’s operations, reputations and profitability. Mirroring this situation, organizations are themselves treated as risk objects by regulators and external stakeholders seeking to prevent damage – negative externalities, systemic dysfunctions and “organizational side-effects” (Scheytt et al., 2006) – to a diverse set of valued entities ranging from financial systems to ecosystems.

Despite the ascendance of the risk management paradigm, risk remains an elusive concept, with less solidity than the institutionalized category suggests. Whereas dominant realist approaches assume risks are objective phenomena “out there” waiting to be identified and measured by technical experts, constructivist research has shown that “risks emerge from the very organizing processes through which they are assessed and managed” (Maguire & Hardy, 2013: 232), including organizing processes within science and other professions. This organizing of risk occurs across three modes: prospectively, to predict and prevent damage before it arises; in real time, to control and contain damage as it is materializing; and retrospectively, to review and revise practices after damage has (or nearly has) occurred in order to improve future prospective and real time organizing of risk in the next iteration of the risk cycle (Hardy & Maguire, 2016). As a result, managers increasingly engage in ‘riskwork’ – normal, everyday actions, practices, and routines through which they make sense of risk, themselves, and their roles, as well as try, collectively, to enact institutional scripts associated with the appropriate identification, assessment and management of risk (Power, 2016).

Certainly, there is lots of riskwork to be done, and it continues to increase. The dissemination of codified approaches to risk and its oversight or governance into all kinds of managerial activities (Hutter & Power, 2005) raises fundamental questions about what risk really means in practice. The growing attempt at the risk management of “everything” (Power, 2004) generates ambiguities and tensions across organizational levels (e.g., strategic vs. operational) as well as functional units (e.g., legal compliance; quality management; environment, health and safety; operations; etc.) due to incompatible time scales, conflicting objectives, or information asymmetries. Those considerations should foster the search for “new ways of seeing” risk as a multi-level and integrative concept, including by embracing innovative qualitative methods (Bansal et al., 2018) to unpack the diversity of riskwork (Power, 2016).

Increasingly, riskwork is also making contributions to – and may be a consequence of – addressing grand challenges, including social inclusion. Tackling the grand challenges of our 21st century will profoundly affect existing modes of organizing, by blurring organizational boundaries and generating even more complex interdependencies (Eisenhardt et al., 2016) and uncertainties. The systemic nature of uncertainties generates new forms of interactions between multiple actors - including corporations, governments, and civil organizations (Wissman-Weber & Levy, 2018) – as well as new calls and requirements for accountability.

We are interested in papers that examine risk – empirically, theoretically and/or critically – as well as its role in contemporary organizing. As issues of risk cut across traditional disciplinary boundaries we particularly welcome papers that draw on multiple perspectives to better understand the complex relationship between risk and organizing, including organization theory, strategy, and accounting as well as social studies of finance or of science and technology. More specifically, we invite contributions that explore risk in and around organizations in terms of the overall EGOS Colloquium themes, such as:

Conceptualizing risk and unpacking the diversity and complexity of ‘riskwork’:

- Is it possible to reconcile the acknowledgment of risk’s heterogeneity with a more explicit, integrative comprehension of what risk is?
- How can we articulate multi-disciplinary perspectives to build a comprehensive and integrative framework of risk? Is such a framework desirable? How can studies of riskwork navigate multiple levels of analysis?
- How do individuals and organizations address the tensions inherent in riskwork, such as that between reducing versus absorbing complexity?
- What are the implications of distributed riskwork, i.e. assessing and managing risk through a multi-organizational and network?

Addressing societal “riskification” and “grand challenges”:

- How does the tackling of “grand challenges”, such as climate change and social inclusion, through the lens of risk generate new ways of organizing risk? To what extent does it challenge dominant discourses and paradigms?
- What kind of new interactions, interdependencies, uncertainties and requirements for accountability emerge from the management of systemic risks?
- To what extent is the growing regulation of risk inclusive or exclusive?

Leveraging risk as a frame of inquiry to enrich organization studies:

- How does riskwork mask or reproduce power relations?
- What does riskwork tell us about individuals’ and organizations’ understandings of responsibility and accountability?
- How might research on risk inform research on stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility, and organizations and the natural environment? How might these literatures inform research on risk?
- How might research on risk inform institutional theory? How might institutional theory inform research on risk? How might research on risk inform practice?

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