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Conceptualising Needs to Enhance Organisational Learning and Enable Knowledge-Based Innovation

Florian Kragulj^a

^aWU Vienna University of Economics and Business, Welthandelsplatz 1, 1020 Wien, Austria

Abstract

Organisational learning causes organisational change; it utilises and results in (new) knowledge. Needs are crucial in these processes, since they govern behaviour and cause us to act. Consequently, it seems to be worthwhile to consider what needs are and how they can be exploited in organisational learning processes enabling innovation. In this conceptual paper, I theorise on the concept of need and argue why considering needs is beneficial in learning and innovation processes, such as vision or strategy development, in which various expectations which presumably emerge from shared needs have to be combined. Based on a trans-disciplinary literature review, I emphasise the principle of equifinality and propose a one-to-many relation between needs and their means of satisfaction. In order to take advantage of this relation, we have to understand what needs are and how they are linked to other phenomena. Therefore, I introduce an ontology, which aims at clarifying the concept of need for organisational practice and points at influencing variables in the transition from needs to need satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

What if you know, what your needs are? Needs govern our actions, though we are mostly unaware of them¹. At the same time, marketing and product design scholars among others highlight that successful products are those which effectively meet customer needs.² Additionally, it has been acknowledged that an understanding of what people need fosters organisational change and innovation processes, strategy development, product design, among other value-creating activities (e.g.^{3,2,4,5,6,7,8}). Thus, needs play a crucial role in organisational learning and development processes.

However, the question pertains: What are needs and how can we assess them? The concept of need has been attracting attention in various fields, the most important being psychology, philosophy and economics (e.g.^{9,10,11,12,13,14}).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43-1-31336-5231.

E-mail address: florian.kragulj@wu.ac.at

However, most of the theories on needs provide limited use for practical implementation as they either refer to abstract and most fundamental needs, i.e. food, shelter, water, etc., or their suggestions of what needs are seem to be overlapping with principally different concepts, such as wants or desires.

To close an important research gap and propose an usable definition of needs, this article addresses the following research question: *How can needs be conceptualised in order to serve understanding for and enhancing organisational learning processes?*

The paper is structured as follows: First, I will argue how the consideration of needs could contribute to organisational learning processes. Second, I will present key findings from a transdisciplinary literature review, which was guided by the three basic notions of 'need' identified by Gasper^{15, 16, 17}. I will review theories from motivational psychology, customer-related fields, organisational study, philosophy, social politics as well as economics and discuss why they have limited use for the field of organisational learning. Third, in order to clarify the concept, I will present an ontology of needs. Finally, I will argue what this implies for and how it potentially contributes to organisational learning and knowledge processes.

2. Why to Focus on Needs in Organisational Learning?

Although no unified theory exists, most authors would agree that organisational learning can be seen as an umbrella term for organisational adaptation and knowledge processes. Unlike the "learning organization" perspective (e.g.¹⁸), organisational learning theories are descriptive and focus on the process of learning *in* or learning *of* an organisation.¹⁹ Acknowledging the importance of the ability to learn and adapt for enhancing the organisation's performance and long-term success, organisational learning can be defined as "a change in the organization that occurs as the organization acquires experience. [...] [it is] a change in the organization's knowledge that occurs as a function of experience."²⁰ Irrespectively of the level of analysis (individual versus collective learning), learning starts with experience and follows a cyclical motion of concrete experience (action), observation and reflection, formation of abstract concepts and generalisations, and testing implications of concepts in new situations.²¹ New experiences act as triggers for learning processes in which these experiences are transformed into new knowledge.

Rebelo and Duarte Gomes¹⁹ claim that future work on organisational learning should "develop cumulative empirical research centred on organizational aspects or variables related to learning in the organizational context instead of persisting in promoting general models of what a learning organization should be like." In the latest, so-called "second stage"¹⁹ of research on organisational learning, researchers tend to search for moderating and mediating variables to better explain learning on organisational level. Contributing to this ongoing research progress, this paper raises the fundamental question 'what role do needs play in organisational learning processes?'. This has not been tackled yet, even though it could shed light on possible drives that cause us to learn and change organisational reality.

It has been argued that addressing needs is an effective approach to guide organisational change²², increase employees' well-being²³ and support decision making.²⁴ Particularly, it has been shown that the consideration of needs is important for innovation processes and fosters their results.^{25,26,4,7,2,8}

Focusing on the outcome of organisational learning, we could hypothesise that a consideration of needs is beneficial in at least two aspects. First, organisational learning embracing the identification and implementation of needs may generally lead to better results. When organisations engage in such processes they reveal and get acquainted with what is necessary for meeting an end, i.e. reaching a goal or fulfilling a purpose. This is a prerequisite (though, not a prescription) for taking effective actions and, thus, meeting an end. For instance, organisations are well advised to learn about what their customers need and take actions, e.g. innovate, accordingly.²⁷ Second, a specific potentiality lies in the basic distinction between needs and the means of satisfaction (satisfiers) which can be found throughout the literature (e.g.^{28,11,7,29,30,31,32,33}). A need can be satisfied in different ways. However, the potentiality this one-to-many relation implies has received little attention (except e.g.⁷). Identifying and developing knowledge related to needs helps to reveal the motivational forces of behaviour and, most essentially, enables organisations to incorporate this knowledge into organisational learning processes, such as innovation, strategy or vision development processes. This allows for developing alternative need satisfying strategies, which could enhance conventional decision making, which starts and remains on the satisfier level only. In order to illustrate this potentiality, I highlight the principle of equifinality proposed in system theory.³⁴

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