Organizing in Action Nets : An Idea Whose Time Has Come !

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of "action nets," introduced by Barbara Czarniawska. Unlike traditional organizational studies that focus on structures, entities, or predefined boundaries, the action net perspective emphasizes the connections between actions, arguing that organizations emerge as one result of these interactions rather than existing a priori. The article positions action nets in relation to organizational fields, networks, and actor-network theory, highlighting its unique focus on temporality, fluidity, and the interplay between human and non-human actors. The article also discusses the widespread application of action nets across disciplines, demonstrating its relevance in studies of policy implementation, technology, accounting, and institutional change. By shifting attention from organizations to the processes that constitute them, the action net framework offers a valuable lens for understanding contemporary forms of organizing, such as open innovation, platform organizations, and crisis response.

1. Introducing action net

To study the practice of management and organizing as an ongoing processes Barbara Czarniawska (1997; 2004) introduced the notion of "action net", which involves connecting actions for a specific purpose within an institutional order. Such collective actions are not necessarily performed within the bounds of a specific organization; an action net may involve a great variety of organizations, or people organized into groups of a loose or temporary character. The action net approach suggest that producers, consumers and formal organizations should be seen as one result of organizing, rather than its premises (Czarniawska, 2009). Barbara thus provided management and organization studies (MOS) scholars with an approach and a tool for studying *organizing* as a process, making it possible to understand how organizations are accomplished (e.g. Weick, 1969/1979; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). The action net approach challenged more traditional ways of understating organizations in three ways.

First, from an action net perspective, space and time do not exist *a priori* (Czarniawska, 2004; Jones, McLean, and Quattrone, 2004). For example, boundaries or routines are not defined in

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advance, but negotiated and set as the process of organizing continues. Organizations are thus seen as temporary reifications as the process of organizing never ceases; in a similar vein William Starbuck (2003) referred to organizations as "action streams".

Second, for researchers, drawing lines between the inside and outside of organizations or between different levels (micro, meso, and macro) can obstruct their view of the ongoing processes of organizing, which are the sources and sites of complexities. Instead, the action net perspective urge researchers to follow the critical instances of organizing that may otherwise be obscured when studying existing entities, including organizations, structures, cultures, groups or communities and offers a vocabulary that permits a joint conceptualization of the material and the symbolic aspects of organizing (Czarniawska, 2008).

Third, this perspective deflects the division between humans and objects by focusing on actions and connections, no matter who or what performs them. The pattern of organizing that emerges from a study based on an action net perspective thus documents a process by means of which collective actions – i.e. objects, quasi-objects like organizational units and documents, and people acting – are continually being connected and enacted during the process of organizing (Czarniawska, 2008).

The purpose of adopting the action net concept is thus to free the researcher from the limitations of the traditional focus of organization studies on places, people, or issues (Czarniawska, 2004) and to allow for capturing the connections between the actions that actually occur in time and space (Korneliussen and Panozzo, 2005). We suggest that this makes action nets a particularly valuable means of studying contemporary phenomena of organizing, such as open innovation and platform organizations, which in the spirit of "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) often transcend formal organization and involve constantly and rapidly shifting groups and ideas. Taking actions as point of departure we suggest that particular attention should paid to how they are connected to, or disconnected from, each other – thus constructing a net.

In the following, we sketch the background against which the concept of action nets emerged and spread. We then position the concept in relation to other concepts such as organizational fields, actor networks and networks. Finally, we illuminate the spread of the concept to various academic fields and round off with potential future avenues to explore for those interested in examining "organizing in spite of organizations" (Czarniawska, 2013). But let us start by first sorting out what the concept of *action* meant to Barbara.

2. Background to the concept

At the time Barbara started to develop her idea of action nets, organizational scholars were predominantly interested in "behaviour", driven by the contributions of James March, Herbert Simon, and Richard Cyert at Carnegie Mellon. They conceptualized behaviour (especially the organizational form of it) as the outcome of cognitive processes – not purely rational but as shaped by bounded rationality, mental models, and cognitive limitations, to name a few. In her work, Barbara took a strong stance against behaviour as the basis for understanding social life, and organizing in particular (see e.g. ,1997) as she felt that in line with its origins in 18th century empiricism it was too strongly connected to sense data as the main units of understanding the world. She argued that the notion of behaviour refers to movements or responses that can be observed in a purely mechanical or descriptive way, stripped of

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meaning. For instance, if one views "raising a hand" as mere behaviour, it is a physical movement.

An action, in contrast, is behaviour understood in light of intentions, purposes, and reasons. It requires interpretation: to call something an action is to situate it in an actor's life, in social and institutional settings, and in histories that give it meaning. Here, "raising a hand" as an action might mean volunteering for arranging the company's annual social event, objecting to a proposal brought forth by the boss, or swearing an oath—depending on the context. If we ignore the settings in which actions make sense we cannot understand the intentions connected to them.

Furthermore, drawing upon ethnomethodology, especially the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967) and Harvey Sacks (1992), Barbara paid particular attention to the significance of the notion of *accountability* as the main social bond of human interaction. Following Harré, 1982) she argued that any manner in which things are conducted "can be treated as an action when it can be accounted for", either before the action happens, while it is underway, or after the action has happened.

Thus, the defining features of an action are its intentionality and how it can be accounted for in terms that are acceptable in each social setting.

Shifting attention away from behavior to action has consequences for how organizational researchers study "organization" and the kind of questions they ask. Importantly, this shift means that focus lies on what constitutes organizing processes in terms of actions and actors, and the connections among and between these actions and actors. It's not meaningless to do "organization" (these are actions), but it is meaningless to visit an "organization" to understand what it does and how it does what it does. After all, organizations are legal units; an organization can exist yet do nothing (as can a 'network' by the way). To accomplish anything, good or bad, "doings" are necessary, and they have to be coordinated, connected, and stabilized – temporarily or for good (Czarniawska et al., 2023).

How can a focus on these doings help researchers gain a better understanding of the processes constituting organizational phenomena, of their agential dynamics and unfolding power relations? To explore these questions, Barbara turned to Karl Weick's influential work in organizational psychology. Weick challenged the prevailing view that organizations should be understood through their design and structure—a legacy of systems theory from the 1950s and 60s. Instead, he emphasized the importance of actions and the process of organizing. In his seminal book *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969/1979), Weick described organizing as the assembly of "ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes." Weick later introduced the concept of sensemaking, which involves creating plausible images that rationalize actions. According to Weick, people act first and then make sense of their actions, which in turn informs and constrains further actions (see also Weick, 2006). Thus, the concept of "organization" emerges through sensemaking, rather than preceding or producing it (Weick, 1995). It is not difficult to see how Weick's sensemaking influenced Czarniawska's focus on the intentionality of actions. And likewise, it is not difficult to see the influence another one of Weick's key concepts had on her work: enactment. Enactment, says Weick, denotes the processes where people bring events and structures into existence through their actions. Enactment involves two steps: first, organizational actors focus on a part of their experience based on preconceptions; second, they act within the context of these bracketed elements (Weick, 1988). The resulting order is created through this process,

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meaning organizations and other phenomena emerge by being talked about and are part of ongoing sensemaking efforts (Weick et al., 2005).

Barbara believed that if researchers focus solely on "organizations" as given entities, this will most certainly obscure the complex processes of organizing through action nets that lead to their emergence and stabilization in the first place (Czarniawska, 2013). For instance, when public organizations such as the public employment office label a refugee as "unemployable", arriving at such a label involves multiple actions, humans, and objects. It involves the refugee visiting the public employment office and meeting a caseworker, having access to a room and computer equipment. Moreover, the caseworker is arranging for an interpreter, the agency's IT specialists are ensuring that the IT system functions properly, and all of them are required to follow the formal policies and guidelines established by the public employment office, to name a few (Diedrich, 2025). This complex net of actions highlights the intricate processes that underpin organizing in everyday practices and illustrates how stabilizing action nets requires the work of both humans and objects (Lindberg and Walter, 2013). But how is the concept of action net connected to other related concepts within the field of organization studies?

3. Positioning the concept

The concept of the *action net* originated in a combination of new institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and the sociology of translation (Latour, 1986), but it is tailored specifically to organization studies. Barbara founded it on "the idea that in each time and place it is possible to speak of an 'institutional order', a set (not a system) of institutions (not necessarily coherent) prevalent right then and there" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780). Action nets differ somewhat from close concepts such as organization field, networks or actor-networks when it comes to their time and space coordinates. Let us look at each of them in further detail to illuminate some sources of inspiration as well as some points of difference between these concepts and action nets.

First up, the concept of organization field, describes the frame of reference by means of which organizations deal with the same types of activity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The different actors need not know one another or meet one another, but they may serve one another as role models, competitors, or objects of desire (Hedmo et al., 2005) and organizing is accomplished with the assistance of such ideal images (Czarniawska, 2004). However, the concept of organization field does not necessarily capture the interactions actually occurring in time and space: organizations in the same field may have virtual contacts or even no direct contact at all. Barbara exemplified this by turning to her own organization – the university:

> University buildings need cleaning, even though cleaning firms do not belong to the organization field of higher education. Yet a cleaning firm on strike may seriously obstruct the 'real' work of the university. Such an entanglement can be captured in an action net (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 781).

An action net, thus, implies actual connections among actions.

Secondly, Barbara made it very clear that an action net is not the same as a network either:

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> Network assumes the existence of actors, and as it is generally understood, is a set of connections *among actors*, be they people or organizations. Action net reverts this assumption, suggesting that connections between and among actions, when stabilized, are used to connect the identities of actors (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 14).

Thus, the difference between an action net and a network is time: before networks can come into being, there must first be actors. In an action net perspective, actions come first and actors second, with networks possibly, but not necessarily, coming third (see Korneliussen and Panozzo, 2005). Actors come second in the sense that they are exchangeable and acquire an "actorial" identity from actions, not the other way round (Czarniawska, 1997). An employee becomes a manager not simply by being called a manager, but by making decisions, coordinating teams, and taking responsibility for outcomes. Thus, past actions build up actors' reputations and stabilize their identities. This brings us once more to the crucial point mentioned above: that 'actors' or 'organizations' are the products rather than the sources of the organizing (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780). It also means abandoning the dominant belief that the subject is the source of meaning and knowledge in favor of the idea that knowledge and meaning reside in practices (Nicolini, 2010). Moreover, changes in actors or the loss of an individual actor will decisively alter the character of the network, whereas a similar event in an action net, however important it may be, may only change the net slightly, if at all (Czarniawska, 1997). If one nurse quits her job, caring for the patient will not cease; someone else will take over. Patient care is what the field of practice of healthcare is all about. Action nets of this kind are shaped by institutions more durable than individual actors.

Finally, the action net perspective has drawn a lot of inspiration from Actor-network theory (ANT). Like ANT it assumes that actions create actors. And like ANT it does not distinguish between humans and objects a priori. However, unlike ANT it urges scholars to begin their studies before the networks are in place – *a reversal in the time under study* (Czarniawska, 2004). Action nets may coalesce into a network, or a macro-actor, but may also disintegrate after fulfilling their function. The latter tends to often be the case of action nets constructed in emergencies (see e.g. Renemark, 2009; Walter, 2009). Moreover, whereas ANT focuses upon the production of solidified entities, action net has a more open-ended perspective. Notably, ANT's focus on macro-actors originally stems from an interest in technology (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005), while the notion of action net stems from interest in actual organizing, with its varying results. It thus avoids some of the critique directed towards ANT on being too focused on macro-actors, rather than on "ecology" (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2005) and on how networks are sustained rather than how they are enacted (Law and Singleton, 2005). Notwithstanding the differences, the work of Karl Weick and Bruno Latour in particular have been sources of life-long inspiration for Barbara (see Czarniawska, 2005; 2022).

4. The use of the concept

Notwithstanding these practical scholarly challenges, the concept of "action nets" has been adopted to explore the dynamic and interconnected nature of organizing processes in many and varying empirical fields and connected to a diversity of perspectives, such as organizational change and the institutionalization of new organizational forms (Rindzevičiūtė, 2010; Miele et al., 2011), project management (Wåhlin et al., 2016), the coordinating of health care activities and objects across different organizations (Lindberg and Walter, 2013; Karlsson

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et al., 2020), corporate branding (von Wallpach and Hemetsberger, 2022), diversity, inclusion and the integration of refugees into the labour markets and societies (e.g. Diedrich, 2016; Napolitano et al., 2022; Bešić and Ortlieb, 2023; Diedrich, 2025), the shifting categorizations of public library membership (Cavanagh, 2015), the emergence of new accounting practices (e.g. Bruno and Lapsley, 2018), the management of waste (e.g. Campos and Zapata, 2012; Gutberlet et al., 2017; Dembek, 2020), public administration (Rämö and Wittbom, 2022), the emergence of new technologies and technology use (Campbell-Verduyn and Goguen, 2019; Zorina et al., 2021), and crisis management (Eriksson, 2012) to name but a few.

In the context of the public sector, action nets have been employed to examine how policy implementation and collaboration occur in practice. Bešić and Ortlieb (2023), for instance have highlighted the multiplicity of "actors" and "actions" involved in enacting policies in the context of refugee integration and the adaptive connections formed among them, often diverging from official plans. Another example is Karlsson et al. (2020) research on inter-organizational collaboration where they have utilized action nets to investigate how disparate actors coordinate their activities to achieve shared goals. These studies emphasize the fluidity of these arrangements, illustrating how new patterns of organizing emerge through improvisation and negotiation.

Others have used action nets within the field of accounting to investigate the construction of accounting as a dynamic and controversial process, revealing how it is built and constantly modified, reinforced or negated during the process of implementation (Bruno and Lapsley, 2018). Similarly, Bekier and Parisi (2023) used action nets to explore the process of constructing a shared consensus about performance indicators in conditions of low contractibility, where intervention objectives and outcomes are not easily quantifiable. In these studies objects and processes are ambiguous and cannot be fully specified in advance.

The concept has also been used in studies of innovation and knowledge sharing. By mapping action nets, scholars have demonstrated how ideas traverse boundaries between organizations and industries, shedding light on the informal and often serendipitous interactions that drive innovation.

Within studies of technology and its uses, Campbell-Verduyn and Goguen (2019) draw on action nets to show how blockchain applications become constructed as "trust-free" tools. By tracing the efforts to reconfigure the socio-technical composition of humans and nonhumans that constituted the payment systems they were able to show how blockchain applications shifted the location and character of the technical vulnerabilities that created market instabilities and concentration.

Focusing on materiality, Dembek (2020) discussed, in detail, the emergence of an action net in her study of the overuse of plastic disposable single-use containers. She highlights the formation and axiological tensions within the action net and the fact that the connections of actions into nets are temporary, and the disconnecting of actions is a constant alternative. Furthermore, Cavanagh (2015) conceptualized public library membership as an ongoing action net of joint intention and collective action between individual members of the public and the library, with a typology of member categories based on political and organizational modes of action.

Some other studies draw upon the concept of "knotting" the action net. For example, Gehman et al. (2013) studying the emergence and enactment of values in organizations. They introduce the concept of value practices and show how they emerge through the knotting of actors,

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events and practices into what they call action networks, which are at once a source of resilience and of fragility. In this context, "knotting" refers to the process of connecting various concerns and actors into a cohesive network to address specific issues, aligning with the notion of "action nets" where organizing emerges through linked actions. The action networks are continuously shaped and reshaped through ongoing actions and interactions, depending on what has been knotted together but also on what becomes unknotted at any given point in time.

Through a comparative historical study of community pharmacy in the UK, Italy, Sweden and the USA, Nicolini et al. (2016) examine what happens to institutional arrangements designed to resolve ongoing conflicts between institutional logics over extended periods of time. Inspired by an action net perspective they suggest that the metaphors of institutional 'knot' and 'knotting' are useful to capture aspects of dynamic and emerging constellation of logics and to foreground the discursive and material work that allows multiple logics to coexist in local arrangements with variable durability. Their study illustrates how different threads making up a knot can remain visible and recognizable over long periods of time without hybridization or dominance taking place. Furthermore, knotting highlights that actions in action nets are knotted together in knots becoming part of a net. This adds the notion of something strong, while at the same time a knot can be undone and redone. Their study thus extends the metaphor of knotting an action net, developed at a more micro level by Lindberg and Czarniawska (2006), to the institutional level.

Finally, and rather unsurprising, Barbara too adopted the concept of action nets to explore a variety of complex organizational phenomena. In her studies of managing large cities for instance she explored how city management activities such as producing, purchasing, marketing, financing, and recruiting are interconnected in an action net (Czarniawska, 2002).

Furthermore, together with her colleagues Barbara used action nets to illuminate the complex dynamics of organizing in the face of risk and threat (Czarniawska, 2009; 2011). The studies showed that when a facing threats or risks even the best plans do not function as desired. There are no recipes for how to act in such situations to resolve a crisis or mitigate a risk, but what actually happens is well-practiced improvisation, including mobilizing resources, sketching plans, building up structures and creating action nets. Thus, as Mol (2008) noted in the context of the health sector, another sector prone to emergencies, the first question ought to be "What needs to be done?" and not, as it often is, "Who is in charge?" (see also Czarniawska, 2011b).

Taken together, these studies give a flavor for the diversity of empirical fields and perspectives where action nets have been used as a meaningful concept for making sense of complex and emergent organizing processes. Notably, Barbara claimed however that she did not develop the concept of action nets with an ambition to develop a theoretical framework (Czarniawska, 2013). Instead, she was envisioning a more pragmatic use of other frameworks:

> I have no analytical ambitions for the term *action net*; to the contrary, it minimizes the a priori assumptions before the study can begin. Many studies begin with the location of actors or organizations; what I wish to emphasize is that such entities are outcomes rather than inputs of organizing. (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 13)

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Barbara suggested studying *action nets* rather than organizations to "… minimize that which is taken for granted prior to the analysis" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 780). Action nets are thus "'empty concepts', to be filled with contents until it is clear what label might be put on them. […] Studying action nets means answering a dual question: what is being done, and how does this *connect* to other things that are being done in the same context?" (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 783-784 italics added). In other words, while some scholars have recognized the analytical value of action nets (see, e.g., Lambotte and Meunier, 2013), the concept is best understood as a perspective or methodological approach rather than a theory—a distinction it shares with Actor-Network Theory. Rather than theorizing actions in themselves, action nets focus on the connections between actions. Barbara offered much guidance on how to apply this perspective in practice in her work on shadowing and other techniques to study people and objects on the move (see Czarniawska, 2007). As a result, scholars working with action nets tend to concentrate on and theorize around unfolding practices and processes among and beyond organizations. As noted above, this makes action nets particularly useful when exploring the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary phenomena of organizing, such as open innovation, platform organizations, social movements, blockchain and decentralized autonomous organizations, crowdsourcing and distributed work, to name a few, which often transcend formal organization and involve constantly and rapidly shifting groups and ideas.

Most notably however, Barbara practiced what she preached. She epitomizes, together with her work, an action net constantly in the making, creating connections between researchers, texts and quasi objects across disciplines, empirical fields and perspectives, bringing together people and objects that may otherwise not have met, and leading to the emergence of new connections and nets, not least so in the form of this Special Issue.

Keywords

action net, organizing, action, knotting, process, practice

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