



The Performative Power of Frictions and New Possibilities: Studying power, performativity and process with Follett's pragmatism

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Abstract

This article seeks to open up new possibilities for process organization studies to reimagine power and performativity by exploring the potential of Mary Parker Follett's pragmatism as process philosophy. I revisit her body of work to show how she translated her process ontology into theoretical resources and practical insights that allow for new ways of understanding power and performativity together and explore them as mutually constituting processes of organizing. In particular, I mobilize Follett's view of conflicts as emerging differences in the world and frictions as constructive conflicts with the potential to generate something new in order to introduce and conceptualize 'performative power', that is, the power emerging from relating and integrating differences in organizational situations that are experienced as frictions by people involved. Drawing on my ethnographic study of an entrepreneurship accelerator – a training programme for innovators and start-up projects – I discuss and illustrate empirically how performative power is generated from frictions that arise in ordinary lived experiences. This conceptualization of performative power is an attempt to develop a processual and performative understanding of power, and a useful lens to conduct process research. Making a connection between performative power and the experience of frictions provides a new way to see, talk and study power processually in contemporary organizations.

Keywords

Mary Parker Follett, performativity, power, pragmatism, process, process research

The greatest need of today is a keen, analytical, objective study of human relations . . . What is the central problem of social relations? It is the question of power; this is the problem of industry, of politics, of international affairs. But our task is not to learn where to place power; it is how to develop power.

(Follett, 1924, pp. ix, xii)

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So far as my observation has gone, it seems to me that whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power.

(Follett, 1925/1941, p. 101)

In the two quotes above, Mary Parker Follett is asking her readers to put power at the centre of social relations and to learn how to develop jointly co-active power. Based on her extensive experience of organizing in different contexts, from neighbourhood associations to public and industrial organizations in the United States and Europe, she provided in her writings a critical analysis of power, as ‘power-over’, the power of some person or group over some other person or group. She argued that an alternative conception of ‘power-with’, jointly developed, not coercive power, was possible and that it could be created through organizing. Her power-with perspective was grounded in her pragmatist philosophy, and theoretical and practical understanding of people’s experiences and the world she inhabited.

Power has always been a core issue in organization studies, and how power is theorized and with what consequences remains highly debated (Ailon, 2006; Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Hardy & Clegg, 1999; Pfeffer, 2013). How we understand power is connected to how we see the social world, and can make a difference to how we think and act (Lukes, 2005; Reed, 2013). Although conventionally power is conceived as the capacity to do something or a resource for doing something, the nature and the experience of power in organizational life are changing (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). This opens up new questions about performativity as an inherent possibility for power and organizing (Raffnsøe, Mennicken, & Miller, 2019) and for our theories and practices to create the social world we inhabit and bring alternative worlds into being (Bartunek, 2020; Gibson-Graham, 2008; Gond, Cabantous, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016). Hence we need new ways of thinking and studying power as a lived phenomenon in contemporary organizations (Fleming, 2014; Sutherland, Gosling & Jelinek, 2015).

In this article, I adopt a pragmatist approach in order to reimagine power and performativity through a processual lens and explore them together as interweaving dynamics of organizing (Simpson, Harding, Fleming, Sergi, & Hussenot, 2018b). Process organization studies engage both with the potentialities of process thinking to understand organizational phenomena and with the challenges of translating different process philosophies and modes of process thinking into theoretical perspectives and ways of studying organization and organizing (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Viewing pragmatism as a process philosophy opens up new possibilities for process studies and can help address these challenges of fully embracing a process ontology (Elkjær & Simpson, 2011; Lorino, 2018; Simpson & den Hond, 2021).

My process view and ontological position are both informed by Follett’s pragmatism (1918, 1919, 1924, 1941). I mobilize her processual understanding of organizing and power, including her view of conflicts as ‘emerging differences in the world’, to re-conceptualize power and performativity as mutually constituting processes of organizing. I introduce and conceptualize what I call ‘performative power’ as power that emerges from relating and integrating differences in organizational situations that are experienced as conflicts by people involved. Performative power can be seen at work by paying analytical attention to the dynamics of ‘frictions’ that are constructive conflicts with the potential to create something new.

Drawing on my ethnographic study of an entrepreneurship accelerator – a training programme for innovators and start-up projects – I discuss and illustrate empirically how performative power emerges from frictions. My analysis shows how performative power can be used to study power in organizational settings, such as the accelerator, that are characterized by the coordination

of differences and the search for novelty. I offer performative power as an attempt to develop a processual and performative conceptualization of power, and a useful lens to conduct process research. Overall, the article seeks to explore how viewing Follett's pragmatism as process philosophy opens up new possibilities for process organization studies.

The article is organized as follows. First, I briefly introduce current studies of power and performativity as processes of organizing. Then I discuss Follett's pragmatism, focusing on her process ontology and understanding of organizing and power in order to elaborate the concept of performative power. I outline the methodology before presenting the analysis of the performative power of frictions in the accelerator. I end by discussing the theoretical implications and the contributions to process studies and pragmatism in organization studies.

Process, Power and Performativity: Community is [a] process

Community is a *creative* process. It is creative because it is a process of integrating. . . . the unifying of differings. ('Community is a process', Follett, 1919, pp. 579–588)

Process studies of power and performativity are becoming a diverse and creative community of inquiry. Initially separate streams of work have started to intersect and change how we can think about power and performativity together as processes of organizing. The interweaving of the 'performativity of power' and the 'power of performativity' has generated ongoing conversations about the inner workings of performativity and the performative power of our theories, as 'performativity itself is an inherent condition of possibility for organizing and the exercise of power more generally' (Raffnsøe et al., 2019, p. 175). A good example is the debate about 'critical performativity' highlighting how theories can bring into being the socio-material production of subjectivities and identities (Cabantous, Gond, Harding, & Learmonth, 2016), the constitution of new organizational models and realities in capitalist contexts (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016) and the connections to broader social and political dynamics (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2016).

New understandings of power are emerging in traditional workplaces and in alternative forms of organizing that challenge existing theories of power (Fleming, 2014; Hardy & Thomas, 2016; Pfeffer, 2013). Work is already under way to answer the need for a new discourse and vocabulary that overcome dualistic views and assumptions of power (Ailon, 2006; Fleming & Spicer, 2008). Foucault had a major effect on organization studies' view of power (Clegg, 1989; Clegg et al., 2006; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Raffnsøe et al., 2019) and Foucauldian studies are expanding our understanding of how discourse produces power relations in organizations, including the mechanisms by which willing compliance to relations of power is achieved or resisted (Hardy & Thomas, 2016; Lukes, 2005; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011).

Process researchers have developed innovative theoretical perspectives and methods to incorporate process thinking more deeply in studies of power and performativity, and have examined their dynamic interplay across a range of related phenomena, including resistance, strategy, activism and leadership (Esper, Cabantous, Barin-Cruz, & Gond, 2017; Harding, Ford, & Lee, 2017; McCabe, 2010; Nicholson & Carroll, 2013; Simpson, Buchan, & Sillince, 2018a). Recent developments in process philosophy and theorizing have clarified the distinction between process thinking as an ontological position and process thinking as an orientation to study organization and organizing, and they have highlighted several modes of process thinking and doing process research (Helin et al., 2014; Langley & Tsoukas, 2016; Sergi, Crevani, & Aubry, 2020). Performativity, articulated in different ways by various authors, is one of the most significant implications in adopting process as ontology; that is, all accomplishments are performative (Cabantous & Sergi, 2018; Gond et al., 2016; Introna, 2013; Simpson, 2016). Undertaking empirical studies of organizing with a process ontology is,

however, extremely challenging because our spontaneous view of the world – including of processes – is entitative, not processual (Selg, 2020). Hence we need new perspectives that enhance our understanding of process as a way of seeing and living in the world.

A useful starting point to understand process as ontology is offered by Dewey and Bentley's framework and vocabulary of 'self-action', 'inter-action' and 'trans-action' (1949) to indicate modes of action and analyse conceptual distinctions between entitative and processual ontologies (Ansell, 2011; Selg, 2018; Simpson, 2009, 2016).¹ Selg and Ventsel (2020, pp. 19–20) explain these different modes of action as follows. Self-action refers to 'an action that is taken up by individual and independent entities, but need not encounter other such individual and independent entities'. Reified entities (i.e. actors, human beings or things) generate their own action. Inter-action refers to 'an action that takes place *between/among* entities that themselves are fully constituted prior to action'. Trans-action refers to 'an action that, in a way, *transcends* the entities, which are *constituted within* this action'. A trans-action is a dynamic, unfolding process. Trans-actors are beings and things that emerge from, or are constituted through, trans-actions as ongoing accomplishments and provisional effects. Trans-action departs from the other two modes of action at an ontological level and invokes a processual ontology (Simpson, 2016).

A trans-actional perspective thus comes with a number of ontological implications. First of all, the world can be seen as a flow of trans-actions, rather than as being composed of entities. Second, trans-actional relations are processual and trans-actional processes are relational (Emirbayer, 1997; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Selg & Ventsel, 2020). Third, a trans-actional view is committed to emergence, understood as the unanticipated generation and development of novelty (Simpson, 2016), where trans-actions have constitutive and creative potential (Selg, 2020).² Trans-actional relations knit together – constitute and potentially transform – actors and situations in the processual unfolding of organizing. Therefore, a trans-actional perspective is fundamentally processual and performative.

Whereas self-actional and inter-actional perspectives see and analyse processes as entities (e.g. power as resource, property or a relation between actors), trans-actional perspectives view them as unfolding, ongoing processes that are constitutive of and emergent from the flows within which they are involved (e.g. power as dynamic process that is constitutive of and emergent from organizing and vice versa). Trans-actional insights resonate with various philosophical and theoretical perspectives that are informing process studies of organizing.³ As I discuss next, pragmatism offers a trans-actional view of action and process that translates process as ontology into theoretical perspectives, concepts and analytical tools to support processual studies of organization and organizing (Elkjær & Simpson, 2011; Lorino, 2018; Simpson, 2009; Simpson & den Hond, 2021).

Follett's Pragmatism: A relation process ontology of organizing and power

In this section I introduce Follett's process ontology and discuss her theory of integration and creative view of organizing and experience. I then focus on her perspective of power-with and the key related concepts of differences, constructive conflicts and possibilities. Finally, mobilizing Follett's work, I propose a conceptualization of performative power to reimagine power and performativity together as mutually constituting processes of organizing.

A relational process ontology and a view of organizing

Follett's worldview is aligned with that of other pragmatists, but it also differs significantly. Her pragmatism was based on a relational process ontology⁴ where the world is viewed as in constant flux and as a complex whole. She drew on William James (1890/1950, cited in Follett, 1919, 1924)

to claim that existence is always unfolding in a process of becoming where change itself – potentiality – is the only thing that is constant and is experienced as a flow of possibilities (Follett, 1919, 1924; Stout & Love, 2015). Follett's conceptualization of the self is similar to George Herbert Mead's view of the individual as self-in-and-through-others (Simpson, 2009), as 'the self is always in flux weaving itself out of its relations' (Follett, 1919, p. 577). Like John Dewey, Follett put solving social and political problems at the centre of her theory of action, whereby to act is to live collectively with a focus on how problems can be addressed and solved, framed by a democratic ethos and strongly focused on societal progress and growth (Ansell, 2009; Frega, 2019).

Follett's pragmatism has three distinctive features. Her thinking was based on her interdisciplinary education and familiarity with intellectual developments of her time, as well as on her own experience of working, studying and consulting for public and private organizations, including community centres and neighbourhood organizations, the US House of Representatives, and industrial firms (Tonn, 2003). This research approach, unusual for her time, resonates with the participatory research endeavours of scholars today (Stout & Love, 2015). Moreover, Follett's writings – developing insights from listening to conversations and observing organizational experiences – set her apart in the effective use of language and ordinary examples. Her attention to words is well illustrated by the discussion of the preposition 'with' and its use, central in her thinking: 'With is a pretty good preposition, not because it connotes democracy, but because it connotes functional unity, a much more profound conception than that of democracy as usually held.' In a note she explained that 'with' 'is understood as indicating an interweaving, not mere addition (M.P.F.)' (Follett, 1925/1941, p. 62). Finally, Follett's way of theorizing was iterative and based on 'sensitizing' concepts. She developed a distinctive vocabulary, building across disciplinary areas and empirical situations, with some foundational concepts – like 'integration', the 'law of the situation', 'creative experience' and 'power-with' – that are closely related and based on a common set of principles. Their meanings need to be understood through their interdependence, however, and as results of Follett's relational process thinking, starting from a theoretical framework of creative integration and experience.

The theory of creative integration. The core elements of her theoretical framework are integration, the situation and the method of integration (Stout & Love, 2015). Integration needed to be understood as a process; she insisted that 'there is no result of process but only a moment in process', and often referred to 'integrating'. Integration – sometimes 'circular response' and 'reciprocal relating' – is relational and 'reality is in the relating, in the activity-between'. We as human beings are not something separate in ourselves but something in relation to others, because a 'circular response' perspective implies that, 'by the very process of meeting, we both become something different' (Follett, 1924, p. 63). Through circular relationships people continuously re-create each other, and there is a reciprocal influence between the whole and the parts. Groups are the result of the interweaving of individuals because 'unity is always a process, not a product' (Follett, 1941, p. 195). The group process depends on the continual integration of differences where the focus is on interdependency and coordination involving a number of individuals and groups that discover joint interests in a situation. The interweaving of activities and progressive integration of potentially diverse desires and interests lead to joint action and commitments, and the recognition of interdependence with others.

Follett viewed the situation as a relational and dynamic whole. All those within a situation – humans and non-humans – are in dynamic relations of mutual influence and responsive to their environment. Acting within a situation requires being responsive to the evolving situation, and the overall situation, represented by the reciprocal relating between people, activities and the environment. This is the dynamic context that includes the physical and social aspects of the situation,

which require specific ways of knowing, understanding and finding agreement (Stout & Love, 2015). People involved in the situation should work together to understand and obey the law of the situation, which gives power to the overall situation, the situation and the group process and not to specific people, positions or organizations.

As a method, integration is also iterative and constituted by related elements, including a disposition, a style of relating, a mode of association and an approach to action (Stout & Love, 2015). Follett described disposition as an attitude: ‘the will to will the common will’ (Follett, 1918, p. 50). The relational disposition generates a style of relating that is cooperative and enables participatory interactions as modes of association. Genuine participation is necessary for the group process to create integration. Integration is neither easy nor always possible, however. When it happens it generates a new unity, in the sense of a moment in the process of integration more than its final outcome. It is a movement forward beyond the possibilities that already exist to create something new (Whipps, 2014). Follett illustrated creative integration with a simple example. ‘In the Harvard Library one day, in one of the smaller rooms, someone wanted the window open, I wanted it shut. We opened the window in the next room, where no one was sitting’ (Follett, 1941, p. 32). Integrating is in fact about jointly unifying and iteratively creating something new (Stout & Love, 2015; Whipps, 2014).

Creative experience and (group) organizing. Follett viewed integration as a ‘creative experience’, also the title of her book (Follett, 1924). Experiencing requires active participation in events or activities, always in an effort to create something new. It becomes creative when differing interests meet and confront one another through a process of integration. She explained that we need to investigate actual experience to ‘find out what *may* be, the possibilities now open to us. . . . We want to know how men can interact and coact better: (1) to secure their ends; (2) to understand and so broaden their ends’ (Follett, 1924, p. xii). Follett proposed ‘creative experiencing’, and variations such as ‘experience as creating’, as an alternative to rational problem-solving, which she viewed as too simplistic, too linear and too detached from social relations. Further, organizing is a relational and emergent social process that depends on the integration of all participants’ experiences and an emergent purpose (Rylander Eklund & Simpson, 2020). So she focused on ‘that method of organization that will generate power’ (Follett, 1941, p. 111), which means horizontal organizational arrangements like groups that allow people to act together and practise and experience power.

A power-with perspective

All Follett’s major concepts link back, through a relational way of thinking, to power-with, which can be viewed as the central concept in her work. She developed power-with as a concept with a normative orientation, well illustrated by the quotations at the beginning of the paper. Power-with is jointly developed and non-coercive power. It is a processual understanding of power, which is both the process that develops power and what is created by power.

Follett started from a provisional definition of power as ‘simply the ability to make things happen, to be a causal agent, to initiate change’ (Follett, 1925/1941, p. 99), and added that ‘genuine power is capacity’ (Follett, 1925/1941, p. 109). By ‘capacity’ she did not mean ‘an inscribed capacity waiting to be deployed’, as in a more conventional view of power.

Control might be defined as power exercised as means towards a specific end; authority, as vested control. And we should remember in this study that power and strength are not always synonymous; it is sometimes through our weakness that we get control of a situation. (Follett, 1925/1941, p. 99)

She characterized ‘power-over’ as the ‘logic of the crowd’, embodied by authoritarian systems, and ‘power-with’ as the ‘logic of the group’, embodied by democratic systems. ‘Power-over’, a dyadic power typical in command-and-authority situations, should be replaced by ‘power-with’, which is a jointly developed power that emerges in situations through the process of integration under the law of the situation.

Power-with becomes a generative force created through collaboration, which in turn serves to unify individuals in groups, ‘while allowing for infinite differing, does away with fighting’ (Follett, 1941, p. 115). Follett’s key insight was the recognition that diversity is a critical condition for progress and growth (Pratt, 2011). Power-with is generated through the group process and creative integration. It is the power of the group to bring together diversity, by conflicting yet integrating differences, and to generate new values and solutions that create social change and growth. Through integration, diversity and conflicts generate power-with in a reciprocal and iterative relation.

Differences, constructive conflicts and new possibilities. These are key concepts in understanding power-with as a perspective. Conflicts are the appearance of emerging differences in the world, not necessarily good or bad. Follett suggested that we should make conflicts – and differences in interests, values, purposes or desires – work for us by using suitable strategies, so they become ‘constructive conflicts’ or ‘frictions’. Integration not only resolves specific conflicts but also transforms conflicts into opportunities to create something new. She noted three main ways to deal with conflicts: domination, compromise and integration. Domination is based on relations of asymmetry, by which one side strives to impose its views upon the other. Compromise, as an instrumental form of reasoning, is the best means of finding solutions where situations are well defined from the start and forms of interaction are based on the mutual renunciation of personal interest. Integration is not either/or, neither compromise nor coercion, but constantly evolving resolutions based on the continual integration of differences. Although Follett emphasized integration, she made an accommodation for disintegration in the creative process as ‘we should always see the relation between disruptive and creative forces; disruption may be a real moment of integration’ (Follett, 1924, p. 178). Conflicts can be integrated through the techniques of disintegration and revaluation (e.g. putting cards on the table, dialogue, and creative resolution or integration by the creation of new common interests, values or purposes).

The integrative resolution of conflicts is possible through cooperative patterns of interaction where conflicting claims can be clearly identified and the law of the situation discovered. To make conflict constructive requires paying attention to the use of language, transforming ‘fighting’ into ‘conferring’. When conversations and discussions fail to resolve differences, as ‘genuine integration occurs in the sphere of activities, not of ideas or wills’ (Follett, 1924, p. 150), they can be integrated only through actual practice (Tonn, 2003). Integration becomes a cooperative inquiry where conflicts are accepted and transformed into frictions, which may be viewed as renewable sources of creative energies that can be put to work.

Finally, the concept of possibilities is key to the conception of power-with. Follett claimed that power-with or ‘a jointly developing power means the possibility of creating new values’ (Follett, 1925/1941, pp. 113–114). This possibility emerges when we make conflict constructive through creative integration. She repeatedly referred to ‘possibilities’, especially in *Creative Experience*, with practical examples viewing possibilities as means and ends where ‘means and ends truly and literally make each other’ (Follett, 1919, p. 579). Possibilities can be viewed as means and ends by which the present is not only shaped but also changed as they provide the force to transform actual situations and open up new possibilities (e.g. new actions, values, purposes and meanings).

In sum, Follett developed a relational process ontology that she translated in a systematic network of conceptualizations where power-with is the central concept. Moreover, she provided

practical insights and applications of her theoretical ideas. The impact of her power-with perspective is generated by its ontological grounding and its theoretical and empirical potential.

A Follettian conceptualization of performative power and a trans-actional lens

I draw on Follett's relational process ontology and power-with perspective to study power and performativity together as mutually constituting processes of organizing. Here I define 'performative power' as *the continuous relating and integrating of emerging differences that may be consequential in the flow of trans-actions of organizational becoming*. Trans-actors and situations emerge together as performative accomplishments in this continuous flow of organizational becoming. Trans-actions that mutually constitute these trans-actors and situations have the potential to transform them. This potential to create something new, emergent novelty, offers possibilities that can change the flow of trans-actions, making them consequential. I define 'conflicts' as the evolving situations that arise from continuous relating and integrating emerging differences and consequences, and 'frictions' as the constructive conflicts with the potential to create something new. I employ conflicts and frictions as sensitizing concepts to study performative power empirically.

Methodology

I take a processual approach to study how performative power is generated from the frictions that arise in ordinary lived experience, drawing on my ethnographic study of an entrepreneurship accelerator. Organizational ethnography enables one to study processes of organizational life as they happen – in vivo and in situ – and 'from within' (Elsbach & Kramer, 2016; Shotter, 2006; Van Hulst, Ybema, & Yanow, 2016). Ethnographic fieldwork provides a situated understanding of 'people doing things together' that, in combination with abductive analysis, can unveil relational processes of meaning-making (Barley, 1990; Fine & Hallett, 2014; Leibel, Hallett, & Bechky, 2018; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

Research context

Entrepreneurship accelerators are convenient sites for conducting processual studies of organizing because of their 'bounded becoming' (Sergi, 2012). They are training organizations that 'accelerate' people and projects. They support participants to form and develop collaborative, innovative start-up projects that solve problems by providing concentrated resources in terms of education, mentoring, networking and funding. Accelerators are also project-based organizations. They are temporary (the training programme normally runs for three to nine months), iterative (the programme is repeated over different rounds with some changes) and performative (as evidenced by changes in jobs and careers, the creation of successful start-ups and the transformation of local ecosystems). The accelerator organization becomes visible through situations of interactions that can be studied, such as meetings, classes, face-to-face and online mentoring sessions, and informal gatherings.

I conducted an ethnographic study of an accelerator based in a large European city, organized by a regional development agency in collaboration with private and public partners. A small number of staff managed the training programme, the educational content was delivered by a stable network of collaborators and partners (e.g. consultants and guest speakers) and mentoring provided by a small pool of successful local and international entrepreneurs. The curriculum was based on project-based learning, focusing on the use of innovation and entrepreneurship methodologies and

tools (e.g. design thinking, lean start-up and business model canvas), and was delivered with the support of other local and international academic and business partners. New participants were recruited in each round of the accelerator programme, with a focus on selecting people with a balanced mix of technical and business backgrounds, genders, ages (normally between their mid-20s and late 30s) and nationalities (European, South American and Australian). In each round a small cohort of 10–12 people was organized into three teams, each assigned to a sponsor organization, with which they collaborated to find and solve a problem relevant to the sponsor and with commercial potential. The programme regularly starts in January and ends in November, and I studied its fourth round in 2017.

Methods

Access and position in the field. My access to the accelerator was negotiated and granted based on a project proposal accepted by the director of the programme and explained to the other staff and participants. I had considerable autonomy and access to situations and people, which included making themselves available for interviews and informal conversations. Access was denied only once, as I shall explain later.

Data collection. Observation was the main method of data collection. The fieldwork included direct observation during more than 15% of the accelerator's working days (28 days). Data were collected through notes that were taken both as events happened or immediately afterwards and through pictures, videos and other digital traces to deepen my understanding of the organizational life of the accelerator. Observations were mostly non-participant and on site. I switched to participant observation, in a few situations, for instance, during a creativity workshop where I became involved in activities alongside the participants. A few observations also took place online, using videoconferencing tools. I sat in on several face-to-face mentoring sessions on different aspects of the projects (e.g. product development and prototyping), where the teams were discussing different aspects of the projects with mentors and exchanging documents, pictures and other digital materials. I also shadowed the accelerator's director when he attended an annual event with other managers from similar programmes in Europe and the US. These different forms of observations provided a composite view of the accelerator's everyday organizational life, enriched by interviews and other data collection methods.

Before entering the site, I collected and assembled archival data, including documents, videos, websites and blogs. In addition to the informal conversations that naturally occurred during the observations and regular catching-up triggered by participants every time I came back to the site, I conducted in-depth and repeated interviews with staff, participants and other people involved (e.g. mentors and speakers) during different stages of the programme (24 interviews in total with 16 different people; 8 recorded interviews).

Data analysis. I used an abductive approach to data analysis and interpretation (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). At the first stage of the analysis, conducted during the fieldwork, the field notes and other material were summarized in memos on key themes in the data and in logs with reflections on the work in the field. The second stage, carried out after leaving the field site, was based on an iterative and comparative development of emerging patterns in the data. 'The creation and resolution of conflicts' became a central pattern in the analysis. Many day-to-day activities and different moments were characterized by disagreements, tensions, disputes, struggles and contention. Some disputes and confrontations were down to simple misunderstandings and differences in views, as well as the diversity of participants. In other cases, conflicts led to progress and reframing aspects

of the projects, and even significant changes in direction. In other tense situations nothing seemed to happen. The experiences that I captured in the notes in those critical moments seem to suggest that some people involved felt puzzled, perhaps even troubled at times, and others elated and full of energy.

Directing the analytical gaze towards conflicts helped to focus on the ‘productive power of conflicts’. In the last stage of the analysis I iterated between data and theory. Follett’s (1924, 1941) writings on power and conflicts were useful in thinking about constructive conflicts as differences being held in tension and how they could potentially generate something new in some situations through ‘friction’. She wrote, ‘I call this: setting friction to work, making it *do* something’ (1925/1941, p. 35). Thinking about some conflicts as frictions generated small abductive leaps that overall resulted in a new way to interpret the data. I came to view the continuous production and resolution of conflicts in the organizational life of the accelerator as the unfolding of power in this organization that could be seen at work by paying analytical attention to the dynamics of frictions.

Presenting data and findings: three vignettes. The data and their interpretation are presented in three vignettes that exemplify conflict situations. The focal point of each vignette is a detailed account of how conflicts and frictions emerged in the situation, the people involved and their relations, how they were resolved, and their consequences (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). My position as actor in the situation is embedded in the text. The interpretation of each vignette follows immediately after the narrative and focuses on analysing performative power using the trans-actional lens described earlier.

The Performative Power of Frictions

I illustrate and analyse how performative power is generated from frictions in three situations that are typical of an accelerator: a class (vignette 1), a mentoring session (vignette 2), and graduation day and the last day of the programme (vignette 3).

Vignette 1: The class discussion of the ‘1/3 equity rule’

After welcome and ice-breaking activities on the first day of the programme, next day the participants attended a class on intellectual property rights and start-up law delivered by two lawyers. The contract that people were required to sign to take part in the programme was discussed during the class and the lawyer explained ‘the 1/3, 1/3 and 1/3 equity rule’: participants would have the right to one-third of the ownership of any results coming out of their work and projects during the accelerator and beyond; another one-third going to the accelerator; and the final one-third to the sponsor organizations. ‘Taking an equity slice’ is a common practice in accelerators. On average the equity taken is between 6% and 10%, although some programmes, especially publicly funded ones, are ‘equity free’, and even provide some forms of living expenses for the duration of the programme.

The 1/3 equity rule embedded in the contract triggered a heated discussion between the lawyers, the participants and a senior staff member. The latter was sitting at the back of the room during the class doing her email, but clearly following the discussion. At one point she turned to me and said,

They always react badly to this ‘shocking news’ that actually is written in the contracts that we have been emailing them before the start of the programme. This is why we put this class at the beginning, based on what happened in previous years during this class. They do not understand that their fees do not cover much. Moreover, we do a lot of work and so does the sponsor organization. But most importantly two-thirds of zero is still zero.

She then stood in front of the room and explained that the contract was a standard agreement, often found in academic organizations and similar institutions. The accelerator's practice was to have the participants sign a standard agreement at the beginning of the programme, with the informal understanding that the exploitation of the rights from the projects, if they were done through a start-up, was open to negotiation at the end.

[Participant 1] Can you share a case about exploitation of the results?

[Staff] This standard agreement was changed in the two cases that happened and was made more in favour of the fellows.

[Participant 2] I ask for transparency . . . after we have done so much work on the project . . . that's not fair that the majority of ownership is taken away from us.

This conversation started by a participant gradually engaged more than half of them and lasted around two hours, taking the entire session and extending into the evening. At the end of the session I approached a couple of the participants who were most involved in the discussion. They both expressed their unhappiness about 'doing all the work and [having] the results taken away', and said that they had to think about whether their ongoing participation was worth it.

The next time that I joined the programme I noticed there were fewer participants than before. The two that I had approached were still there but the participant who had started the discussion had gone and a new participant had taken her place. When I asked the staff about it, they told me that 'we had a discussion with her, and we encouraged her to leave. This was a better result for her, the other participants and the programme. . . . She was a sort of troublemaker . . . we have learnt to spot them from the beginning.'

Becoming active participants and understanding part-taking. The vignette shows the potential for transformation in the trans-actional relations knitting together actors and their situations. The class becomes a situation where conflicts emerge and become frictions. As Follett suggested, understanding conflicts does not mean they are avoided, but it means 'playing the game differently', which means relating and integrating all the interests to create new possibilities. The class is intentionally positioned at the beginning of the programme to bring differences in views, interests and understandings into the open so they can be scrutinized and resolved.

The vignette illustrates how the actors themselves can be changed at the same time as their situations. By engaging in the discussion of the $1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3$ rule, participants develop their understanding of what it means to work together and accept the underpinning interdependency of the creative experience in the accelerator. It is about working not only with other participants but also with the accelerator – which includes staff, mentors and relevant others – and sponsor organizations, who are also active participants in the programme. All of them are 'part-takers' – in the double meaning of 'taking part in the activity' and 'taking a part of the result' – and the $1/3$ rule becomes the law of the situation when viewed in the collaborative context of the programme, which aligns the interests of all actors involved. The participative relation that organizes the accelerator programme is made clear and tangible by the symbolism of the $1/3 + 1/3 + 1/3$ rule and materialized in the contract that the participants sign at the outset.

Moreover, in the evolving situation, actors create new meanings that open up new possibilities and trigger new actions. The contract becomes a temporary agreement that can be reopened and renegotiated at the end of the programme. The future possibility of reopening the contract transforms the meaning of the contract for many of the participants. The new understanding of it gives provisional stability for people to start working together within the programme and to manage the uncertainty involved in creating something new. It distributes the rewards but also, mostly, the risks. Based on this expanded understanding of the $1/3$ rule and the contract, the participant who

does not seem to accept them becomes a ‘troublemaker’ who is encouraged to leave. It is an unexpected situation of conflict that actors need to resolve through dialogue and through opening up the possibility of leaving the programme. This is a consequential change for the participant who is leaving and the programme that needs to replace her.

In sum, creative experience depends on the integration of the experiences of all actors who are working together. They become active participants. The vignette highlights both the relating and integrating of differences, with emerging consequences and new differences, and the collective and interdependent aspects of performative power, as well as the importance of temporal anticipations of possible futures.

Vignette 2: A mentoring session and its follow-up meetings

The teams present their projects and the work undertaken since previous meetings in mentoring sessions. Normally, a member of the team presents the project – or pitches, to use the business term – and other members attend the session and take questions. The mentors ask questions and challenge the assumptions of the projects to help the teams to think about different aspects of their work. This vignette illustrates what happened during a mentoring session and follow-up meetings during the last couple of months of the programme. At this stage, the teams had been working on their projects for more than five months in collaboration with the sponsor organization. The following excerpt is from an exchange during a team presentation.

- [Presenter] This is our global market with 173 million dollars around the world. Our estimation is that we can reach a market of 3.7 millions.
- [Mentor 1] I see some major weaknesses here. . . . There are many small markets in different countries that combined together just form a small global market . . . after four years to create a company and 5 million investment, investors will not want 100 millions in sales.
- [Mentor 2] What about competitive technologies like . . . are they not already in the same market that you are targeting? You need to pivot to a different market.
- [Mentor 3] What about moving from targeting the immunization to the therapeutic market? The latter is 95% of the whole injection market.

The presenter, supported by her team, provided convincing answers to the volley of questions from the mentors. The other two team presentations and mentor discussions followed similar dynamics and involved questions about the targeted market, a popular topic. Afterwards all the teams went for some drinks in the local bar, looking satisfied about their presentations and cheerfully chatting on the way out.

The next day, each team had a follow-up meeting with some staff to discuss next steps in the projects, including the approaching deadline for submission of consultancy reports to the sponsor organizations. In two meetings the staff praised the performance of the teams during the session with the mentors, and the progress made. In the third meeting, with the team involved in the exchange quoted above, it became clear that the team was falling apart, and the project was not going anywhere. Team members voiced their disagreements on how to solve the problems identified in the session with the mentors. With just a few weeks left before the end of the programme, they had little to show for the final presentation. On leaving the room and walking to the programme’s offices I asked the senior staff what she made of what we had just seen. ‘They are what we thought was our best team, and to be honest I am surprised,’ she said. ‘They have been fighting for ages between them without settling on anything.’ She shook her head and seemed as puzzled as I was.

Later that day I had the chance to discuss these events with the director of the programme. He knew what had happened with the last team in the follow-up meeting, but said he was not too concerned because ‘we will make them have something to present, do not worry. . . . They can still create something good. If not, we will make them settle on something good enough [pause] to be presented. We have seen this before, in other editions of the program.’ The team presented their project at the final event, as discussed in the third vignette.

Becoming team members and a team is an integrative group process. Here we can understand not only how actors become team members, but also how a ‘team’ is as much a product of relations as it is an integrative group process that continuously emerges from the continual and progressive integration of differences. During the mentoring session the actors become ‘team members’ by presenting and answering questions about their projects. Experienced founders become ‘mentors’ by asking challenging questions and providing constructive feedback, based on their own experiences, and on anticipation of the future in terms of the potential market and other factors. The market invoked by the mentors and materialized by talking about numbers, size and money becomes part of the law of the situation. The direct ‘giving of orders’ by the mentors – e.g. ‘you need to pivot’ – is depersonalized by the team members, who are working together to create larger market opportunities for their respective projects. All the actors involved in the mentoring situation understand and work to enhance their interdependency and coordination. Following the law of the situation requires a contingent and situated understanding of the evolving situation and the broader context, which includes integrating potentially diverse interests, values and understandings of mentors, targeted customers and other actors. However, ‘pivoting’ to a new market could be consequential. It requires making changes and potentially disrupting a developing project. This can iteratively generate new differences and integration.

The second part of the vignette shows that a team is both a continuous integrative group process and a performative accomplishment that is provisional and uncertain. There are challenges in building meaningful relations across differences that need to be continuously re-evaluated and integrated to create something new. In this situation, conversations and discussions failed to resolve the conflicts and the actors did not seem able to create genuine integration through activities and joint experiences. As Follett suggested, bringing differences into the open, transforming conflicts into frictions and putting them to work can be a useful way to think about the creative integration process. It requires an integrative attitude and a joint search for meanings and purposes by the people involved, together with regular communication and opportunities for direct contact, like mentoring and coaching sessions and meetings. Integrating can be acquired as a method through practice and training, and involves ongoing, painstaking work where previous accomplishments can be undone. It also takes time and might not work as expected.

In sum, the two situations – a mentoring session and follow-up meetings – are not exceptional, but ordinary working situations in the organizational becoming of the accelerator. For this reason, they are useful to highlight how consequential some mundane actions may be in opening up and closing down possibilities, and changing the flow of organizational becoming. With this vignette we can understand further the impersonal, contingent and uncertain aspects of performative power.

Vignette 3: Graduation day and the last meetings

Graduation day included a public event and a party. The event was structured as a series of talks performed in front of a selected public, which included families and friends of the participants, guests from other accelerator programmes in Europe, investors, sponsor organizations and the media. The director introduced the programme and the new initiatives planned by the accelerator.

He presented the outcomes of the programme so far, including some of the results embodied by the next speaker, who was introduced as the co-founder of 'the only start-up that has a product on the market among the ones that have been generated by this programme and similarly in Europe'. The co-founder presented the story of his start-up project, lessons learned in the previous four years, and future plans and expectations – combining start-up jargon with humour and a dusting of self-irony that amused the audience. He raised expectations for the pitches by the teams, who each presented their project, focusing on the innovative idea that they had been working on, the problem they were solving, the targeted market and the plans and milestones to make it a success. A 'Q&A' session followed with all team members and experts including two international guests and the start-up co-founder. The questions were targeted at evaluating the idea, market opportunities, projects and teams, without being too challenging. All the teams performed well, and everybody celebrated at the party.

The key meeting of the last day of the programme was the '360-degree' feedback session with all team members. When I discussed the purpose of the meeting with the staff, they said the participants would be encouraged to comment on what worked and what did not work in the programme. They planned to use the feedback to revise and refine it. I was surprised when my invitation to attend was withdrawn at the last minute in a conversation with the director. The reason he gave was unclear, and our conversation quickly and unexpectedly became tense. Later, based on interviews and conversations with some participants, I discovered that the feedback meeting had been heated, more than the staff expected. Many participants expressed frustration and told staff they did not intend to continue their projects or collaborate with the programme.

In the following months, the staff met each team and participant again to discuss the possibility of continuing to collaborate, whether continuing the start-up project with the same team or on their own, and to negotiate the new equity structure, starting from the contract that was signed at the beginning of the programme. The eventual results of these negotiations and the consequences set in motion were that only two of the 11 participants decided to continue the project, each of them without their team members but in collaboration with the accelerator and the sponsor organizations. Some participants remained involved with competitions and other activities of the programme and its international network.

Becoming entrepreneurs and projecting possible future(s). The first part of the vignette highlights how temporal interdependency is a constitutive dimension of the knitting together of actors and situations. Becoming entrepreneurs is a performative accomplishment that emerges from the reciprocal relating and integrating of different actors. The team members become 'entrepreneurs' in the context of interdependency and coordination with each other and also with other actors, in particular the start-up co-founder. The participants are 'projecting possible future(s)' and opening up new possibilities. That means they blend the present with the future that is projected and anticipated as full of opportunities and possibilities. These projections and anticipations are aligned with and embodied by the start-up co-founder, whose actions are seen as intertwined with those of the participants. This dynamic alignment and binding of action expand the participants' present activities and create new possibilities. These new possibilities can be experienced and interpreted differently by the people involved in these situations, triggering what can be seen by the participants and other actors as exciting, surprising, puzzling and unexpected reactions. The relational and temporal aspects of the flow of trans-actions that constitute and transform the actors and the situation are intertwined.

I have included the withdrawal of my invitation to the final feedback meeting and my exchange with the director to illustrate how power can be experienced beyond words in interactions. In the other two vignettes I attempted to render some emotional aspects of the interactions that I captured

in the data: surprise, humour, cheerfulness and unhappiness. My personal experience of friction in the situation with the director triggered new possibilities for thinking differently about how performative power works and what it does. I return to this point below, when discussing ideas for future studies, in terms of the role of the body, affect and materiality on the study of performative power that emerges in situations. Here, it is relevant to point out that although the conversation remained mostly polite, it was unexpectedly intense. It also affected my sense of time, as I did not immediately realize that our exchange had lasted 75 minutes.

The second part of the vignette shows how conflicts can be transformed into creative frictions and can develop new opportunities when actors extend the uncertainty and temporality of the situation. 'Leaving the situation open' instead of 'defining the situation' results in extending the period of uncertainty before committing or binding to possible trajectories of action, which can be helpful in creating new possibilities. Moreover, instead of integration, actors can in some situations choose to 'dis-integrate' from their existing groups and continue their creative journey with other actors within their community. The disintegration of some relations can open up the possibility for new relations and integrations.

To summarize, the analysis of this vignette points out the importance of temporal interdependency, projectivity and anticipation of possible and plausible futures, and other temporal dynamics of performative power. It also suggests that disruptions of temporality and relationality matter.

Performative Power and New Possibilities

Brilliant empiricists have poked much pleasant fun at those who tell us of some vague should-be instead of what is. We want something more than either of these; we want to find out what *may* be, the possibilities now open to us. This we can discover only by experiment. (Follett, 1924, pp. xi–xii)

This study offers a processual analysis of how performative power emerges in the unfolding of organizational becoming. Paying analytical attention to conflict situations and frictions in the organizational life of an accelerator reveals performative power in the trans-actional relations that knit actors and situations together. The three vignettes provide a composite picture of how actors can themselves be changed at the same time as their situations, and the potential in the trans-actional relations to create new actions and new possibilities for people to act on. New possibilities emerge through the continuous process of creative integration of differences and conflicts. These possibilities may be consequential and create novelty.

Drawing on Follett's relational process ontology of organizing and power, I have defined 'performative power' as the continuous relating and integrating of emerging differences that may be consequential in the flow of trans-actions of organizational becoming. My analysis of performative power reveals three main theoretical insights. First of all, performative power is a collective and mundane, yet interdependent and impersonal process. It is collective and mundane in the sense that power emerges from the trans-actions of actors doing things together in ordinary situations. From a trans-actional perspective, actors and situations are mutually constituted with power. The attention to the trans-actional dimension of action emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependency of people who act together. Thus, performative power is interdependent and impersonal because 'nobody and everybody' is in charge of its emergent becoming (Introna, 2013; Selg & Ventsel, 2020). Second, performative power can emerge from temporal interdependency and disruption dynamics. Power can be developed through connecting and aligning present actions to reinterpretations of the past, and anticipations and projections of possible futures (Mische, 2009; Simpson, 2009). Temporal disruptions can result from the constant relating and integrating of emerging differences and conflicts. These temporal ruptures and interruptions can generate new

relational possibilities and novelty (Carlile, 2004; Tavory, 2018) but they also demand flexibility and adaptation to a life of constant disruption (Fleming, 2014). Third, performative power highlights that change can be transient, contingent and provisional, but needs to be consequential for the ongoing flow of organizing, that is, meaningful for the actors involved so as to shape their future actions (Carlile & Dionne, 2018; Reed, 2013). Consequences can be seen as changing directions in the flow of trans-actions (Simpson et al., 2018a) and as creating provisional stability and facilitating action in situations of intense uncertainty. Thus, performative power points towards a view of power that is more nuanced and not as 'powerful' as we expect it to be, but still consequential and potentially creative.

Performing processual possibilities for process organization studies

In this article, I have explored the potential of Follett's pragmatism for process organization studies and for reimagining power and performativity as mutually constituting processes of organizing. As several scholars note, pragmatism has contemporary resonances and rich potential to contribute to contemporary organization studies (Elkjær & Simpson, 2011; Farjoun, Ansell, & Boin, 2015; Lorino, 2018; Simpson & den Hond, 2021). Yet Follett's pragmatist perspective remains seriously under-represented in organizational research (for exceptions see Ansell, 2009; Hafting & Lindhult, 2013; Lorino & Mourey, 2013; Rylander Eklund & Simpson, 2020). Conventional readings of Follett's work in organization studies tend to focus on individual concepts and insights like 'power-with' and 'conflicts as emerging differences in the world', and pay only limited attention to the deep relational thinking and concerns that anchored those ideas (e.g. Boje & Rosile, 2001; Clegg et al., 2006; Contu, 2019; Graham, 1995). In contrast, I have started my exploration of Follett's body of work with her ontological position and the concerns she sought to address. My first contribution in this paper comes from revisiting Follett's key writings (1918, 1919, 1924, 1941) and showing that while aligned with other classical pragmatists – notably James, Dewey and Mead – her pragmatism is excitingly different and full of potential that can be tapped by process organization studies. This is because she demonstrated how a process ontology can be developed and translated into theoretical resources and practical understandings that allow for new ways of process thinking and research. Her way of working opens up new possibilities for generative process theorizing about power and organizing; it also helps to understand the performative power of her concepts themselves. Ontologies of the social world and ways of theorizing power are connected (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Lukes, 2005; Pratt, 2011; Reed, 2013).

I have discussed how Follett's theorizing and concept-making were deeply relational, recursive, forward-looking and open-ended. She proposed different terms that allowed for surprising insights, like 'power-with'. Her theories and concepts highlighted new connections – for instance, between power and creative experience. They provide directions for research and analysis, with particular attention to 'what may be'. She showed how concepts are fluid, open to revision and adaptable, and so useful to build 'new' concepts. Her theories and concepts are processual and performative tools that actively help to make the world by thinking otherwise. Her style of theorizing and concept-making could be examined further in relation to current conversations about process theorizing (Cloutier & Langley, 2020).

My second contribution of this paper is to introduce and conceptualize performative power as power that emerges and can be experienced through frictions in organizational life. Embracing Follett's relational process ontology and thinking about organizing and power, I have mobilized her understanding of differences, conflicts and frictions and turned them into a conceptualization of power. Thus I argue performative power emerges through the continuous relating and integrating of emerging differences, and has the potential to create something new. Performative power is an attempt

to develop a processual and performative understanding of power as a constitutive process of organizing that is collective, pluralistic, temporal and potentially creative (Pratt, 2011). Moreover, making a connection between performative power and the ordinary lived experience of frictions provides a useful lens to conduct processual research that seeks to see, talk and study power at work in contemporary organizations. Drawing on my ethnographic study of an accelerator, I have demonstrated how it can be used to examine how power emerges and is experienced in organizational settings that are characterized by the coordination of differences and the search for novelty. Performative power can thus be a helpful starting point to explore power in collective creativity (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006) and the emergence of novelty in organizations (Carlile, 2004; Garud, Simpson, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2015). It can help to link the lived experience of power, diversity and creativity in organizational situations, emphasizing the integration of differences and the creation of novelty as emergent possibility and not as certainty of 'creativity on demand'. Moreover, the complex interdependency and temporal dynamics of performative power could be explored further by drawing on other pragmatist perspectives like Mead's philosophy of temporality (Reed, 2013; Simpson, 2009).⁵ Finally, considering how to theorize and study embodiment, affect and materiality in the dynamics of performative power may be a fruitful way to capture more comprehensively the lived experience of power in organizations (Ashcraft, 2020; Sutherland et al., 2015). Future studies of performative power could explore these theoretical and empirical suggestions.

Lastly, my writing of this article was inspired by seeing the potential of putting process studies in conversation with pragmatism to enhance processual thinking and research in organization studies. Viewing Follett's pragmatism as process philosophy has opened up new possibilities to embrace process as ontology and to develop a processual understanding of power and performativity together as mutually constituting processes of organizing. The conceptualization and the processual study of performative power and frictions are an attempt to provide a useful way to reimagine and to study empirically the dynamic interweaving of power and performativity in the emergent flow of organizing. In the end, performing processual possibilities requires us to develop new perspectives that enhance our understanding of process as a way of seeing and living in the world. This article seeks to move us beyond existing understandings and to inspire others to develop together new processual possibilities for organization studies.

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Notes

1. My use of hyphenation here follows Dewey and Bentley's (1949: pp. 107–108) practice 'as a means of emphasizing the issues involved in their various applications . . . It has the particular value that it enables us to stress the inner confusions in the names as currently used.'

2. Mutual constitution as form of causality has been discussed by Selg (2020), and in relation to power by Reed (2013) and Selg (2018).
3. There are parallels between the concept of ‘trans-action’ and Karen Barad’s (2003) notion of intra-action, but also with John Shotter’s (2006) ‘with-ness thinking’.
4. In social sciences what is meant by ‘relational’ and ‘processual’ varies. I follow scholars in relational sociology that use ‘processual’ to acknowledge the primacy of process and ‘relational’ to acknowledge the primacy of relations in different approaches, with overlap in the case of ‘relational all the way down’ approaches (see Emirbayer & Mische, 1998 and Selg, 2018, 2020 for further discussion). Follett’s ontology is both processual and relational, hence I use ‘relational process ontology’ to make this ontological distinction.
5. Reed (2013) proposes an initial conceptualization of performative power based on Mead’s philosophy of temporality. What he means by performative power, however, is different although related to mine. He draws a conceptual link between power and social causality and discusses performative power as the performative-pragmatist dimension of power and social causality together with the relational-realist and discursive-hermeneutic dimensions.

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