

**The European Commission as a Learning Organization?  
Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Ideas**

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## 1. Introduction

The European Commission is one of the most important players in the EU policy making process. Denotations such as the 'motor of the European integration process' or "animator, impresario and manager" (Fitzmaurice 1994: 181) all point to the fact that the European Commission has to be situated in the "heart of the EU system of governance" (Nugent 1997: 6) in which she has helped to establish some of the new modes of governance (Lebessis et. al 1998: 10; see also Edwards/Spence 1994: 4; Christiansen 1996: 86). Accordingly, the strength of the European Commission is widely associated with its ability "to practise, or to experiment with, innovative forms of policy-making and continuous institutional reform" (Christiansen 1996: 86; see also Wallace 1996: 148ff; Laffan 1997: 422ff). Its rights of initiative, the accumulation and generation of policy-relevant knowledge within the Commission and its participation in the important vertical and horizontal committee structures of the European Union contribute to this ability. However, while the importance of the European Commission in this respect has already been highlighted in a series of case studies, the crucial question of whether and how the distinctive organizational structure and composition of, as well as the procedures within the European Commission influence the way in which EU policies are developed, remains a 'black box' up to now. This is not least due to the fact that the European Commission is often treated as an unitary actor or a monolithic entity in which several mechanism and structures - such as the role of the cabinets and the general secretary - ensure the image of the Commission as an actor speaking with one voice. However, in recent years several studies have highlighted the distinctive character of the European Commission in terms of its sectoralisation and fragmentation, its multinational staffing and cultural heterogeneity, as well as in terms of the absence of uniform administrative procedures and practices. As Cini has pointed out, this in turn leads and contributes to the development of different approaches to policies by the individual DGs, to their own way of working and their own political and organizational objectives (see Cini 1997: 74) - a development expressed in the term "multi-level-organization" (Cram 1994). „If, as a result, the Commission has matured from a small agency to an extended bureaucracy, than individual DGs have turned from organizational sub-sections into quasi-ministries in their own rights“ (Christiansen 1996: 86). As a result, certain problems are arising within the European Commission such as horizontal and vertical co-operation and co-ordination deficiencies between the individual DGs and the political and administrative arms of the Commission, as well as conflicts over objectives and practices - just to mention a few of them. Against this background the DGs (the subunits of the European Commission) could be theoretically conceptualized as "organizations within an organization".

From this inception the paper aims to reflect theoretically the following two interrelated questions:

- (1) *How is an organization - composed of multiple identities and nested games like the European Commission - able to reconsider its own organizational guiding assumptions in response to changing environmental demands?*
- (2) *Correspondingly, in what way is an organization - marked by the mentioned characteristics - able to develop a new and integrated understanding of problems, solutions and actions which are likely to change dominant core beliefs existing in parts of its subunits?*

These are theoretically challenging questions assuming practical importance for the development of effective and efficient forms of governance in the European Union. This is due to the fact that the European Union is facing (new) environmental demands requiring the development of new solutions for (particularly environmental) problems which increasingly tend to be of a cross-sectional character. For that reason, effective problem solutions, which usually evolve from the work of the European Commission, need to be based on an understanding of different sectoral circumstances, aims, problem perceptions and solutions, in order to reconcile them in an integrated manner. The environmental integration principle of the European Union serves as a good example in this respect<sup>1</sup>.

The integration principle was introduced into the treaty of the European Community via the Single European Act, Art. 130R (2): "Environmental protection requirements *shall* be a component of the Community's other policies". The Maastricht Treaty further strengthens Art. 130R (2) by stating that "Environment protection requirements *must* be integrated into the definition and implementation of the other Community policies". From then on, all Directorates General have had a legal obligation to consider environmental matters whereby Article 162 of the EEA Treaty requires the Commission to "adopt its rules of procedure so as to ensure that both it and its departments operate in accordance with the provision of the treaty", hence drawing up Community policies and legislation that are accompanied by an assessment of its implications for the environment. This implies that the guiding assumptions and objectives pursued by the DGs have to be reconsidered in a way that is compatible with the requirements of the integration principle. Collective learning processes may form essential preconditions in this respect. In practice, however, integrating environmental concerns into the work of the Commission across departmental boundaries presents peculiar difficulties because of (1) the strong boundaries between different DGs and the substantial differences in their size and budgetary resources; (2) the weak collective identity among Commissioners due to their differing national and political backgrounds; and (3) because of its multinational staffing, administrative heterogeneity and sectoral fragmentation (see Baldock et. al. 1992: 14). Against this background, the diffi-

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<sup>1</sup> It is however not the purpose of this paper to present any empirical results; empirical research, which forms part of a research project conducted by the authors, will be based on an elaboration of the theoretical consideration and will not start before the end of 2001.

culties of seeking to integrate environmental requirements vary between different policy domains and DGs (not least depending on the nature of the objectives of the policy/legislation to be subjected to integration), although the Commission introduced a series of organizational and procedural modifications (e. g. environmental units/individuals in other DGs, usage of EIA, internal environmental monitoring of policies etc.) in order to improve the coherence between different Community objectives and to enhance the implementation of the integration principle.

Keeping this in mind it is our guiding assumption that a solution of such problems is essentially dependent on the co-operation and communication between different actors and DGs within the European Commission as well as on their flexibility and openness towards changing environmental demands since these are key factors for enhancing reflexivity in organizations and for initiating organizational learning processes which may in turn open the opportunity to avoid contradiction and internal inconsistencies in Community policy.

In other words, we assume, that the development of an integrated understanding of problems and solutions within the European Commission could be related to the term “organizational learning”. And that it is essential not only to examine the actual policy outputs and legislations drawn by the European Commissions, but to shed light on the Commission’s internal processes and structures with regard to its influence on the organizational learning capacities of the European Commission.

Against this background, the paper consists of two parts. At first it will start with a brief discussion of the organizational learning literature in order to highlight some of its important insights as well as remaining problems. Building on these considerations, we will, second, sketch out a different approach to organizational learning by including neo-institutional<sup>2</sup> insights which should be able to take into account the fragmented and multi-cultural nature of the European Commission.

## **2. Organizational Learning: State of the Art and Theoretical Shortcomings**

### ***Conceptualization of organizational learning***

Although the discussion about the phenomena of organizational learning processes can be traced back to the early 1960’s (cf. Daft/Huber 1987:2), it was not before the beginning of the 1990’s that the term “learning” or rather the scientific dispute about collective learning processes has received increasing attention again. This is not only reflected in the inflationary use of the term ‘learning’ in different disciplinary contexts, but also in the growing amount of literature dealing with organizational learning (cf. Klimecki/Thomae 1997). Correspondingly there exists a wide range of definitions of the term ‘organizational learning’ (see Argyris/Schön 1978:19; Duncan/Weiss 1979: 84; Garratt 1990:77; Geißler 1991: 25; Hedberg 1981: 3; Staehle 1991: 843) which reveals substantive differences in

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Powell/DiMaggio (1991); March/Olsen (1984); Scott (1995); Selznick (1996)

their respective understanding of assumptions, terms and concepts which make up the 'quality' of organizational learning processes. Therefore, the field is strongly fragmented and is lacking a paradigmatic frame of reference. However, despite of this rather unstructured research field there are certain key issues and arguments that seem to constitute processes of organizational learning.

Some agreement exists that distinctions must be drawn between individual and organizational learning. Though individual learning is important to organizations and organizational learning occurs through individuals, it would be a mistake to conclude that organizational learning is nothing but the cumulative result of organization members' learning (cf. Fiol/Lyles 1985: 804; Hedberg 1981: 6). Rather, talking about organizational learning implies talking about learning of organizations as entities capable of thinking and acting - and not merely about individual learning in organizations (by the organization members). Organizations are therefore capable of learning independently of each single individual, but not independently of all individuals (Argyris/Schön 1978) since they learn through their individual members and are therefore directly or indirectly influenced by individual learning. Despite this, the idea of organizational learning frequently avails a metaphorical understanding of learning reflected in an attempt to show similarities between individual and organizational characteristics in order to be able to draw analogies between phenomena of individual learning and organizational learning. Hence, as with the case of individual learning, organizational learning is widely regarded as taking place when organizations interact and attempt to come to terms with their (problematic) environment in a way that they increase their understanding of reality by observing the results of their actions<sup>3</sup>. Within this reflexive process, the cognitive structure of the learning system (organization) and the underlying assumption about the environment could be changed (cf. Klimecki/Thomae 1997:2). Terms such as 'scanning', 'monitoring', 'sense making' or 'interpretation' (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979; Hedberg 1981; Weick 1995a; Weick 1995b; Huber 1991) describe this (systematic) interaction between organizations and their environments in which via learning processes new information is selected, interpreted and processed/treated. As a result, organizations may change their ways of perceiving and constructing reality as well as develop new action patterns (cf. Daft/Weick 1984:286).

In this perspective, organizations operate and interact in a complex environment. Since the organizational environment is characterised by instability and dynamics it is necessary that the organization is able to change its underlying organizational knowledge about the right ways of acting, planning and deciding in a changing environment in order to secure the survival of the systems by learning new problem solutions and new action strategies (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979:76ff.; Hedberg 1981:3; Daft/Weick 1984). Organizations are

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<sup>3</sup> This interpretative understanding of organizational learning must be distinguished from the classical behaviourists' approach which in principle is based on a 'stimulus-response-model' relating learning to observable changes in behaviour.

therefore regarded as open systems (cf. Scott 1992: 76ff.) which continually adapt themselves to their surroundings or translate their internal and external environment in terms of their own frame of references.

However, existing empirical and theoretical studies about organizational learning processes not only deal with the question of how organizations scan their environment or scan new information out of their environment. Rather the attention is also devoted to the environment itself which can be conceptualized as the 'information environment' "that stands conceptually between the actual environment and the perceived environment. Once conceptualized, the information environment can be thought of having characteristics, such as completeness, unbiasedness, and clarity, that may be important predictors of organizational learning (...)" (Huber 1991:99; see also Daft/Weick 1984; Daft/Huber 1987).

On the one side, information which shows that the used theory of action contradicts developments of the perceived reality is information which can lead to question the validity of organizational knowledge. Under these circumstances, modifications of organizational knowledge by a revision of the organizational hypothesis becomes necessary in order to integrate information not conforming to pre-existing organizational expectations. On the other side, modification processes may result from an anticipation of future environmental challenges by the organization (cf. Klimecki et al. 1994; Allaire/Firsirotu 1985).

Whether learning is conceptualized as a reactive adaptation to a problematic situation that already occurred, or as an anticipation of future developments/challenges, it is crucial that learning is (a) dependent on a perceived 'misfit' between organizational expectations and environmental requisition, and (b) occurs via reference to the existing organizational knowledge base<sup>4</sup>.

In analogy to the development of individual Bewußtseinsinhalte', organizational learning is therefore regarded as a process which leads – to differing extents - to a modification of the organizational knowledge base. At the same time this knowledge base functions as a filter through which the organization generates knowledge by perceiving, selecting, interpreting, and processing information (cf. e.g. Huber 1991: 102; Wiesenthal 1995).<sup>5</sup>

### ***Some preliminarily notes about organizational knowledge***

So far we have defined learning as a process which is essentially related to an alteration of the so called 'organizational knowledge base'. But what constitutes the special quality

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<sup>4</sup> Within the literature on organizational learning, a variety of different forms of 'experience-based learning' are brought up for discussion reflected in terms like "organizational experiments", "organizational self-appraisal", "experimenting organization" or "unintentional/unsystematic learning". An advancement of experience-based learning was conceived by March (1991), whereby he differentiates between 'exploration' (fundamental revision of the set of rules) and 'exploitation' (improvement of the set of rules of an organization). There is nevertheless only little systematic and empirically oriented work, and even if empirical research is conducted, the various studies hardly refer to each other (cf. Huber 1990: 91 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> Recently, the generation and processing of information and knowledge have increasingly also been discussed in 'knowledge-management-concepts' (for example Probst/Romhardt 1997; Romhardt 1997 a and b; Willke 1998); this could be regarded as a prolongation of the organizational learning approaches.

of the organizational knowledge base in general and in contrast to individual knowledge (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979)? Although the fundamental works of Argyris (1976) as well as Argyris/Schön (1978) do not employ the term 'organizational knowledge', but rather 'organizational theory of action', the latter nevertheless substantially influenced the way in which the reservoir of organizational knowledge is usually described. Under such a perspective, 'theories of action' embody a specific organizational world view. This organizational world view contains "norms for corporate performance (...), strategies for achieving norms (...), and assumptions which bind strategies and norms together (...)" (Argyris/Schön 1978: 14). In accordance with Argyris/Schön (1978) the 'theory of action' is divided in a so called 'espoused theory' and in a so called 'theory in use'. While the first, the 'espoused theory', represents official guidelines (Leitbilder), strategies, objectives and an ascertainable organizational knowledge in written form, the second, the 'theory in use', determines the actual behaviour of the organization members that is often tacit and undiscussable (ebenda 15). This theory in use can be inferred from the observation of decisions, argumentations and collectively solidified modes of behaviour. We will return to this later on.

Beside the terms referred to the literature on organizational learning also provides designations such as 'knowledge base' (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979: 85) or 'frames of references' (cf. Shivastrava 1983) in order to entitle the stock of organizationally shared knowledge which includes normative premises, assumptions about the reality, about causal relationships and context conditions (with differing emphases; see Hedberg 1981; Pautzke 1989; Pawlowsky 1992; Finne 1991). "This [organizational knowledge; LH/TM] is defined as that knowledge which is available to organizational decision makers and which is relevant to organizational activities. By the relevance of such knowledge we mean specifically that it can be used to determine organizational actions (at any level from tasks to strategy) with respect to a specific outcome" (Duncan/Weiss 1979: 85f).

In contrast to individual knowledge, which is held by individuals, organizational knowledge is distributed across the organization. This means that this knowledge represents the 'inter-subjective (socially) shared constructions of reality' (Berger/Luckmann 1995) that contains shared hypotheses of organization members about organizational behaviour and its consequences (Pawlowsky 1992: 203; see also Duncan/Weiss 1979; Berger/Luckmann 1995). Although organizational knowledge results from subjective reality interpretations of organization members, the inter-subjective quality of organizational knowledge presupposes that individually acquired knowledge is communicable, consensual and integrated in order to be accepted, stored, and applied as valid and reliable assumptions about organizational behaviour (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979: 86). "Communicable" here refers to the ability of the knowledge "to be stated in terms that are in principle understandable to other members of the organization" (Duncan/Weiss 1979: 86). In addition,

this knowledge must also be consensual, meaning that there exists an “acceptance of this knowledge across members of the organization and agreement concerning the validity and utility of this knowledge” (Duncan/Weiss 1979: 86). Organizational knowledge must eventually also be integrated, “that is, the body of knowledge in the organization we referred to as organizational knowledge is understood to be a set of interrelated statements of action-outcome relationships” (Duncan/Weiss 1979: 86).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, “learning” refers to a modification of the organizational knowledge base. But this ‘new’ knowledge which is generated in organizational learning processes differs from knowledge resulting from individual learning processes insofar as individual learning leads to an increase in “private” knowledge while organizational learning leads to an increase in “(public) organizational” knowledge. The latter could be described as knowledge which is socially defined, normatively legitimised and accessible for other organization members (cf. Duncan/Weiss 1979: 87f.).

To that extent organizational knowledge is not only stored in the minds of individuals but also in anonymous rule systems, e.g. in guidelines, descriptions of working processes, routines and indications of the organizational culture which are accessible to and used by all organization members (cf. Willke 1998: 291). Therefore, organizations are not only influenced by individual learning processes, but organizations influence the learning of individual members and store what has been learned. For that reason the knowledge is not lost even if a member leaves the organization.

### ***Single and double learning: Types of organizational learning***

The organizational knowledge base can not only be differentiated against individual knowledge in terms of its quality and distribution. Rather, it is also subject to different kinds of learning processes regarding the extent to which it is altered during such processes. On the basis of early studies in which adaptation processes were essentially brought up for discussion (cf. Cyert/March 1963; March/Olsen 1976) Argyris (1976) and Argyris/Schön (1978) introduce three different types of learning: ‘single loop learning’, ‘double loop learning’ and ‘deutero learning’<sup>6</sup>. Similar distinctions are reflected in terms such as ‘adjustment learning’, ‘turnover learning’ and ‘turnaround learning’ (cf. Hedberg 1981), ‘lower-level-learning’ and ‘higher-level-learning’ (cf. Fiol/Lyles 1985) or ‘operational

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<sup>6</sup> Following Bateson (1972) deutero learning refers to the possibility that “members learn (...) about previous context of learning (...) They discover what they did that facilitated or inhibited learning, they invent new strategies for learning, they produce these strategies, and they evaluate and generalize what they have produced. The results become encoded in individual images and maps and are reflected in organizational learning practices” /Argyris/Schön 1978: 27; see also Argyris/Schön 1996: 28f.) Deutero learning thus refers to the ability to learn how to learn and to improve the quality of the learning process. But while single loop and double loop learning could be identified with regard to individuals and organizations, deutero learning is particularly likely to occur on the individual level. Thus, in relation to organizations, deutero learning has so far been applied in theoretical fashion only.

learning cycle' and 'integrated learning cycle' (cf. Garrant 1990 and in summary Fiol/Lyles 1985)<sup>7</sup>.

Single loop learning is conditioned by a perceived mismatch between the consequences of an action and the underlying expectations (cf. Argyris/Schön 1978:19). Therefore, the central mechanism of this learning process consists of self-regulative processes in which (negative) feedback information from the environment function as stimuli for an *adaptation* within a pre-defined co-ordination system (cf. Pawlowsky 1992: 206). According to the literature, objects of single loop learning are rule catalogues or rule systems which are reflected in work instructions, task and role descriptions. However, the substantial features of the theory in use remain unchanged (Argyris/Schön 1978:18). Results of single loop learning processes are modified or new rules like changed patterns of communication relations or a changed division of labour.

In contrast, complex or double loop learning is based on a confrontation between the effectiveness and efficiency of traditional organizational hypotheses, norms and action/procedural instructions in the one side with alternatives which are fed back to the organizational knowledge base on the other (cf. Pawlowsky 1992). "The results of their inquiry will take the form of a restructuring of organizational norms, and very likely a restructuring of strategies and assumptions associated with these norms, which must then be embedded in the images and maps which encode organizational theory-in-use" (Argyris/Schön 1978: 22). In this context the ability of the system to unlearn past theories of action and routines is frequently regarded as a substantial prerequisite for this type of learning (cf. Hedberg 1981). The object of complex learning is the knowledge system or the theory in use which is modified in its underlying assumptions and norms. Because of the connectiveness between complex learning processes and an alteration of the central elements of the knowledge base, complex learning seems to be markedly difficult. Organizations are anxious to protect their identities (reflected in their core beliefs) by selective perception and analysis, so that the accommodation of new knowledge depends decisively on its ability to fit into existing core beliefs. Therefore, new situations are preferably processed by changes in the peripheral assumptions (cf. Wiesenthal 1995; Sabatier 1993). In addition, if one considers that an organization's theories of action contain in their scope "the organization's patterns of communication and control, its ways of allocating resources to goals, and its provision of self-maintenance – that is, for rewarding and punishing individual performance, for constructing career ladders and regulating the rate at which individuals climb them, and for recruiting new members and instructing them in the ways of the organization" (Argyris/Schön 1978:15), then a modification of the core

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<sup>7</sup> In Germany, the discussion about organizational learning processes is particularly dominated by authors who argue from a management perspective. In this context, terms like "improvement learning" and "modification learning" (cf. Klimecki/Probst/Eberl 1991) or "assimilation" and "accommodation" have been introduced (cf. Staehle 1991).

element of the organization's knowledge can involve extensive organizational modifications on the one side, but might also cause extensive opposition by the members of an organization on the other side. Therefore, it seems to be that collective learning processes in organizations are subject to high demands because micro-political aspects or organization's 'domestic politics' (cf. Küpper/Ortmann 1988; Crozier/Friedberg 1979) such as power, interests and bargaining processes become relevant.

### ***Criticism and shortcomings of the existing organizational learning literature***

Although there exists a growing amount of literature concerning organizational learning, there are still some theoretical and empirical shortcomings which we would like to address briefly in order to develop our own approach to organizational learning:

1. *Avoiding an anthropomorphizing or individualising of organizational learning processes by specifying transfer mechanisms:* Frequently theories of individual learning provide the basis for theories of organizational learning. "However, if a distinction between the two levels is not made explicit, a model of organizational learning will either obscure the actual learning process by ignoring the role of the individuals [and anthropomorphizing organization by a theoretical fixation on organizations rather than on the linkages between individual learning and organizational learning; LH, TM] or become a simplistic extension of individual learning by glossing over organizational complexities" (Kim 1993: 42f). These problems are reflected in theories which equate organizational learning with the actions of a group of individuals, such as the top management groups and/or in theories which ignore the interaction between individual learning and learning at the organizational level. This could be highlighted for example with regard to the '(in-) complete learning cycle' developed by March/Olson (1975) which differentiates between four stages in an organizational selection or learning process. It assumes that (1) "the cognitions and preferences held by individuals affect their behavior"; (2) that "the behavior (including participation) of individuals affects organizational choices"; (3) that 'organizational choices affect environmental acts (response)' and finally that (4) "environmental acts affect individual cognitions and preferences" (see March/Olson 1975: 149). In this model, individual learning is primarily driven in some way by what is happening in the environment, and organizational learning occurs when the entire cycle is completed, yet it fails to explicitly lay out the way in which learning occurs *within* an organization. Both approaches therefore do not identify an explicit transfer process through which individual learning is retained by the organization. Hence, if individuals should leave, the organization is likely to suffer a loss in its learning. "However organizational learning is more complex and dynamic than a mere magnification of individual learning" (...) (Kim

1993: 40). On the one side, a model of organizational learning has hence “to resolve the dilemma of imparting intelligence and learning capabilities to a nonhuman entity without anthropomorphizing it” (Kim 1993: 40). On the other side, it also needs to specify the transfer mechanisms through which individual learning becomes embedded in organizational memory (see Weick 1995 a; Weick 1995b; Walsh/Ungson 1991) and structure. This points to an aspect which has until now received only scant attention and remains ill-understood. In this respect we assume that communicative processes are playing a central role since – unlike individual learning – collective learning involves the development of sufficient consensus around diverse interpretation in order to result in organized action (see Fiol 1994: 403). For that reason, progress in the debate about organizational learning is essentially dependent on the development of a “communication framework”. Although Daft/Huber started to develop such a framework by introducing the concept of media richness and by highlighting the relevance of face-to-face communication as a means of resolving an equivocality of information through discussion and rapid feedback, they nevertheless missed out on two important aspects. First of all, introducing face-to-face communication as a means of reaching mutual understanding and fostering collective learning processes implies that the organizational members are able to mutually question their beliefs, to challenge the validity claims involved in any communication, and to try to convince each other to change their causal and principle beliefs in order to reach a reasoned consensus (*verständigungsorientiertes Handeln*). “And, in contrast to rhetorical behaviour, they are themselves prepared to be persuaded. Successful argumentation means that the ‘better argument’ carries the day, while ones material bargaining power becomes less relevant” (Risse 2000: 9). Developing a communication framework hence requires to conceptualize processes of arguing, deliberation and persuasion and to differentiate them from strategic bargaining<sup>8</sup>. Only then are we able to improve our understanding of how actors develop a common knowledge concerning both a definition of the situation, an optimal solution for a commonly perceived problem and a common normative framework. As studies on organizational learning have neglected the relevance of a differentiation between these distinct modes of social interaction, they rarely have taken into account the ensuing question of how learning is inhibited by institutionalised power structures within organizations and by the self-interested behaviour of organization members.

This, however, leads immediately to the second aspect: the question about under which conditions arguing processes are likely to occur and proceed in a ways that foster collective learning processes. This is an important aspect, yet frequently neglected within the existing literature on learning.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Saretzki (1995, 1996); Majone (1989).

2. *Coming to grasp with the results and objects of learning processes:* As already mentioned, the term “organizational learning” has been used to refer to the process by which organizations interact and adjust to their environment. With regard to these processes, two basic dimensions are frequently referred to in order to highlight the changes resulting from a learning process within organizations: On the one side, *cognitive* developments affecting primarily an organizational interpretation systems or knowledge base. On the other side, *behavioural* developments reflected in new responses and actions (see Fiol/Lyles 1995). Even though this distinction is implicitly or explicitly drawn in a number of learning concepts, it is not systematically taken into account when learning is empirically analyzed and when attempts are made to describe the results of learning processes. However, this is of crucial importance, since changes in behaviour may occur without any cognitive development; similarly, knowledge may be gained without any accompanying change in behaviour. Following March/Olson’s (1975) “incomplete learning cycle” Kim (1993) in particular mapped out a number of learning disturbances which underpin the necessity to differentiate between cognitive and behavioural development. The connection between individual learning and individual behaviour for example might be disrupted by roles (e. g. job description, standard procedures) which are too rigid so as to leave enough room for the translation of individual experiences into action (Romme/Dillen 1997: 74). Against this background, “especially in the context of organizational learning, it is essential to note the differences between cognition and behaviour, for not only do they represent two different phenomena, but one is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the other” (Fiol/Lyles 1985: 806). One challenge is therefore to specify conditions under which for instance standard operating procedures hinder the initialization of an organizational learning cycle. Another challenge is to find ways to make cognitive developments explicit and thus empirically observable without concluding from behaviour changes on cognitive changes and vice versa. One way of approaching this challenge is to specify certain organizational components in which the organizational knowledge base is stored and reflected. In this respect, Walsh/Ungson (1991) introduce the term “organizational memory” as a means of storing information and distinguish five such places of storage: (1) individual memories (storage of information about personal experiences and observations); (2) organizational culture (storage of organizational knowledge about possible problem solutions in the form of symbols, rituals etc.); (3) transformations (involving guidelines with which work is managed such as standard operating procedures, planning systems etc); (4) organizational structure as a framework for individual behaviour which defines individuals’ roles, and (5) the physical structure of the workplace within organizations. Even without a

wholesale critique of the relevance of these “storage places” and their possible modification as a way of observing cognitive changes, the distinction of Argyris/Schön between an “espoused theory” and a “theory in use”, as well as the concept of a “decoupling” within organizations highlight the problems associated with linking learning to changes in these elements. The concept of a decoupling within organizations was initially introduced by the work of Thompson (1967) and picked up by Meyer/Rowan (1977) from a neo-institutionalist perspective. Meyer/Rowan argued that formal structures or the “institutional context” of many organizations in post-industrial society and its associated changes may only dramatically reflect the myths of their institutional environments instead of the actual demands of their work activities (Meyer/Rowan 1977: 341). In other words: For reasons of gaining legitimacy and resources, organizations may symbolically develop specific formal structures, guidelines etc. as a response to environmental demands, without changing their technical core or task performance accordingly. And since a connection between the two levels – the “institutional context” on the one side and the “relational context” on the other side – may cause discontinuities within organizations, organizations tend to decouple both levels in order “to buffer the formal structures from the uncertainty of technical activities by becoming loosely coupled, building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities” (Meyer/Rowan 1977: 341).

A comparable distinction has been drawn by Argyris/Schön (1978). They distinguished between the so called “theory in use” and the “espoused theory”. The espoused theory serves as an official guideline or corporate identity for the organization and its members, as well as for representing the organization in their environment. „When someone is asked how he would behave under certain circumstances, the answer he usually gives is his espoused theory of action for a situation. This is the theory of action to which he gives allegiance and which, upon request, he communicates to others“ (Argyris/Schön 1978: 11). The espoused theory is reflected, for example, in official strategies or organizational structures. By contrast, the theory in use determines the actual behaviour of the organization’s members. It reflects the individual and collective experiences of the members and represents their shared understandings of reality. Speaking of an organizational learning process thus means to demonstrate a change on this level and not only on the level of the espoused theory, since the latter might be altered for symbolic reasons only and in order to secure legitimacy vis-a-vis the external environment without necessarily reflecting a corresponding change on the level of the theory in use (since both levels may be decoupled). This is not least likely due to the fact that the organizational knowledge base usually constitutes the identity of an organization and is therefore to a certain extent shielded against from environmental changes which question established beliefs. Further prog-

ress in developing a theoretical framework for analysing organizational learning is therefore dependent on an ability to indicate the object of individual and collective learning processes, on the ability to avoid mixing up symbolic changes from deep cognitive and normative changes, as well as on the ability to specify conditions under which and mechanisms through which processes of decoupling between cognitive/behaviour changes or between the espoused theory/theory in use can be avoided (without thereby implying that every learning disturbance or forms of decoupling need to be seen as a disadvantage for an organization in any respect).

3. *Taking into account the implications of conceptualizing organizations as nested games*: So far we have argued that organizational learning depicts a process in which new inter-subjectively shared assumptions about organizational actions are generated, stored and applied through individual/collective perceptions and interpretations of the external environment. These new assumptions and actions can then again cause reactions in the environment which may initiate a new learning cycle. Now these descriptions give the impression that organizations are monolithic entities (inter-)acting with a certainly dynamic and unstable, but nevertheless “singular” environment. However, organizations can also be conceptualized as a series of nested systems, in which each subsystem may exhibit its own specific identity and knowledge, leading to different interpretations of reality. And organizations can also be conceptualized as a series of nested systems, in which “all subsystems deal with a different external sector” (Daft/Weick 1984: 285) and, at the same time, represents a relevant environment for the other subsystems. Conceptualising organizational subsystems as “organizations within an organization” as it would appear on this background and with regard to the internal structure and functioning of the European Commission, we need to consider two aspects. First it has to be questioned whether and how shared understandings and collective learning processes can be reached between the different subsystems in an organization (as was pointed out earlier). Second we need to take into account that organizational subunits may hold their very own theory in use and espoused theory, thereby responding to internal (as well as external) demands (such as the integration principle) from other subsystems by merely changing their espoused theory in a symbolic fashion. Only if we apply this distinction are we able to draw conclusions about possibilities, conditions and limitations of organizational learning processes.
4. The last shortcoming of the organizational learning literature which we would like to address is related to the second criticism and is concerned with the – in our view - insufficiently drawn distinction between different kinds of organizational behaviour or forms of reaction to environmental demands. The organizational learning literature is

usually based on a simplistic distinction between processes that either lead to learning or non-learning, without taking into account that organizations as well as their sub-systems may have at their disposal a wide range of action possibilities. As hinted earlier, organizations may for example adjust to new environmental demands by changing their formal structures and ways of behaving in a symbolic fashion only, without changing their cognitive structure accordingly. Organizations may also actively “oppose” or “ignore” demands for changing their underlying assumptions or might be unable to transform cognitive changes into behaviour changes. Both processes might be regarded as “non-learning”, but both reactions are presumably based on different reasons or structural causes, therefore referring to different conditions which have to be altered in order to promote learning processes. Against this background it seems necessary to conceptualize different kinds of organizational responses on the subunit level in order to increase our understanding of options and limitations for as well as conditions under which collective learning processes can be enhanced.

In the following we will develop our own approach to learning with which we attempt to take into account the range of criticisms just outlined.

### **3. Devising a research agenda**

#### ***Thinking about responses: A heuristic framework***

In her 1991 article, Christine Oliver laid down a typology of (strategic) organizational responses<sup>9</sup> which organizations can employ if they have to react to new environmental demands in order to receive legitimacy and resources. Following Meyer/Rowan (1977), Oliver developed five types of (strategic) responses (acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance, and manipulation) ranging from conformity to resistance. However, we assume that these five responses do not cover the whole range of possible responses within this spectrum of action and decision possibilities. Building on Oliver’s considerations we therefore devise seven (ideal) types<sup>10</sup> of strategic responses: acknowledge, acquiescence, compromise, avoid, reject, oppose, ignore – we will turn back on this in detail later on.

In our view, drawing this distinction helps a) to distinguish between different kinds of learning and non-learning process and b) to show a way of connecting organizational learning ideas with neo-institutional insights in order to shed light on some of the deficiencies of the organizational learning literature which we have explored in our critique (see. Ch. 2.).

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<sup>9</sup> See also Scott (1995); Goodstein (1994)

<sup>10</sup> For the time being, these ideal types are only conceptualized theoretically; they will be examined in an empirical research project focusing on the implementation of the integration principle in different DGs.

By connecting both research fields we would like to a) conceptualize the ideas about single-loop (simple learning) and double-loop (complex learning) as types of responses, and b) to focus on the connection between the two theories of action developed and discussed by Argyris and Argyris/Schön and the seven types of organizational responses. We assume that these responses lead to differing changes on the levels of the espoused theory and the theory-in-use (see figure 3). We thus follow Argyris and Argyris/Schön in that we would like to draw attention to the important fact, frequently neglected in the organizational learning literature, that changes on the symbolic level (the espoused theory) – for example new organizational structure<sup>11</sup>, new guiding lines – are not automatically followed by changes on the material level or with regard to the task performance of the organization. In other words: changes within the symbolic description of an organization may first of all serve to achieve and maintain legitimacy and resources from the constituents and to show to the outside world that the organization follows new demands -so that the organization can be observed as being up-to-date. To assess whether changes on the level of the espoused theory have any impact on the daily operations, the behaviour of organizational members, on task performance, on belief systems and on organizational knowledge or whether such changes have no impact and could thus be seen as being of a merely symbolic nature, it is necessary to look at the “material” action-level, i.e. the theory-in-use. In so doing, we refer to the idea of organizational decoupling (Meyer/Rowan 1977) in connection with the idea of action theories as conceptualized by Argyris/Schön.

Keeping this theoretical conceptualization in mind and bringing our empirical field back in, the frame of reference to which strategic responses refer represents the implementation of the integration principle within the European Commission. This means that the European Commission as an organization as well as the single DGs within the Commission can respond to the legally binding demand of implementing the integration principles by developing behaviour based either on resistance or on conformity. We assume that conformity and resistance strategies might be connected to the two theories of action as we have explained above.

In detail: Regarding a spectrum of strategic responses between resistance and conformity - we assume, on the one hand, that the *espoused theory* can be divided into three different dimensions: the process of organizational talk (the espoused theory) can (1) change in conformity with the demands of the integration principle (*congruent change*), (2) change in a way that is resisting the integration principle (*disgruent change*), or (3) remain un-

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<sup>11</sup> To clarify this example, Meyer/Rowan distinguish formal structures and daily organizational work in the sense that „formal structure is a blueprint for activities which includes, first of all, the table of organization: a listing of offices, departments, positions, and programs. These elements are linked by explicit goals and policies that make up a rational theory of how, and to what end, activities are to be fitted together. The essence of a modern bureaucratic organization lies in the rationalized and impersonal character of these structural elements and of the goals that linked to them“ (Meyer/Rowan 1977: 341f).

changed by retaining the *status quo* so that within the organization the introduction of the integration principle has no consequences for the espoused theory.

On the other hand, we assume that conformity and resistance also can and have to be applied to the *theory-in-use*. In this context we distinguish between four different dimensions: (1) the existing theory in use remains unchanged (*status quo*), e.g. the introduction of the integration principle has no impact on the behaviour of the organizational members and on their task performance; (2) the theory in use changes peripherally only by, for example, adapting new rule elements to the requirements of the integration principle; (3) corresponding to the requirements of the integration principle, the theory in use changes in its underlying normative/cognitive assumptions through congruent (*complex*) learning processes; or (4) the theory in use remains valid and is confirmed. Against this background it is conceivable that *disgruent learning*, i.e. learning leading to a deviation from the integration principle can ensue. Table 3 summarise these considerations.

**figure 3: Connecting the Dimensions of the espoused theory and the theory in use with the organizational responses Conformity and resistance**

Theories of action		Responses	Conformity	resistance
espoused theory		<i>status quo (1)</i>	the espoused theory remains unchanged	
		<i>Congruent (2)</i>	Changes in the espoused theory in conformity with the integration principle in a congruent way	
		<i>disgruent (3)</i>		Changes in the espoused theory in resistance to the integration principle in a disgruent way
theory in use		<i>status quo (1)</i>	The theory in use remains unchanged, there is no impact on task performance	
		<i>Adaptation(2)</i>	Changes in the theory in use through adaptation processes	
		<i>Congruent Learning (3)</i>	Changes in the theory in use within its underlying normative/cognitive assumptions	
		<i>disgruent Learning (4)</i>		The theory in use remains unchanged because of its superior validity

In the context of this conceptual framework we now turn back to the variety of organizational responses (acknowledgement, acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, rejection, opposition, ignorance) which specify the two general categories of 'conformity' and 'resistance' in more detail. In the following we will describe these responses in detail.

Conformity				Resistance		
Acknowledgement (1)	Acquiescence (2)	Compromise (3)	Avoidance (4)	Rejection (5)	Opposition (6)	Ignorance (7)

### 1. Acknowledgement (recognition of validity, complex learning)

Acknowledgement occurs when the validity of the integration principle and its underlying assumptions and objects are accepted and acknowledged. The theory-in-use as well as the espoused theory are modified in a congruent way which refers to processes of complex learning. Acknowledgement is not accompanied by a 'blind' adherence to new rules, but is based on a reflexive interaction with the new norms and values in order to be able to transfer it effectively. The organizational subunit is convinced of the modifications and processes them in an active fashion. Members are involved in this process through an open information strategy and through participative forms of co-operation.

RESPONSES		CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
<b>Theories of action</b>			
<b>ESPOUSED THEORY</b>	<i>CONGRUENT</i>	Acknowledgement	
<b>THEORY IN USE</b>	<i>CONGRUENT LEARNING</i>	Acknowledgement	

### 2. Acquiescence (taking for granted, adaptation)

Acquiescence occurs when organizational subunits agree with modifications and new demands decided upon by the organizational leadership and which are legally binding. Rules are obeyed and accepted as valid norms. If new rules becomes generally accepted within the organizations as a whole, organizational subunits do not question these taken-for-granted rules or values. In contrast to acknowledgement, acquiescence can be seen as form of blind adherence. Acknowledgement is mostly been based on imitative/mimetic<sup>12</sup> behaviour by which the measures already established in other organizational subunits are copied in order to implement new legal and normative demands. Obedience represents the driving force for conformity in relation to the organization. A conforming behaviour like this serves to support general organizational interests as well as the legitimacy of the organizational subunit within the organization in order to gain and obtain support from organizational leaders and other subunits. Acknowledgement leads to a congruence between the expectations and the espoused theory in use as demonstrated by the organizational subunit. It results in an endeavour to modify the actual theory in use in such a way that it is again in agreement with the new expectations. Deviations from the new demands will be corrected by an identification of error sources. This reaction is therefore based on processes of single loop learning (simple learning) which we have already discussed above.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, DiMaggio/Powell (1991); Galaskiewicz/Wassermann (1989).

RESPONSES		CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
<b>Theories of action</b>			
<b>ESPOUSED THEORY</b>	<i>CONGRUENT</i>	Acquiescence	
<b>THEORY IN USE</b>	<i>ADAPTATION</i>	Acquiescence	

### 3. Compromise (partial conformity)

For this type of response to occur it is fundamental that the organizational subunit is in relative (accommodating) agreement with new demands (thus a conformity position/attitude). However, since possibly the new requirements cannot be into agreement with the conventional ways of acting and task performance completely, the subunit seeks to find some kind of integrative consent. As a result, requirements will lead to partial implementation only. Against this background, the organizational subunit seeks to obtain specific promises from the organization through negotiation processes. The organizational subunit thus acts in conformity with the new demands if the organization does provide these specific resources. In contrast to acquiescence, for example, the partial compromise is reflected in an ambivalent espoused theory and theory-in-use. This means that certain aspects of the new expectations are integrated because of its inter-subjectively recognized validity - without completely giving up traditional convictions.

RESPONSES		CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
<b>Theories of action</b>			
<b>ESPOUSED THEORY</b>	<i>CONGRUENT</i>		Compromise
<b>THEORY IN USE</b>	<i>STATUS QUO</i>		Compromise
	<i>ADAPTATION</i>		
	<i>CONGRUENT LEARNING</i>		

### 4. Avoidance (symbolic or ceremonial conformity)

Avoidance represents a form of resistance which is reflected in symbolic conformity and thus leads to a congruent modification of the espoused theory, yet without adaptation or complex learning processes on the material level, i.e. in the theory-in-use. The theory-in-use remains unchanged. The attitude of avoidance is motivated by the intention of the organizational subunits to 'outwit' the circumstances which require a conformity in behaviour. They try this by hiding their non-conformity on the level of the theory-in-use, by demonstrating symbolic conformity on the level of the espoused theory. Neither do an introduction of the modification, nor an attempt to find a compromise take place. In other words: the organizational subunit demonstrates to the 'outside world' that it has introduced these required modifications. But this is only a symbolic demonstration taking place without an alignment of actions within the organizational subunit. The central objective is therefore to construct a facade of symbolic and not a real/actual conformity.

Theories of action		RESPONSES	CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
ESPOUSED THEORY		<i>CONGRUENT</i>	Avoidance	
THEORY IN USE		<i>STATUS QUO</i>		Avoidance

### 5. Rejection (defiance, defensive opposition)

Rejection is a response based on reflected opposition towards modifications within the organization in which a disruent espoused theory is exhibited. We assume that organizational subunits will act in such a fashion if and when their internal logics and the modifications diverge strongly and when subunits are not willing to reconstruct their internal ways of acting in accordance with the new demands (while at the same time having little to lose by acting in such a way). This is not least due to the fact that they possess a strong position of power within the organization. In this sense, there is neither an attempt to find a partial compromise, nor to demonstrate symbolic conformity. In addition, there is no attempt to manipulate organizational leaders or other subunits. Rather, the expected modification is rejected by a specific kind of external representation within the frame of the espoused theory, while at the same time the theory-in-use remains unchanged.

Theories of action		RESPONSES	CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
ESPOUSED THEORY		<i>DISGRUENT</i>		Rejection
THEORY IN USE		<i>STATUS QUO</i>		Rejection

### 6. (Active) Opposition (manipulation, defiance, challenge)

Active opposition can be characterised as a response by which - through the application of power or through coalition-building with other influential participants - the organizational subunit tries to fight against the new rules and demands. This response is based on the assumption that the theory of action of the subunit is superior. Against this background, the subunit seeks to actively change the content of the new requirements in the sense of its own theory of action. In contrast to rejection, opposition is accompanied by a form of disruent learning which is taking place in the context of strategic and argumentative modes of interaction by which other members of the organizations are to be manipulated in accordance with the subunit's own convictions. On the level of espoused theory, opposition is again reflected in a kind of disruent learning.

Theories of action		RESPONSES	CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
ESPOUSED THEORY		<i>DISGRUENT</i>		Opposition
THEORY IN USE		<i>DISGRUENT LEARNING</i>		Opposition

## 7. Ignorance (disregarding)

Ignorance represents a kind of resistance by which formulated expectations are not considered by the organizational subunit. Rather, the organizational subunit ignores the norms and values developed by other organizational subunits or organizational leaders. Contrary to the other mentioned types of responses, neither the espoused theory nor the theory in use change.

RESPONSES		CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
<b>Theories of action</b>			
<b>ESPOUSED THEORY</b>	<i>STATUS QUO</i>		Ignorance
<b>THEORY IN USE</b>	<i>STATUS QUO</i>		Ignorance

The following table provides an overview of the relation between the different kinds of responses and the theories of action within the different dimensions.

**Figure 4: Overview of the connection between responses and theories of actions**

RESPONSES		CONFORMITY	RESISTANCE
<b>THEORIES OF ACTION</b>			
<b>ESPOUSED THEORY</b>	<i>STATUS QUO</i>		<b>IGNORANCE (7)</b>
	<i>CONGRUENT</i>	ACQUIESCENCE (2) AVOIDANCE(4) ACKNOWLEDGEMENT (1)	<b>Compromise (3)</b>
	<i>DISGRUENT</i>		<b>REJECTION (5)</b> <b>OPPOSITION (6)</b>
<b>THEORY IN USE</b>	<i>STATUS QUO</i>		<b>REJECTION (5)</b> <b>AVOIDANCE(4)</b> <b>IGNORANCE (7)</b>
	<i>ADAPTATION</i>	ACQUIESCENCE (2)	<b>Compromise</b>
	<i>CONGRUENT LEARNING</i>	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT (1)	
	<i>DISGRUENT LEARNING</i>		<b>OPPOSITION (6)</b>

### **Concluding considerations**

At the beginning of our paper we put forward two questions which led our theoretical and which will lead our empirical considerations. The first question was how an organization - composed of multiple identities and nested games like the European Commission – is able to reconsider its own organizational guiding assumptions in response to changing environmental demands. Following from that, our second question related to the way in

which an organization is able to develop a new and integrated understanding of problems, solutions and actions which are likely to change dominant core beliefs existing in parts of its subunits. In the course of the paper we have argued that such a modification can be related to the term “organizational learning”. Through briefly summarizing the literature on organizational learning, we have tried to point out some of the major dimensions which seem to characterize organizational learning processes in general. However, as we have worked out in Part 2, there still remain some important shortcomings which need to be taken into account in particular if we apply theoretical considerations about organizational learning to the European Commission. The European Commission is composed of a number of powerful subunits which – according to their size, age, staffing and policy domain – pursue their own interest and exhibit their own internal logic as well as their own way of acting and thinking (despite of the overarching aims and functions of the European Commission as a whole). The characterization of the GDs as quasi-ministries in their own right underpins this description conceptually. However, if we consider the European Commission as such a non-monolithic entity, it is necessary to go beyond a merely systemic perspective which sees organizational learning being driven by environmental demands alone, and rather analyse how learning occurs *within* an organization and under which conditions this leads to a change in the way in which the subunits act and think. Especially in this respect we also have to increase our awareness towards different kinds of cognitive and behavioural change within the subunits, reflected in the breadth and extend to which both the theory in use and the espoused theory are subject to change. For that purpose we developed a framework composed of seven different types of responses. However, the distinction between these types should not be seen as more than a merely heuristic framework which should help us to note the differences between cognitive and behavioural change, between changes on the level of the espoused theory and the theory in use. As a heuristic framework, it helps to further inquire into the following questions, yet does not yet provide answers to them:

- (a) how can we relate changes on the level of the espoused theory and the theory in use to different types of reactions given that our heuristic framework only demonstrates the possibility that changes on both levels are a result of specific responses. In this respect we assume that the empirical analysis of the processes by which demands are processed and communicated within the subunits, as well as a further specification of both levels will be of use for further inquiries.
- (b) Even if we do take into account the possibility that the kind of response chosen by the subunits may change over time - for example from pure acknowledgement to the conviction of the importance and correctness of the modification and thus to complex

learning - we have not yet specified any independent variables or mechanisms which may lead to such a change;

- (c) In relation to this, we still need to answer the question of which variables cause what kind of behaviour and cognitive change under what conditions. This question points to the fact that there is no in-built causal hypothesis within our framework. In this respect we assume that the selection of a specific kind of response is first of all dependent on the way in which new information is acquired (scanning), communicated and interpreted, whereby communication processes based on a reasoned consensus play a central role given that for organized action to result collective learning involves the development of sufficient consensus around diverse interpretations. Developing a communication framework hence requires to conceptualize processes of arguing, deliberation and persuasion and to differentiate them from strategic bargaining, in order to further our understanding of how actors develop a common knowledge concerning both a definition of the situation, an optimal solution for a commonly perceived problem, and a common normative framework. A very important aspect is thus to find ways for analysing communication processes within the DGs – for example by looking at the way in which communication is organized within the DG and between DGs (e. g. through face-to-face communication, telephone calls, e-mail etc., see Daft/Huber). Secondly, in the context of these processes and the responses resulting from them, certain context conditions gain crucial importance which can be distinguished in a first approximation as either *subunit-specific* (age, size, power, knowledge and interests of the DG), as *inter-subunit-conditions* (position and influence of the subunits in relation to other DGs and within the Commission; procedural and structural connections between the DGs); or as *characteristics of the internal environments within the European Commission* (degree of institutionalization of the new demands and specifications; degree of the concurrence between the modifications induced by the integration principle and the present/actual theory-in-use; gain of legitimacy, resources, support and sanctions expected by conformity and resistance).

Since the integration principle is legally embodied since 1986 we will – in the context of a process oriented analysis – reconstruct changes on the espoused theory level and on the level of the theory in use from 1986 till 2000 in selected DGs. We assume that only a process-oriented analysis is able to show if and how the actions of a DG have changed from point of time x till point of time y.

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