



Call for Abstracts
International Conference on Organizational Sociology
ICOS 2025

Organizing Plurality

March 28/29, 2025
Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, Germany

Joint conference by:

Section on Organizational Sociology of the German Sociological Association
www.organisations-soziologie.de

Research Committee 17 “Sociology of Organizations”
of the International Sociological Association
www.organizational-sociology.com

Research Cluster OPAL (Organisation, Personal, Arbeit, Leadership)
at Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg
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In modern society, organizations typically face a myriad of expectations from numerous groups, individuals, and systems. These expectations come from various societal domains, ranging from the micro to the macro level and from the local to the global. They include moral, political, and environmental concerns, as well as macro-level values and norms attributable to different "value spheres" (Weber 2009), "institutional logics" (Friedland & Alford 1991), "orders of worth" (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006), "function systems" (Luhmann 2012), and "organizational fields" (DiMaggio & Powell 1983), among others.

Many of these expectations tend to be competing or contradictory, and accordingly, scholars have observed that heterogeneous demands often lead to conflict (e.g., Battilana & Dorado 2010; Berkowitz & Grothe-Hammer 2022; Pache & Santos 2013; Valentinov & Roth 2022; Gluch & Hellsvik 2023). Nevertheless, organizations are usually quite successful in handling these demands on a daily basis (McPherson & Sauder 2013; Besio & Meyer 2014; Matinheiki et. al. 2019). Moreover, organizations not only cope with these societal demands, but also play a crucial role in shaping and implementing them. However, we still know relatively little about the impact of these internal organizational solutions on broader societal contexts and how they contribute to shaping such societal trends (Apelt et al. 2017).

We identify at least four societal trends in which the ability of organizations to process and shape heterogeneous expectations plays a central role:

1) Organizations and Valuation

Society is characterized by ongoing and often contentious valuation processes (e.g., Lamont 2012), in which organizations play crucial roles. Many organizations specialize in providing and conducting professional valuations. Examples of this are organizations involved in developing ratings and rankings (Ringel et al. 2021), as well as those that set standards and define classifications (Bowker & Star 1999) or conduct audits (Power 1997), accreditations, and quality assurance. Interestingly, these evaluations often focus on other organizations or nation-states, assessing, for example, their economic performance or ecological impact. However, evaluations not only occur between organizations but within organizations (Dahler-Larsen 2011). This situation can be particularly sensitive when individuals are the subjects of valuation: students are evaluated in schools, employees in companies, or patients in hospitals. Given that these evaluations may be guided by different expectations (such as profitability, ecology, diversity, or health), tensions and conflicts can be expected. This raises the question of how and with what consequences organizations prepare themselves to deal with these multiple, potentially conflicting expectations when performing valuations or being valued.

2) Organizations and Sustainability

In the face of ongoing ecological problems and accelerating climate change, a recent megatrend has been the promotion of sustainable forms of organization and organizing (Delbridge et al. 2024; Gümüşay & Reinecke 2024). The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been an important driver in this regard. Organizations are expected to operate sustainably to ensure climate-friendly products and services, sustainable processes, and business relationships. Businesses, for example, are facing new challenges in balancing profitability expectations with sustainability concerns and other desirable goals, such as inclusion and equality. Different types of organizations in different industries and positions in the supply chain implement sustainability differently. In particular, alternative forms of organizing such as hybrid, partial, fluid, temporary, meta, or participatory organizations, are seen as specifically prone to recombining sustainability with other goals (Arnold 2022; Stjerne et al. 2022). Policy areas such as energy supply challenge organizations with particularly high sustainability demands. These can create difficulties, but they can also encourage new forms of organizing. Energy cooperatives are just one example of how organizational management of heterogeneous expectations can promote innovative business models and organizational forms. Thus, the organizational dimension of sustainability issues needs to be explored more deeply.

3) Organizations and Digitalization

The ongoing digitalization has confronted organizations with a plethora of new challenges and problems. In particular, rapid developments in artificial intelligence (AI), algorithmic decision-making, and big data have increased the speed, volume, and complexity of organizational information processing and knowledge management, creating both new opportunities and risks (Faraj et al. 2018; Lindebaum et al. 2024). Organizations shape the process of digitalization by incorporating algorithms into their decision-making processes and structures. Organizations must deal with multiple and often conflicting expectations of heterogeneous environments when digitalizing their structures, processes, products, and services. Just as digitalization affects organizations, vice versa, organizations shape the process of digitalization by reflecting and processing the plural and heterogeneous expectations of different stakeholders (Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021). How organizations manage different heterogeneous expectations and shape digitalization processes is an open research question.

4) Organizations and Governance

Organizations are central actors in almost all forms of modern governance (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2009; Ansell et al. 2017), as well as prominent objects of governance efforts themselves. Public administrations are constantly confronted with heterogeneous and contradictory expectations from different actors, logics, and social systems of their regulated fields; conversely, private organizations have to reconcile both legal-political and other societal expectations. In governance processes, regulatory organizations must combine political and legal considerations with the expectations of regulated actors, interest groups, and other

stakeholders. Political organizations must cope with the increasing complexity of regulated policy fields and often bring together heterogeneous public and private actors on several levels of regulation in order to couple different problem perspectives. Modern forms of governance constantly process heterogeneous expectations of diverse actors in governance networks and meta-organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson 2008). Thus, we ask about the role of organizations in governance processes and the organization of heterogeneous expectations in governance fields.

In these and many other problem areas, organizations have to deal with plural, heterogeneous, and often conflicting expectations. Therefore, we invite contributions that address questions such as:

- How do organizations deal with heterogeneous expectations from different societal domains (e.g., moral missions and economic expectations) and what effects do different strategies for dealing with this situation have on society??
- How do organizations innovate and drive new expectations in organizational fields and broader societal contexts?
- How do organizations shape modern forms of (political) governance and what new forms of organization can be found in governance structures and processes?
- How do organizations shape new grand challenges such as digitalization, global health crises, large-scale disasters or climate change, and vice versa?
- How do macro-societal pluralities give rise to new organizational forms, structures, and processes, and how do these new aspects of organization in turn affect society?

We invite papers that address these or similar questions revolving around the role and relevance of organizations in addressing the challenges of an increasingly plural society. The conference will be held at the Helmut Schmidt University in Hamburg, Germany, on March 28-29, 2025. Please submit a **1–2-page abstract** to submissions@icos2025.com by **November 30, 2024**. Acceptance decisions will be made by the end of the year.

ICOS 2025 is a joint conference of the Section on Organizational Sociology of the German Sociological Association (DGS), the Research Committee on Sociology of Organizations (RC17) of the International Sociological Association (ISA), the Research Cluster OPAL at the Helmut Schmidt University, and the "Organization & Society" Research Group of the Department of Sociology and Political Science at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU).

Registration and participation are free, but membership in either the ISA Research Committee "Sociology of Organizations" or the German Section on Organizational Sociology is mandatory. Note that both associations offer free membership but would of course greatly appreciate it if you decide to become a paid member.

To become a member of the ISA Research Committee "Sociology of Organizations", please click here: <https://organizational-sociology.com/join-us>

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