

Toward beautiful and good research: crossing the production of generative knowledge

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to explore what it means to engage in beautiful and good research within organizational and managerial contexts. It reflects on how research can respond to the complexity of lived experience, the ethical responsibility of knowledge and the tensions between methodological appropriateness and practical relevance.

Design/methodology/approach – Through three vignettes drawn from action research projects in Italian welfare organizations (the ATS project, VimodroneHOME and Milan District 3 East), the paper adopts a situated and dialogic research perspective. These experiences involve the co-construction of research paths through demand renegotiation and a strong connection with organizational actors and their contexts and challenges.

Findings – The three vignettes illustrate concrete attempts to interpret and practice an idea of beautiful and good research within real-life welfare contexts. In each case, the research takes shape through a renegotiation of the initial demand made by organizational actors, which thus becomes a negotiated demand. The findings demonstrate how care, proximity and ethical responsibility foster a shared sense, value and transformation.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to the debate on alternative research paradigms by proposing a perspective that values situatedness, reciprocity and the co-generation of knowledge. It redefines rigor and relevance through an epistemology rooted in proximity, dialogue and transformation.

Keywords Good and beautiful research, Situated inquiry, Dialogic methodology, Action research, Organizational knowledge, Welfare systems, Ethical responsibility

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

This paper acknowledges Cunliffe's (2011) call to develop new ways of studying organizations and new forms of knowledge, while the objectivist problematic and scientific models of research still prevail in the world of work and organizational studies. This contribution situates itself within a broader and well-established academic tradition that has long engaged with questions concerning the ontological, epistemological and methodological foundations of research, as well as the ethical and aesthetic dimensions that shape research design and practice, through reflective, critical and creative approaches. Within this framework, the contribution seeks to enhance awareness of these underlying assumptions and to articulate more rigorously what designing “beautiful and good” (*kalos kai agathos*) research could or should mean. The paper suggests how the possibilities of qualitative research can be disseminated, highlighting how our metatheoretical position has practical consequences. At stake is the assumption of a relevant, relational, transformative stance, matching researching, consulting and training as integrated ways for generating situated knowledge (see Table 1).



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The paper claims that conceiving and practicing work and organizational research is a profession and an art (Scaratti *et al.*, 2022) by exploring the *applicative* nature of human and social sciences, with specific reference to work and organizational psychology. Relatedly, it addresses the different ways of conceiving of research as the production of relevant and expendable knowledge as well as the need to bridge the gap between academic and practical knowledge (Bartunek, 2011; Gibbons *et al.*, 1994).

At stake is the overcoming of a modernist vision of rationality as a unitary and privileged system of knowledge (Toulmin, 1990), toward an epistemology of practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) connected to an emic methodology (Berry, 1969, 1999), seeking for a relational and transformative research perspective (Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2021). Following the position of Tsoukas (2009) and Sandberg and Tsoukas (2011), which calls for the adoption of a *logic of practice* that can go beyond traditionally understood scientific rationality and restore an appropriate relationship with the contexts and systems of activity, we can borrow the three anchors adopted by Mintzberg (2009) to interpret management and apply them to research:

- (1) Science, by evoking the power of the word, with its connection to logical and thinking skills, to the analysis of reality, and to planning, programming and consolidating knowledge;
- (2) Art, with its connection to seeing and imagining, to creatively conceiving and to multiple sensory expressiveness;
- (3) Artisanal practice, which is linked to concrete action and doing, adventure and learning, and the realistic construction of meaningful processes/products.

Table 1. Challenges and risks in doing good and beautiful research (ATS project)

Research/Intervention question	Complexities brought on by the context	Epistemological and methodological risks
The goal is to support the planning process aimed at assisting family caregivers through the construction of an interinstitutional network and the development of shared actions among public bodies, private social actors and local professionals. The request was to accompany the project while considering the plurality of stakeholders, organizational constraints and territorial specificities	The project is developed within a dense institutional ecosystem composed of ASSTs, municipalities, social districts, public institutions and third-sector organizations. Each stakeholder brings with them different objectives, decision-making timelines and operational languages, exacerbating the difficulties involved in the coordination and alignment of actions. Added to these are strict regulatory constraints, limited financial resources, frequent turnovers in roles and contacts and the growing variabilities in the health and social needs the project aimed to address. These factors generate nonlinear project trajectories that require continuous rethinking of strategies, priorities and operational structures	One epistemological risk entails reducing the context's complexity to theoretical and standardized organizational models designed elsewhere and ill-suited to grasp local specificities. Another risk is the possible marginalization of practitioners' experiences and of knowledge embedded in local territories. On a methodological level, one such risk is using rigid tools and techniques that are poorly adaptable and unhelpful in accompanying an evolving project. Another risk is the difficulty of valuing relational processes and meanings that emerge throughout the project's timeline

Source(s): Authors' own work

These anchors are connected to the idea of beautiful and good research insofar as they imply the assumption of a structural projectuality inherent in the existential-biological condition of subjects (see [Carmagnola, 1989](#); [Pagliarini, 1985](#); [Varchetta, 1990](#)). In a historical phase characterized by the reconfiguration of paradigms related to epistemological culture, modes of symbolization and worldviews, and cultures of enterprise, what is at stake is the construction of one's own meaningful personal and professional life plan, in dialogue with the constraints and opportunities offered by concrete social, work, organizational and economic contexts. The aesthetic aspect of this tension is linked to the possibility of seeing and recognizing the dimensions of potentiality (beauty) that open up to the identification and construction of our realizative trajectories and to the multiplicity of possible projects. The ethical connotation (oriented toward the good) concerns the challenge required by investing in a form of projectuality that is neither resigned nor conformist, but open to a universal breath of one's own action, beyond opportunism and instrumentality.

To adopt visions and take on the responsibility of realizing meaningful actions (for ourselves and for others) requires us to adopt an ethical and aesthetic position ([Scaratti and Kaneklin, 2013](#)) that places us within a perspective of social actors capable of intervening in a reality (organizational, professional, sociocultural, economic) and representing it as a set of networks and practices within which we can make our own contributions of understanding, dialogue and possible construction. Hence, there is a need to revisit the territories of knowledge and open perspectives that are more attentive to the socio-linguistic, material and relational conditions of inquiry and research processes and oriented toward an awareness of the multiple visions and constructions of the world ([Goodman, 1978](#)), doing so is a matter of taking a semiotic perspective, typical of cultural psychology ([Cole, 1996](#); [Valsiner, 2014](#)), which considers human beings as meaning-makers, and adopting a gaze that is attentive to people's processes and experiences.

For this reason, identifying the issues at stake and determining which ones should become the focus of study and intervention is neither straightforward nor predetermined, but rather the outcome of a social process of joint construction. This implies moments of negotiation, the crossing of dynamics of cooperation and conflict, and transactions aimed at reaching points of provisional convergence. Therefore, it requires a constant dialogue between one's paradigmatic and theoretical assumptions and the concrete and situated construction process, enabling the recognition of problems by connecting them to feasible and consensually recognized solution perspectives ([Scaratti, 2005](#)). In this perspective, research, as a profession ([Scaratti et al., 2022](#)), refers to the possibility of legitimizing different rationalities (scientific, technical and practical) ([Hamilton, 2005](#)) and the consequent need to employ the art of improvisation ([Polkinghorne, 1997](#)) used when individuals have to face events and situations defined by fluidity and uncertainty. Accordingly, it calls for a hermeneutic approach that can discern and interpret situations and realities grounded in the lived experience of the actors involved ([Green, 2009](#)).

Evoking improvisation is the link that connects the world of professions and that of art ([Scaratti et al., 2022](#)), with a historical reference to the associations of artisans in the Middle Ages, divided into the major arts (from judges and notaries through money changers, doctors and merchants) and the minor arts (butchers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, etc.). All members of these trades or professions, as craftspeople or artisans, demonstrate ability, skill, capability and competence, that is, observance of a set of rules and procedures for carrying out a human activity with a view to obtaining certain results, according to the rules of the art. Conceiving of research as a profession and as an art habit requires a change of mindset to tackle unprecedented problems, adopt an exploratory attitude, enhance the ability to build action-oriented situated knowledge, and find the right balance between curiosity and respect for the object with which one has to deal professionally. The challenge is to acquire a new paradigm that is open to the complexity of the multiple relationships that connect the various dimensions of reality and to generate questions with creativity and courage that fuel curiosity and a passion for knowledge.

Based on the conceptual background outlined above, this paper explores the epistemological and methodological implications embedded in conceiving and applying generative knowledge, highlighting certain foundations for the adoption of the concept of beautiful and good research. The paper develops as follows: first, the theoretical framework that supports the need to overcome existing traditional ways of conceiving research in work and organizational studies is explored, with specific reference to the evolution and transformation of current organizational scenarios and the connected requirement of an epistemology of the particular (Tsoukas, 2009). Then, the methodological dimensions related to the assumption of a processual approach are highlighted through the presentation of three research experience vignettes. A discussion follows the connection between the described approaches and beautiful and good research, and finally, the key coordinates for a suitable concept of beautiful and good research are depicted and connected to the professional implications for researchers.

2. Theoretical framework

In organizational and managerial scholarship, the ideal of objectivity has often been treated as the hallmark of “quality”: the more detached the researcher, the more credible the knowledge. Yet this promise of neutrality can operate as an epistemic constraint – an “as-if” position that hides its own social location and disciplines what counts as legitimate understanding (Cunliffe, 2022; Harquail, 2019). When objectivity becomes an institutionalized norm, it tends to privilege distance, linear explanation and portable categories, encouraging researchers to stabilize organizational life into generalizable schemas rather than to remain answerable to the textures of lived experience (Alvesson, 2013; Cornelissen, 2017). In practice, such schemas often function as imposed frames: they pre-structure what can be seen and said, and they can distort phenomena by forcing plural, processual realities into tidy causal sequences (Scherer, 2003; Shotter, 2016a; Weick, 1989). This is particularly problematic for the study of organizations, where meaning, language, relationship and history are constitutive rather than residual (Gephart, 2004; Van Maanen, 1979).

Our notion of beautiful and good research takes shape as a direct response to this constraint. We define it as a form of engaged practice that is grounded in specific situations, sustained through proximity to organizational life and guided by a disciplined willingness to dwell in complexity rather than rush toward explanation (Cunliffe, 2022; Scaratti, 2017). “Beauty,” in this sense, is not aesthetic decoration; it is the capacity to stay with complexity without prematurely reducing it, and to let accounts remain textured, partial and alive (Boncori, 2022; Shotter, 2016a). “Goodness” is not a universal moral claim; it is a relational commitment to accountability in how knowledge is produced, interpreted and circulated – especially when research is conducted across asymmetries of voice, recognition and power (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). This definition insists that rigor is not synonymous with rigidity, but with care, proximity and responsiveness to what the field demands and disrupts (Cunliffe, 2022; Shotter, 2016a).

Placing this definition into dialogue with scholarship on epistemic injustice clarifies why “getting close” is not merely methodological, but ethical and political. Epistemic injustice describes how power shapes who is heard, who is believed and what interpretive resources are available to make experience intelligible (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). In organizational research, the rhetoric of objectivity can fuel testimonial injustice by downgrading people’s accounts as “subjective” while elevating academic categories as the authoritative voice of reason (Collins, 2000; Fricker, 2007). It can also intensify hermeneutical injustice when dominant theoretical vocabularies fail to capture lived organizational realities – especially those shaped by gendered, racialized and colonial histories – forcing participants to speak through concepts that do not fit (Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2012). Dotson’s account of epistemic oppression pushes this further: inclusion without transforming the conditions of intelligibility can reproduce silence under the guise of participation (Dotson, 2011; Medina, 2013).

Therefore, “beautiful and good research” must be designed not only to represent organizational life but also to reduce epistemic harms produced by imposed categories and decontextualized explanation (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2012).

Global South and decolonial scholarship strengthens this argument by revealing that universalist claims about “quality” and “rigor” are not neutral; they are historically entangled with coloniality – the global ordering of whose knowledge travels, whose categories become theory and whose experiences become raw material (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000). Quijano’s concept of the coloniality of power makes explicit that modern organizational forms and managerial rationalities are embedded in geopolitical hierarchies that structure labor, value and recognition (Quijano, 2000). Mignolo’s call for epistemic disobedience identifies the necessity of refusing the idea that Northern abstractions are the default language of explanation (Mignolo, 2009). Santos, in turn, names epistemicide and proposes an ecology of knowledges: a commitment to epistemic plurality in which different ways of knowing can coexist without being ranked by a single Western metric (Santos, 2014). Smith’s decolonizing methodologies translate these insights into research practice by insisting on reciprocity, accountability and benefit-sharing as conditions of legitimacy – precisely because research has often been extractive, especially in Indigenous and Global South contexts (Smith, 1999). Spivak’s warning about representation further cautions that “giving voice” can become ventriloquism when researchers retain the power to frame, translate and authorize meaning (Spivak, 1988). Against this backdrop, our definition explicitly rejects the idea of “beautiful and good research” as a universal ideal; instead, it is a situated orientation that must be continually negotiated in relation to contexts, histories and power relations (Mignolo, 2009; Santos, 2014).

This orientation is inseparable from an ecological understanding of organizations. If organizations are socially constructed artefacts and evolving cultural processes, then research cannot treat context as noise or treat meaning as a secondary layer to be coded into pre-existing variables (Czarniawska, 2008; Tsoukas, 2009). An ecological style of inquiry calls on researchers to overcome decontextualized lenses and to accompany emergence: to attend to how practices, languages and relations continuously reconfigure what organizations are (Langley, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Toulmin, 1990). In this view, knowing is not an act of extracting stable facts but a process of negotiating meaning within changing worlds (Schutz, 1973; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). This is why reflexive engagement matters: researchers are called to co-inhabit the field, to be affected by it and to revise their categories in response to what actors make meaningful in practice, rather than applying predefined labels from above (Scaratti, 2017; Shotter, 2016a).

A key implication is the need to value research approaches that enable the co-construction of knowledge between scholars and practitioners. Collaborative processes grounded in mutual engagement, shared problem definition and co-creation of solutions provide a concrete methodological pathway for making knowledge accountable to those who live the organizational realities being studied (Denis and Lomas, 2003; Scaratti, 2017; Shani *et al.*, 2008; Testa *et al.*, 2022). These approaches also sustain a constant and reciprocal dialogue between theory and practice: theory no longer precedes practice as an abstract template, but emerges from practice as a reflective articulation of lived and shared experiences, continuously reconfigured as contexts change (Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017; Yanow and Tsoukas, 2009). Such dialogical and participatory commitments resonate with Freire’s insistence on knowledge as a dialogical, emancipatory practice rather than a top-down transfer of expertise (Freire, 1970), and with Fals Borda’s participatory action research, which centers co-investigation and the political relevance of knowledge for communities and workers (Fals Borda, 1987). They also align with standpoint epistemologies that treat marginalized positions as sources of critical insight into how power organizes organizational life (Collins, 2000).

Taken together, these strands allow us to reframe “beautiful and good research” as a situated and relational response to the deceptive constraint of objectivity. In this sense, the contribution

belongs to an ongoing scholarly lineage that has long challenged dominant epistemologies – not by rejecting rigor, but by redefining rigor as attentiveness, relationality and reflexive responsibility in the production of knowledge (Cunliffe, 2022; Fricker, 2007).

In the following section, we present three experiences that express attempts to interpret and practice the approach to beautiful and good research. Such attempts are neither obvious nor straightforward, and they always face uncertainties and unexpected events.

3. Vignettes of suitable beautiful and good research

The following vignettes offer glimpses into experiences drawn from real organizational contexts that we have found ourselves inhabiting and accompanying as researchers and psychologists both of and for organizations. These are not exemplary descriptions or cases to be emulated, but rather vivid, dense and ambiguous situations that have challenged our epistemological and methodological stance. They are fragments of organizational life that have activated the need to practice a different form of research that is beautiful and good because it is capable of drawing close, of being situated and of being sensitive to complexity and change.

The requests emerging from organizational contexts ever more frequently go beyond demands for analysis or technical support. Instead, they require perspectives that can hold together the depth of relationships, the fluidity of needs and the need to construct shared meanings. As academics, we are being called upon by organizations, prompting new research approaches that make room for reflexivity, for dialogue among different forms of knowledge and for the construction of transformative practices. In this sense, what we consider beautiful and good research is not a formula to be applied but an ethical and methodological tension that is continuously renewed through fieldwork and thus involvement in processes of listening, mediation and facilitation.

Each vignette is introduced by a brief description of the context and accompanied by a table that highlights its key elements – the research or intervention question, the organizational complexity encountered and the epistemological and methodological risks associated with standardized modes of knowledge production.

The aim of this exercise is not to recount successful cases but to show how certain organizational conditions – marked by the plurality of actors, institutional dynamics, constraints and tensions – require an attitude to research that suspends judgment, embraces uncertainty and opens spaces of understanding and meaning-making. In each of these situations, beautiful and good research was not a predefined choice but a possibility that emerged through dialogue with reality, specifically made viable by the researchers' willingness to be traversed by the questions of the context and to carefully accompany the processes that unfolded from them.

3.1 To accompany or to impose? The risk of a top-down model

The first vignette is set in the context of the Health Protection Agency (Agenzia di Tutela della Salute, ATS) of Bergamo (Northern Italy), which launched a project called *Supporting Family Caregivers: Alongside Those Who Provide Care* in 2022. The project's goal is to foster a support network among the various actors involved in assisting family caregivers. A broad network is involved (municipalities, social districts, public health, third-sector organizations and others) and cooperates in defining and implementing shared interventions.

From the earliest stages, a complex request emerged, namely, to support the planning process by focusing on the strategic objectives, the diversity of actors involved, the operational constraints and the practical feasibility of the proposed actions. Thus, the question raised was not how to validate a preexisting model, but rather how to contribute to the emergence of solutions that could adapt to the complexity of the context and its constant transformations. In this scenario, there was a risk of producing a rigid organizational framework that was

conceived externally and poorly suited to respond to local contexts. A top-down model that was insufficiently grounded in the real problems and practitioners' experiences would result in solutions that are of limited usefulness, difficult to implement and incapable of creating lasting impact.

Within this tension, the need for accompaniment emerged: a form of research support that remained close to emerging needs, operational challenges and the changing conditions that characterize caregiving. It was a complex, fragmented, yet essential field that required processes of reflexivity and dialogue among different professional perspectives and organizational cultures, overcoming mono-professional logics and paving the way for new and shared configurations.

To allow the reader to grasp (in part, and with no claim to exhaustiveness) the complexity we faced as researchers, we present the following ethnographic vignette:

During the initial phase of the project, one of the most delicate moments was the establishment of a multidisciplinary team dedicated to supporting family caregivers. The nurses came from the ASSTs, while the social workers belonged to the Ambiti: two different organizational worlds, each with its own procedures, timing, and language.

From the very first meetings, the complexity became apparent: each professional had their own regular work commitments, and finding common days and times turned into a challenging exercise. Schedules rarely aligned, and finding shared space often meant giving up other duties or rescheduling already planned activities.

When the team finally managed to meet, professional differences emerged strongly. A nurse emphasized the need to carefully monitor the clinical parameters of an elderly caregiver, while a social worker pointed out the difficulties of a family network worn down by fatigue. The discussions grew lively: on one side were those advocating for prioritizing health aspects; on the other were those stressing the urgency of strengthening social ties and access to community services.

In such a situation, made up of differing organizational logics, practical constraints and sometimes divergent professional perspectives, the researcher can choose not to yield to the temptation to offer ready-made "recipes" but to embrace the complexity and navigate it by undertaking beautiful and good research that is intertwined with the situated context.

3.2 Evaluating without reducing: the risk of oversimplifying impact

The second vignette, the VimodrHOME project, was launched by the Municipality of Vimodrone (Northern Italy), in collaboration with a network of local partners, to develop an innovative initiative in the field of youth policies and territorial cohesion. In this context, an academic research team was involved in the task of supporting the project through an evaluation process. The request, formally focused on impact analysis, posed important challenges: how can we convey the value of an evolving social experience without reducing it to a set of short-term quantitative indicators? How can we avoid a mere standardized measurement that is unable to grasp the complexity of the processes being activated?

One major risk involved was adopting a simplified perspective focused exclusively on immediately observable numerical variables while overlooking the deeper dimensions of the project. The transformative value of the initiative, as well as its generative potential, did not reside only in the short-term results it could produce but also in how visions, practices and relationships were built around the joint construction of those very outcomes. Therefore, our interpretation and negotiation of the request was to design an evaluation process capable of integrating strategic vision, collaborative dynamics and recognition of the social value of lived experiences. In this scenario, to evaluate meant being able to listen, closely observe and convey the generative scope of a project that resisted confinement within the boundaries of linear reporting (see [Table 2](#)).

In this case as well, we chose to use the form of the ethnographic vignette to offer the reader a glimpse into the complexity we faced as researchers.

Table 2. Challenges and risks in doing good and beautiful research (VimodrHOME project)

Research/Intervention question	Complexities brought on by the context	Epistemological and methodological risks
The goal is to support the VimodrHOME project through an impact evaluation activity that would not be limited to measuring short-term results but would instead be capable of highlighting the initiative’s innovative scope in the field of youth and social policies. The explicit request was to reveal the transformative and generative dimensions of the project, which not only diverge from traditional processes but also embrace the complexity of our time and the dialogue between institutions and local communities	The project involves a broad and diverse network of stakeholders: municipal social services, youth associations, third-sector organizations, professionals and citizens. The process of codesigning takes place in a dynamic context in which institutional objectives intertwine with the emerging needs of local communities. The value of the project lies not only in its immediate outputs but also in the processes of building relationships, alliances and new forms of collaboration. The planning process evolves in a nonlinear way and requires constant renegotiations of meanings, roles and practices	Epistemologically, there is a risk of adopting a reductionist evaluation logic that is oriented toward demonstrating effectiveness using functional and performance-based criteria. Methodologically, there is a risk of using tools, such as social return on investment (SROI), which are useful for accountability purposes but are incapable of capturing the quality of generative processes, the narrative and relational dimension of innovation, and the situated value produced by the project’s participatory and transformative dynamics
Source(s): Authors’ own work		

The first meeting of the VimodrHOME project took place in a municipal hall, with representatives of the lead organization sitting alongside municipal technicians and some political figures. After the opening remarks, one of the project managers took the floor and spoke in a firm tone:

For us, having an impact measurement report is essential. We need clear numbers: how many young people are participating, how many activities have been carried out, how many families are involved.

At that point, one of the political representatives added, “We need to be able to demonstrate, with data in hand, that this project has a significant social impact, as this is the only way we can ensure continued funding in the coming years.”

The scene immediately revealed the demand for an evaluation grounded in measurable outcomes and political-organizational needs. However, this approach clashed with the complex and non-linear nature of social and territorial project design processes, which cannot meaningfully be reduced to numerical indicators.

For the researchers, the emerging challenge was to both account for impacts to guarantee the continuity of funding (a legitimate need) and to value the quality of generative processes, the narrative and relational dimension of innovation, and the situated value produced by the project’s participatory and transformative dynamics.

3.3 Seeing, reading and interpreting power to promote change

The third vignette emerges from a supervision process for social workers within Milan’s District 3 East, an intermunicipal organization overseeing integrated social and healthcare services. Initiated to implement a national reform in social services – introducing the right to supervision for social workers – the project was funded through Italy’s adaptation of the Next Generation EU Plan.

During the initial needs analysis, social workers reported confusion due to an overload of redundant meetings. Supervision was then reinterpreted as a form of action research across the

four municipalities, transforming each meeting into a space for generating practical, transformative knowledge. These meetings enabled discussion, decision-making and strategic planning on complex cases and shared resources.

However, the knowledge produced was highly contextual and fragmented. Decisions often remained unimplemented because stakeholders were absent or conflicting decisions were made in parallel meetings. Consequently, there was a reflexive reconstruction of each meeting's center of transformation, focusing on relevance, connections and reconfigurations.

The fragmentation of actors and organizations threatened cohesion. Fault lines – between public and private sectors, old and new hires, social and health services – amplified asymmetries, often undermining collaboration. The researchers risked being seen as partisan. Ultimately, the process highlighted the need for a method that could reconnect fragmented realities and an epistemology that acknowledged how power shapes knowledge production (see Table 3).

The following ethnographic vignette was chosen to give the reader a sense of the density of ethical and methodological issues we encountered as researchers.

Let's see where the axe will fall.

Thus began the supervision meeting with a social worker from the Ufficio di Piano (Planning Office), who effectively played a middle-management role, since she had the authority to plan priorities and commitments for the municipal social workers while in turn reporting to a supervisor. The term “axe” referred to the organizational design developed over more than a year of interviews, participant observations, and co-design sessions—moments of deep involvement for both the territorial social workers and the members of the Technical Table, the body that brought together the heads of social services from the four municipalities, the Planning Office social workers, and the head of the Planning Office herself.

Table 3. Challenges and risks in doing good and beautiful research (district 3 of Milan Project)

Research/Intervention question	Complexities brought on by the context	Epistemological and methodological risks
The initial proposal was structured around three objectives • Supporting workplace well-being • Supporting organizational well-being • Facilitating the emergence of innovation drivers in specific directions Subsequently, the question became clearer and transformed into a request to reorganize the system of meetings within the District, driven by the goals of reducing redundancies and increasing the perceived effectiveness of the meetings themselves	The project was promoted by an institution that does not directly provide services but coordinates the integration of services offered by various organizations recognized as part of the Social District This institution operates along multiple lines marked by fragmentation and power asymmetries The value of the project lies in two aspects: first, in its recognition of meetings as crucial contexts in which multiprofessional knowledge is turned into organizational practices, and second, in identifying the opportunity to connect various centers of knowledge production—knowledge that is useful, practical, transformative, contextual, dialectical, contended and contested	During the research process, there emerged a risk of adopting an epistemology that sees, reads and interprets contexts without considering intercontextual dimensions and the ways in which organizational narratives and conversations maintain and reproduce inequalities in status and power between different settings On a methodological level, there was a real risk of assuming an organizational design was valid simply because it was constructed through participatory means, assuming that “participatory” equated “legitimate.” However, even democratic participation can leave some people marginalized. Dialogue with those on the outside can lead to a complete and profound revision of the action research project, right down to its epistemological assumptions

Source(s): Authors' own work

“What do you mean by ‘axe’? Where does this perception come from?” I asked.

“Well, you want to cut everything; you’re trimming us down to the bone,” she replied.

Indeed, the organizational design that had been developed responded to the need, expressed by all the municipal social workers, to participate in fewer but better-organized meetings, where their time could be used more meaningfully. This led to the integration and consolidation of previously dispersed meetings into specific, predictable, and clearly defined moments—resulting in an overall reduction in the total number of meetings. However, I realized at that moment that the social worker from the Planning Office had not taken part in the participatory co-construction process of the new organizational design—not accidentally, but deliberately: “I didn’t want to take part because my supervisor has no idea how many things we actually do.”

This single conversation marked a turning point for the entire action-research process. From that moment on, the dimension of power—and how it is compressed and expressed in contradictory ways within intermediate management levels—became an integral part of the work. Everything, absolutely everything, needed to be reconsidered, including the epistemological assumptions themselves.

For the researchers, the emerging challenge was to integrate the open and participatory nature of the organizational co-design process that had led to the emergence of a new proposal and a critical perspective on power relations and dynamics, that is, a recognition of how these can significantly shape the ways different participants interpret the same phenomena. A participatory process is not good in itself; rather, it requires a legitimacy that can renew itself and engage in dialogue with multiple actors.

4. Discussion: doing beautiful and good research

The situations analyzed in the preceding sections represent concrete expressions of the challenges encountered when research enters organizational contexts to accompany processes rather than to apply models. In each of the cases discussed, a clear tension emerges between the complexities of the requests raised and the risks of reductive answers, which are responses that, despite stemming from legitimate requests, could have led to prepackaged solutions. This tension is not only methodological: it concerns how “objectivity” can become a deceptive constraint, thereby narrowing what counts as intelligible organizational reality (Harquail, 2019; Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014).

Within these spaces of uncertainty and ambiguity is where the meaning of what we call *good and beautiful research* becomes visible. In particular, we define this as a form of research that is situated, attentive and reflective – a kind that draws close to contexts, allows itself to be transformed by encounters with actors and does not presume to explain before it has understood. Viewed from this perspective, rigor does not equate to the rigidity of analytical frameworks but to methodological care, the ability to listen and the ethical responsibility of being present. The request becomes a shared focal point, to be transformed into a renegotiated and jointly defined demand by all involved actors. In these terms, “beautiful and good research” is not the application of a universal standard of quality: it is a situated orientation that must be continually negotiated with and within contexts, especially where histories of epistemic domination shape what can be said, heard and recognized as knowledge (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1988).

The first vignette highlights the need to move away from the temptation to apply a pre-established model, instead fostering the need to create dialogue among different perspectives, heterogeneous organizational cultures, and diverse languages, timelines and working modalities. The organization requested support in accompanying a process of shared design involving a plurality of institutional actors, valuing complexity and sustaining the co-construction of visions and strategies. This shift from “applying models” to “accompanying processes” also has epistemic-justice implications: when pre-given categories are imposed from above, some actors’ knowledges risk being discounted as merely “local” or “subjective,” reproducing testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (Collins, 2000; Dotson, 2011;

Fricker, 2007; Pohlhaus, 2012). In Medina's terms, this is also an exercise in epistemic responsibility: it expands shared interpretive resources and creates collective conditions for recognizing knowledge that would otherwise remain unheard or unintelligible (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013).

The second vignette highlights how evaluation can go beyond visible outcomes to capture alliance-building and paradigm shifts in social policy. In the *VimodrHOME* project, launched by the Municipality of Vimodrone to promote innovative youth policies through the construction of an interinstitutional network, the initial request was to conduct an impact evaluation. As a research group, we believed in the importance of interpreting this request within a broader approach capable of supporting reflective and generative processes. This choice deliberately resists audit-like versions of "objectivity" that discipline actors through predeclared outcomes – often turning evaluation into an instrument of compliance rather than learning (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000).

In this light, we used social network analysis (SNA) as an initial tool to map the web of relationships among project partners. This tool provided a valuable foundation for identifying already activated connections, spotting emerging strategic alliances and understanding the collaborative potential characterizing the project's entire ecosystem. The analysis was not viewed as a static snapshot but as a starting point to stimulate conversations and raise awareness of the distinct dynamics at play (Figure 1).

Starting from a constructivist and transformative epistemological stance, the final product, an evaluation report, was conceived as a dialogic tool. Specifically, this tool became a critical and open restitution capable of stimulating reflections among partners, thus highlighting the critical issues that emerged along the way and consciously strengthening the strong points to guide the future. In this way, evaluation was configured not as a final judgment but as a lever for learning and consolidating territorial alliances. This dialogic restitution also responds to Spivak's warning about representation: rather than "speaking for" actors by finalizing meaning in a definitive report, the report is designed to return interpretive agency to the network and to keep contestation visible (Spivak, 1988).

The third panel made it clear that epistemological premises are not an *a priori* element of research practices or the expression of a one-way positioning choice; rather, they emerge dialectically through the relationship of care and embedment (Scaratti *et al.*, 2010) that the researcher develops with the actors within the organization. The constructionist gaze enabled

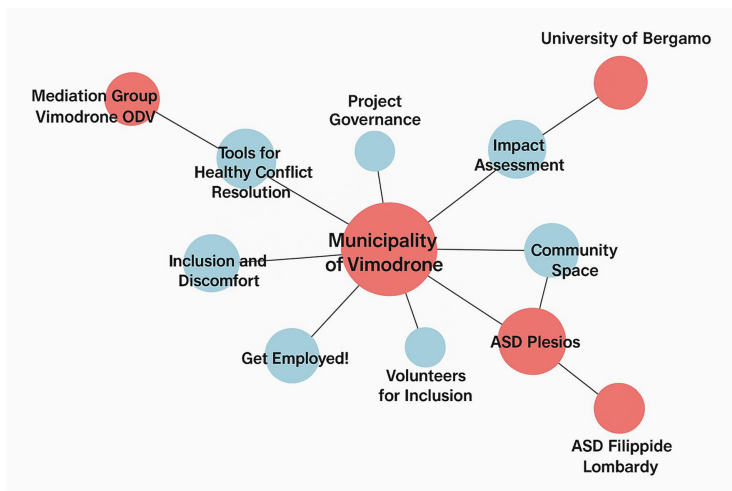


Figure 1. Social network analysis (SNA). Source: Authors' own work

us to recognize and give value to meetings as contexts for constructing practical, useful and transformative knowledge (Scaratti, 2021); to grasp the implications of contextuality and situatedness (Bluhm *et al.*, 2011; Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017); and to recognize that it was contested and contested knowledge (Cunliffe, 2011). Here epistemic injustice provides an additional lens: knowledge is contested not only because contexts are complex, but because credibility and intelligibility are unevenly distributed – making reflexive inquiry a practice of responsibility toward who can be heard and what can be made sayable (Dotson, 2011; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Pohlhaus, 2012).

In the supervision of the East District Social Unit 3, some meetings assumed the function of pivots for critical reflexivity on the themes raised by the actors. These included the shared management of material resources, the differences in status among organizational roles and professional profiles, the responsibilities of managing social projects for citizens, and the varying forms of oppression exercised toward colleagues and citizens themselves. These same contexts evolved into hubs for the development of a new structural framework. In particular, an interorganizational structure took shape as a synthesis of contributions from actors across multiple organizations, forming a shared collective legacy.

4.1 Themes and symphonies

One transversal element running through the three experiences described is that they are knowledge pathways of high practical relevance. The initial knowledge, the knowledge collected and valued along the way, and the new knowledge built through the ensuing interactions all met the need to be applicable in daily practice to improve “being” and “doing.” Thus, practical relevance was explored by the criterion of verification embedded in the very human relationship between the researchers and the actors involved, coevolving with the path itself. This represents a notion of well-being and better-being that unfolded during the process, varying from person to person, context to context and moment to moment. In this sense, beauty is fidelity to unfolding complexity, while goodness is accountability to participants’ meanings rather than subordination to predesigned causal logics (Collins, 2000; Santos, 2014).

We could have identified a central construct in each of the three pathways and made comparisons between the “before” and “after,” verifying the significance of the change achieved. One might have assessed the evolution of the quality of collaboration, the sense of community/work and organizational well-being through pre- and post-intervention measurements. However, such a practice would have (literally) constrained the multiplicity of meaningful dimensions – particularly the vastness of relationships, conversations, tensions and actions – within a limited number of variables. It would be like claiming that the value of a symphony lies in the theme rather than in the symphony itself. From a decolonial standpoint, such reduction also matters because it privileges one regime of intelligibility – linear, abstract, universalizing – over relational and situated ways of knowing (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014).

The three pathways thus share the characteristic of starting from (not arriving at or stumbling upon) complexity. In all three cases discussed here, the phenomenon under study was the functioning of interorganizational networks. One might be tempted to abstract or extract a transversal model of steps, incidents and phases. However, had the network of health agencies, municipalities and social districts involved in the Caregiver Project been examined using the same approach applied to the institutions responsible for overseeing Milan’s Eastern District 3, would we still have observed the emergence of distinct operational configurations, supra-local coordination arenas, experimental devices and practices of systematic observation and reflection? Alternatively, by applying a common model to the supervision of the District 3 East and the Vimodrone projects, would we still have worked collaboratively on a participatory and widespread organizational design? This does not mean avoiding critique; rather, it shifts rigor from forcing comparability to sustaining situated responsibility for the interpretive choices made and their consequences in context (Cunliffe, 2022; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013).

4.1.1 About the hyphen between research and action. In the three experiences described, consultancy, evaluation research and organizational supervision are configured as action-research pathways. In our approach, action research is characterized by its ability to consciously move within this diversity, comfortably dwelling in the tension toward recursive legitimization. For example, in the complex scenarios we worked in (e.g. the interorganizational scenarios), some stakeholders may build stronger trust with researchers when they share objectivist premises, that is, when they feel reassured by the fact that they are working together to transform clearly defined and shared objects. At the same time, it is equally possible that other stakeholders find it easier to place their trust in a researcher when the democratic and participatory nature of the entire research design is guaranteed. Therefore, it is important to meet the stakeholders' needs (even when these diverge among themselves) by building with them credible and meaningful representations of the work proposal, not for tactical reasons but out of an ethic of care. This ethic resonates with dialogical and participatory traditions in which knowledge is co-produced through dialogue and shared problem-framing (Fals Borda, 1987; Freire, 1970).

However, reassurance does not mean collusion. The multitude and diversity of thought paradigms that come into play in complex contexts, such as those considered in this work, can lead actors to exert varying forms of oppression over others. In all three cases discussed here (ATS, VimodHome and District 3 of Milan), the projects' promoting committees were not immune to the urge to demonstrate the success of their project idea by resorting to predeclared expected outcomes as a form of discipline. Doing so meant pushing the involved actors and beneficiaries to demonstrate a project's effectiveness at all costs, selecting those who complied and excluding those who showed doubts or refused to cooperate.

This notion represents a specific ethical turning point in which the researcher's autonomy becomes a space for renegotiating the very meaning of doing research. In many ways, this is a "terrain" wherein the deep significance of claims regarding the dialectic and transformative nature of research is recovered (Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2021) and where the need for the knowledge produced to be recognized by the communities involved becomes apparent (Cunliffe, 2003; Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017). From an epistemic injustice perspective, these are also "credibility contests": the researcher can either reinforce testimonial hierarchies by privileging managerial success narratives or cultivate responsibility by holding open spaces where dissenting experiences remain intelligible (Collins, 2000; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013).

These ethical turning points, as is now evident, do not coincide with the slavish application of any particular technique but with the ability to recognize the opening of spaces of possibility even amid the turbulence of unfolding events. Perhaps, it is here more than anywhere else that research becomes action.

In Lewin's experimentalist vision, action corresponds to executing a program devised by a committee of diverse subjects and roles (Lewin, 1946). This vision is based on the idea that research and action are separate and sequential moments. However, in the vignettes presented in the current work, action research becomes a reference that informs practices of consultancy (first vignette), evaluation (second vignette) and professional supervision (third vignette) – a common thread running through broader and more complex frameworks. Furthermore, through a reflective and critical lens, research practices coincide with the recognition of practical, useful and transformative knowledge that permeates everyday life and the lived experiences of the actors involved.

Action also coincides with the highly critical distance introduced by reflective practices, that is, seeing oneself in the representations returned by the researcher while also recognizing and mobilizing oneself in response to these provocations. Through this phenomenon of "knowing one's knowing," a principle of performativity – an active intervention in discourse and practice – is thus revealed (Spicer *et al.*, 2009). Hence, the new words circulating through reflection, the new discourses born from self-recognition and the symbolic spaces generated by emerging metaphors all introduce elements of change. Thus, action is not separate from research but is part and parcel of a beautiful and good research process.

Finally, the hyphenic space (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013) between research and action coincides with the ethical reflexivity of the researcher, who is required – while immersed in the context – not to lose sight of the social, epistemic and political coordinates of their situated being. As the relationship between researchers and respondents is marked by asymmetric power (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013), the former must draw upon categories, arguments and poetic insights to position themselves not only at the beginning of the journey but during each of its phases. Decolonial scholarship sharpens this requirement by insisting that reflexivity also includes resisting epistemic extraction – i.e. refusing to turn lived experience into raw material for external categories while retaining authorship and authority (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Smith, 1999; Spivak, 1988).

4.1.2 Human before all. The eighteenth-century pediment of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo states that “Art renews the people and reveals their life.” Similarly, research practices also have the potential to come into contact with the life of the fields in which those same practices take shape – recognizing, desiring, respecting and becoming permeated by it: a life that is not an immutable and perfect essence, but dynamism, change, meaning-making – a movement in upbeat.

Beautiful and good research can only be born from the courageous acts of abandoning the need to appeal to essences (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Zanoni *et al.*, 2017) and assuming – as a starting point – that no lived experience can be reduced to a stable and pure essence. In this way, the researcher has the opportunity to enter the life context (i.e. the *lebenswelt* of the subjects; Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2021; Testa *et al.*, 2022; Scaratti *et al.*, 2022) and begin to live the epistemic adventure alongside them.

As Merleau-Ponty (1953) affirmed, life stands in opposition to any mechanistic hypothesis. Considering the vital element within contexts means embracing those qualities that give organizational contexts uniqueness, unrepeatability, value and unpredictability, all of which form an intrinsic resistance to any form of standardization and quantification.

Therefore, movement and change (action) are intertwined with the ongoing production of meaning in human experience (research). Even when experience takes the name of “organization,” the life-world remains the primary horizon from which human beings draw meaning and within which they develop theories (Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2010). The production of meaning through interactions leads human beings to necessarily experience change, as change itself coincides with the reweaving of existing networks of meanings (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

Given the human relevance of the phenomena and issues at stake, promoting organizational change makes no sense unless it is preceded by critical reflections on the theories informing practice. Furthermore, a critical reflection on theories is pointless if such reflection has not considered profound questions about human beings, such as who we wish to actualize, liberate, and educate, and for whom we wish to reconstruct meaning in the workplace. If we, human beings, are always and necessarily implicated in organizational life (Aktouf, 1992), it is essential to refocus every research problem in the terms suggested by Shotter (2016b) and taken up by Cunliffe (2022b). Ultimately, this means that doing research entails questioning the meaning of the human-ways-of-being-human-in-a-human-world (Shotter, 2016a, p. 116).

5. Conclusion

We can sum up the need to overcome the mainstream way of conceiving of research in work and organizational studies – which remains widespread – by regarding the intertwining of profession and art as the key component of a researcher’s movement toward embracing a paradigm of complexity. The challenge is to develop research and knowledge production tackling unprecedented problems with an attitude of critical thinking. The researcher is required to have a specific attitude that is not taken for granted and is connected to the ability to sustain unpredictability; to the exercise of action-oriented thinking and the joint and situated research of knowledge; and to a mental disposition that is capable of reflecting on one’s own assumptions and of entering into dialogue with one’s own and others’ experiences (Scaratti

et al., 2022). In the terms developed above, this also entails rejecting the deceptive comfort of objectivist distance and embracing a rigor of proximity: a situated attentiveness that allows the researcher to be transformed by encounters before advancing explanations (Cunliffe, 2022a; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013).

In the field of research in work and organizational studies, this attitude entails an articulated connotation as applied social science (Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2021), with reference to polyphonic, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, collaborative and orchestral coordinated approaches in conceiving research. Tackling organizational contexts characterized by meaninglessness and uncertainty, in which people have to deal with unforeseen problems, criticalities and troubled situations, requires addressing the intersection between activity, experience and context (Green, 2009) and conceiving of scientific research as an unfolding process of social accomplishment (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). In this perspective, studying organizational realities, intervening in them and generating knowledge and changes means approaching contexts of action characterized by uniqueness, ambiguity, unpredictability and provisionality and measuring oneself with practical and implicit knowledge (Scaratti and Ivaldi, 2021).

Hence, the challenge arises of dealing with research objects that increasingly take the form of research problems, generated by situations of urgency and low formalization, whose configuration derives from social exchanges with differently experienced interlocutors. Such objects depend not only on the logical coherence of the project that connects them to a theoretical paradigm of reference but also on the process of concrete construction linking the problems to knowledge objectives that can be useable and consensually recognized.

The considerations developed enable us to imagine beautiful and good research, supported by invention, imagination and improvisation. At the same time, we avoid presenting beauty and goodness as universal values: decolonial and Global South scholarship reminds us that “quality” has often been defined through Northern standards of abstraction, linearity and control, and thus must be re-negotiated as a situated and accountable practice (Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014).

Research is beautiful insofar as it remains faithful to complexity without forcing linear closure, and it keeps organizational meaning situated rather than abstracted (Boncori, 2022; Czarniawska, 2008; Van Maanen, 1979). Research is good insofar as it is accountable for the epistemic conditions it creates: it resists epistemic exclusion and reduces testimonial and hermeneutical injustice by co-constructing interpretive resources with people through an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice (Cunliffe and Scaratti, 2017; Denis and Lomas, 2003; Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Shani *et al.*, 2008; Testa *et al.*, 2022).

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