

available at www.sciencedirect.comjournal homepage: <http://www.elsevier.com/locate/scaman>

Reframing resistance to organizational change

Robyn Thomas^{a,*}, Cynthia Hardy^{b,1}

^a Cardiff Business School, Cardiff, CF10 3EU, UK

^b Department of Management & Marketing, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria 3010, Australia

KEYWORDS

Resistance to change;
Power;
Organizational change

Abstract We examine the literature on resistance to organizational change and identify two dominant yet contrasting approaches: the demonizing versus the celebrating of resistance to change. We show that both of these approaches fail to address power relations adequately and, in so doing, raise practical, ethical and theoretical problems in understanding and managing change. We propose an alternative, more critical approach, which shows how both power and resistance constitute organizational change. We highlight how power-resistance relations lie at the heart of organizational change.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Charles Darwin famously observed that adaptation to change is the key to survival. An observation often reflected in management of change neologisms, this sentiment seems beguilingly simple to those who face the challenges of complex organizational change. Consequently the management of change has attracted considerable attention in the management literature. Of particular note is the energy devoted to how to deal with the challenges associated with resistance to change, resulting in a sizeable body of literature on the causes of resistance, and how it can be best managed. In this paper we identify two dominant approaches in the conceptualizing of resistance: demonizing it and celebrating it. We examine these two approaches to show how both fail to address power relations adequately and, in so doing, raise significant theoretical, ethical and practical issues.

We start by critically exploring the most common approach to resistance, which is to demonize it by viewing

it as a pathology that obstructs attempts to change organizations (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). This work grants change agents² the right – if not the duty – to use whatever means necessary to prevent resistance, including the use of power against employees (Hardy & Clegg, 2004). This way of dealing with resistance does not however appear to have been very successful, given the number of change initiatives that fail (Beer & Nohria, 2000). Consequently, some researchers have recently argued for a different approach. They suggest that what change agents label as resistance may, in fact, represent novel ideas for change (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Piderit, 2000). This work celebrates resistance, arguing that it plays an important role in successful organizational change. However, this approach also privileges change agents – granting them the sole prerogative of deciding whether certain behaviours on the part of employees constitute resistance or not. Accordingly, employees may be placed in an even more invidious position than when resistance is demonized: encouraged to resist, they risk condemnation if

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 29 2087 5724; fax: +44 29 2087 4419.

E-mail addresses: thomasr4@cardiff.ac.uk (R. Thomas), chardy@unimelb.edu.au (C. Hardy).

¹ Tel.: +61 3 8344 3719.

² The term change agent is used in much of the literature to refer to those individuals who lead a change initiative, usually senior managers.

their responses are not deemed to be palatable by their superiors.

Demonizing and celebrating approaches, despite very different conceptualizations of resistance, both privilege the change agent. In so doing, they legitimate asymmetrical power relations between change agents and change recipients, raising a series of practical, ethical and theoretical issues. In order to overcome these problems, we argue that organizational change should be viewed as an outcome of the dynamics of both power and resistance, drawing on insights from Foucault's (1979, 1980, 1982) conceptualisation of power relations. By emphasising power-resistance relations, we shift the focus away from questions of who resists change and why, to questions of how relations of power and resistance operate together in ways that are constitutive of change. Change involves establishing new understandings, new practices and new relationships (Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011). While change can be imposed, it is more likely to be taken on by members of the organization if they have played a part in the negotiations of new meanings, practices and relationships. In this paper, we show how power and resistance lie at the heart of these negotiations, and in doing so provide insights into the multi-faceted and transversal ways in which organizational change occurs.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The next section will examine the management literature on organizational change to outline the ways in which resistance has been conceptualized. We then examine how power and resistance shape organizational change. Third, we illustrate how our approach can be applied. Finally, we discuss the implications for understanding and managing change.

Resistance to change

Change is a firmly established priority for organizations. The 1980s and 1990s saw organizations experiment with TQM, customer service initiatives, reengineering, right-sizing, downsizing, culture change, and countless other managerial fads and fashions (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). More recently, global environmental, technological and financial shocks have forced organizations to adapt and transform their activities (Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In't Veld, 2004; Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008). To realize such changes, it is commonly held that successful change requires the cooperation of employees, since any resistance on their part can hamper the change initiative (Piderit, 2000). In this section, we identify two dominant approaches to conceptualizing resistance to change, and examine how each deals with power.

Demonizing resistance to change

A long established assumption in the literature on organizational change is that resistance constitutes a problem. For example, in Coch and French's (1948) seminal study in a US pyjama sewing factory, employees reacted to being moved to different jobs by quitting, being absent, restricting output and showing hostility towards management. It was concluded that this behaviour constituted resistance to the change and, accordingly, the study was designed explicitly to examine why people resisted change so strongly and what could be

done to overcome such resistance. This problematizing of resistance was then taken up by Lawrence (1954: 49), who argued that employee resistance to change was one of "the most baffling and recalcitrant of the problems which business executives face." Other studies followed, which also focused on overcoming resistance (e.g., Zander, 1950), especially in the Organization Development (OD) approach to change (Cummins & Worley, 1997; French & Bell, 1990). Even processual and political approaches (e.g., Kotter, 1995; Pettigrew, 1973, 1987; Quinn, 1980), which criticized OD for failing to capture the "messiness" of change, explicitly acknowledged the strong possibility of resistance and treated it as something that needed to be overcome – an assumption which continues to be popular today (e.g., Furst & Cable, 2008; Harvard Business School, 2005).

Not surprisingly, studies went on to investigate the causes of, and solutions to, resistance. Causes were typically conceptualized in terms of shortcomings in an individual's attitudes, emotions and/or behaviours (Piderit, 2000; van Dam, Oreg, & Schyns, 2008). For example, parochial self-interest led employees to resist because they focused on "their own best interests and not on those of the total organization" (Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979: 107). Other deficiencies on the part of employees included misunderstanding the change; a lack of tolerance for change; and cynicism towards change (Furst & Cable, 2008; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Reichers et al., 1997; van Dam et al., 2008). Some work did argue that resistance could be caused by the mishandling of the change by change agents (Greiner, 1992; Reichers et al., 1997; Spreitzer & Quinn, 1996) but, even here, subordinates were still blamed for engaging in resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999).

Solutions to this continued challenge of resistance are manifold. Some appear to be benign insofar as they revolve around communication, education, and participation (Furst & Cable, 2008; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005). For example, many change models provide suggestions for developing an effective communication strategy as a means of avoiding resistance (Klein, 1996). In the event that employees remain unconvinced of the benefits of change or do not change quickly enough, change agents are then justified in resorting to exercising power through various coercive methods to force through the change (French & Delahaye, 1996). Employees can also be forced to cooperate through such strategies as manipulation, withholding information, implying future benefits, and using coercion in the form of sanctions, edicts, threats and dismissals (Bennebroek Gravenhorst & In't Veld, 2004; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Poole, Gioia, & Gray, 1989). Change agents are thus justified in using the stick as well as the carrot in their attempts to eradicate resistance (Hardy & Clegg, 2004; McCarthy, Puffer, May, Ledgerwood, & Stewart, 2008).

Viewing resistance as a problematic obstruction is a dominant view in both management practice and theory (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). It can be seen in studies of change that range from firms in Russia (McCarthy et al., 2008) to public utilities in Italy (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005) to hospitals in New Zealand (Kan & Parry, 2004). It views resistance unequivocally in "negative terms, as a sign of failure ... or as a problem to be eliminated or minimized" (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005: 1816). As a result, the change agent is placed "on the side of the angels, and the people being changed as mulish and obstinate, resisting innovations that have proved

successful elsewhere” (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006: 2030).

Celebrating resistance

More recently, a different conceptualization of resistance has emerged which, rather seeing resistance to change as something to be avoided or eradicated, views it as part of successful change. This work proposes that the demonizing of resistance has not provided sustainable ways of managing change and argues that this mindset can interfere with successful change (Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Furst & Cable, 2008). Further, negative reactions to change may be motivated by positive intentions (Piderit, 2000), and middle managers, in particular, can make an important contribution to change through their questioning of the claims and understandings of change agents (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Wooldrige, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). Similarly, participation by employees and other stakeholders can enhance change initiatives by challenging taken for granted assumptions (van Dam et al., 2008). In this way, it is argued, resistance can, despite challenging change agents, lead to better change and, consequently, is to be encouraged, even celebrated (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006; Ford & Ford, 2009).

According to this view, subordinates “resist” by making a counter-offer i.e., “a move in a conversation made by someone who is willing and receptive to the request yet is seeking some accommodation” (Ford et al., 2008: 373). Change agents should then be willing to make that accommodation, even if it is not what they initially had in mind. Such thoughtful (Ford et al., 2008), productive (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg, 2011) or facilitative (Thomas et al., 2011) resistance depends upon subordinates being willing and able to make counter-offers and change agents making being willing and able to make reciprocal accommodations. In this way, different positions and the values that inform them are resolved, “not through conflict, but through the negotiation of mutually sensible meanings” (Dobosz-Bourne & Jankowicz, 2006: 2030).

If resistance is celebrated as a core element of effective change, then the role of change agents is to harness it, in designing and implementing successful change initiatives. Resistance now ceases to be dysfunctional behaviour and instead is a product of interactions between the change agent and change recipient, whereby the former makes sense of the reaction of the latter.

[T]here is no resistance to change existing as an independent phenomenon apart from change agent sensemaking. This does not mean that recipients don’t have reactions to change, nor does it mean that their actions can’t have an adverse impact on change; they can and they do. What it does mean, however, is that none of these actions/reactions are, in and of themselves, resistance, and they do not become resistance unless and until change agents assign the label *resistance* to them (Ford et al., 2008: 371)

In other words, resistance only exists if change agents label the actions of change recipients as such; and a tendency to do so precipitously or unthinkingly may hinder the change effort.

This approach appears to be diametrically opposed to the work that demonizes resistance. However, the conceptuali-

zation of power relations remains the same. In both approaches, the conceptual distinction between the change agent and recipient is retained, and crucially, it is still the change *agent* who determines which responses constitute resistance and which do not.

Practical, ethical and theoretical challenges

Our analysis of the two dominant ways of conceptualizing resistance to change within the management literature shows how both are situated within a particular discursive framing where the interests and assumptions of management and change agents dominate. This raises a series of practical, ethical and theoretical challenges that inhibit the development of a more adequate understanding of organizational change.

First, there are practical limitations with both approaches that relate to the privileging of the change agent in deciding what does and does not constitute resistance. In the case of demonizing resistance, these practical problems are twofold. First, the demonizing of resistance does not appear to have resulted in its eradication as failed change attempts are common and are regularly attributed to employee resistance (e.g., Boonstra, 2004; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Sorge & van Witteloostuijn, 2004). Second, demonizing resistance rules out the possibility of using it to enhance the change initiative (Ford et al., 2008). In a customer-oriented cultural change programme in a telecommunications company, Thomas et al. (2011) show that where challenges by middle managers to change implementation plans were dismissed, the result was degenerative dialogue and the reproduction of existing knowledge. In contrast, when change agents were willing to build on challenges to their assumptions around customer focus, new knowledge was generated concerning the need for the company to create a commercial focus. In the latter case, therefore, “resistance” was incorporated into the change effort; in the former case, change agents resisted the “resistance” and, in so doing, lost the opportunity to bring about more innovative change.

The work that celebrates resistance is intended to redress the shortcomings of the demonizing approach; however, it too runs into practical problems. It assumes that change agents will be responsive to counter-offers and cautious about precipitously dismissing them as resistance. They must be willing and able to evaluate the impact of counter-offers and incorporate them appropriately into their change plans. However, assessments as to whether a counter-offer “improves” the change effort may be difficult. Counter-offers add to complexity and, when confronted with complex problems, individuals adopt various heuristics to simplify decision making rather than seek out more complexity (Hodgkinson, Maule, Brown, Pearman, & Glaister, 2002; Marnet, 2007). In particular, there is a tendency to prefer information that supports a chosen alternative rather than to engage with conflicting information (Schulz-Hardt, Frey, Luthgens, & Moscovici, 2000). It seems likely, therefore, that there will be significant practical problems if change agents have a monopoly in deciding whether or not reactions to specific change initiatives should be accepted, challenged, accommodated or negated, and therefore whether they are constituted as resistance.

Second, a number of ethical issues can be noted arising from this privileging of the change agent, which result in existing asymmetrical power relations being accepted and normalized, instead of being scrutinized and problematized (Hardy & Clegg, 2004). In the case of demonizing resistance, this usually means taking for granted the right of change agents to use power under any circumstances, while ignoring employee concerns. For example, while references to Coch and French's (1948) original study abound in the change literature, the situation of the employees – young women, from rural backgrounds, who were subjected to rigorous supervision by male supervisors – is rarely mentioned. The factory adopted piece-work, time and motion studies, and harsh production quotas, yet discussions of employee resistance drawing on this study take it for granted that such responses were dysfunctional, pathological, and unnecessary. There is rarely any acknowledgement of the power exercised by male managers; discussion of the potential reasons that might have led the young female employees to resist; or recognition of how oppressive management practices might have contributed to the "problem" of resistance (Agócs, 1997). Thus, the demonizing of resistance discounts the interests and experiences of a range of stakeholders who may be adversely affected by change. It also assumes that, fundamentally, employers are doing the "right" thing when they design and propose change programmes, even if they sometimes mishandle aspects of implementation. Yet organizational change initiatives rarely represent "win-win" scenarios where everyone benefits. Most often, there are trade-offs, which affect some stakeholders more than others, and some change initiatives are undertaken on questionable grounds (Staw & Epstein, 2000). At a time when critics argue that the global financial crisis is being used to legitimize changes that have significantly negative effects for employees (e.g., Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change, 2009), it is important that we subject the asymmetrical power relations evident in the discursive constitution of change to closer scrutiny.

The ethical challenges associated with the celebrating approach are less visible but are, perhaps, even more pronounced, as change recipients are placed in an invidious position. In demonizing resistance the message to employees is clear: don't resist! In the case of celebrating resistance, change recipients are encouraged to resist, but still risk being labelled as resisters in the event that their challenges are construed as antithetical to organizational interests. This places them in a double-bind: if they do not resist, change recipients risk being penalized for not contributing to the change effort; if they do resist, there is still a good chance that change agents may categorize their responses as negative for the reasons mentioned above. In addition, more critical questions about the effects of change initiatives on employees or other stakeholders are just as likely to be ignored as in the work that demonizes resistance; as are questions concerning whether the exercise of repressive power is justified in the event that certain actions are deemed to be unacceptable. Even the fact that power may reside *in* the act of labelling certain reactions as resistant is obscured.

Finally, there are theoretical limitations with both approaches as a result of their conceptualization of resistance as something that is defined solely by the change

agent. This position is at odds with recent theoretical developments in understanding change, which argue that successful change arises from the co-construction of meanings by a variety of actors (Thomas et al., 2011). The labelling of actions as resistance involves interpretation of those actions. Interpretative acts are "a fundamentally social process" whereby actors "interpret their environment in and through interactions with others" (Maitlis, 2005: 21). Whether and how new organizational arrangements ensue, therefore, upon the negotiations of meaning that involves multiple organizational members (Morgan & Sturdy, 2000; Thomas et al., 2011; Tsoukas, 2005). Furthermore, these negotiations are multilateral, interactive, and iterative processes that do not divide neatly into change vs. resistance. Theoretical developments in the analysis of identity also throw doubt on the neat categorising of the change agent and change resistor. For example, research has shown that middle managers can be both change agents, leading the change effort (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Wooldridge et al., 2008), and change recipients, resisting change initiatives (Feldman, 2004; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Identity is not fixed but constructed in different ways over time as a result of such factors as career progression, organizational settings, and the nature of work (George & Chattopadhyay, 2005; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Roberts, 2005). The labelling and fixing of essentialist identities of change agent and recipient is thus problematic. Thus, neither the neat packaging of change and resistance behaviours, nor the various actors' identities in the change process is clear-cut and fixed.

In sum, the two dominant ways of conceptualizing resistance fail to deal adequately with the issue of power and in so doing give rise to a series of practical, ethical and theoretical issues. Both demonizing and celebrating approaches maintain a distinction between change agent and change recipient and privilege the former. It is the change agent who decides what constitutes resistance, who can be resistant, and how resistance should be dealt with.

Power-resistance relations and change

The work that has been concerned with resistance to change has not only ignored power as a theoretical concept linked to resistance, but also contributed to a situation where asymmetrical power relations – and the privilege of change agents – are taken for granted. We contend that, in light of the problems identified above, studies of organizational change need to consider both power *and* resistance. Our approach builds on Foucault's (1980; 1982) work, which sees power and resistance as co-constitutive, diffuse and multidimensional (Thomas et al., 2011).

Foucault characterizes power as operating dynamically at a "given place and time" in a more or less coordinated "cluster of relations" (Foucault, 1980: 199). This conceptualization challenges the idea of "sovereign" power i.e., individuals possessing a battery of power sources that they mobilize to produce particular outcomes. Instead, power circulates through complex webs of possible actions in which all actors are located (Deetz, 1992a, 1992b). The way in which power circulates through this web has effects, nonetheless. For example, it causes new meanings to develop, new objects to emerge and new bodies of knowledge to

accumulate (Maguire & Hardy, 2009). However, these effects are contingent and indeterminate. Actors may consciously attempt to influence the circulation of power and “jockey for their own advantage”, but “it does not follow that the broader consequences of those local actions are coordinated” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982: 187).

Foucault argues that power is productive. It produces “reality”, including “domains of objects”, and “rituals of truth” and individual subjects (Foucault, 1979: 194). In producing reality in this way, some actors may be privileged, while others may be marginalized; some subjects may “secure their sense of what it is to be worthy and competent human beings” (Knights & Morgan, 1991: 269), while others may rebel against the ways in which they are defined, categorized and classified (Sawicki, 1991). Individuals are, then, always “in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, 1980: 98).

Foucault (1980) also argues that power and resistance implicate each other. There are no relations of power without resistance. Resistance is an adaptive response to power, it operates in tandem with power, and it forms at the points where relations of power are exercised.

“Resistance is what opposes power, not simply diametrically but transversally, opposing by going off in a different direction ... Acts of refusal indeed typically involve power themselves, even the most passive responses (Kelly, 2009: 109)”.

In sum, power and resistance thus operate together in a web of relations in which power is never complete and possibilities for resistance always exist. Power is exercised through multiple points of pressure and so too is resistance. Such struggles are not necessarily repressive since there is a creative potential when meanings are renegotiated (Rouse, 1994).

This conceptualization of power and resistance shifts the focus away from questions of who resists organizational change, why and when, to a question of how *relations* of power and resistance operate together in producing change, and in what ways.

An illustration

We illustrate the complex interactions between power and resistance and their role in constituting organization change with reference to a study of change published elsewhere (Kellogg, 2009). The study compares similar change programmes in two US hospitals, one of which was deemed successful – at Advent Hospital – and one which was not – at Bayshore Hospital. The programmes were proposed by surgical directors to reduce the working hours of surgical residents – doctors who undergo hands-on training after medical school – following new regulations reducing their working week from over 100 h to 80 h (see Fig. 1). Both hospitals created new “night float” teams with additional staff, to reduce the number of nights that residents spent “on call” and to allow interns (first-year residents), who worked the longest hours, to shorten their workdays. The aim was to ensure a maximum of 80 h per week for all residents. The changes required interns to hand off routine work not completed by the time they finished their day to the new “night float” residents, who were senior to them i.e., “chiefs” (fifth-year residents) and “seniors” (second, third or fourth-year residents).

The new approach was seen by some to violate existing understandings of medical practice with the result that, while some individuals (reformers) pushed for reform, others (defenders) defended the status quo. However, power and resistance were not neatly separated out in the case hospitals as a clash of two monolithic ideals i.e., power vs. resistance or change agents vs. change recipients. Instead, power-resistance relations were intertwined and iterative i.e., defenders resisted the change; reformers resisted the defenders; defenders resisted the reformers and, eventually, at one of the hospitals, defenders supported the reformers. Nor were power-resistance relations equated with particular work or hierarchical groups – some chiefs and seniors supported the change; others did not; some interns actively tried to enact the new work practices, some did not.

There were a number of reasons for defending the status quo. First, surgeons were concerned over their own potentially increased workloads as they would now need to communicate with more people. Second, the changes challenged the traditional surgical identity of the “iron man” surgeon, who was tough enough to deal with long hours. Third, the requirement for interns to hand off work to night floats violated professional norms that: prohibited junior residents from asking their seniors for help with routine work; maintained that the best patient care was provided when patients remained with the same resident throughout their hospital stay; and advocated that the most effective way to educate residents was in the hospital and on the job. Consequently, as Vignette 1 below shows, defenders attempted to reproduce existing meanings concerning practices and professional identities. They did this in a number of ways, for example, through jokes that excluded certain reformers and gossip that served to restrict their professional opportunities. Defenders used terms such as “commanders” and “wingmen” to accord status to those who resisted the changes, compared to the terms such as “stopgaps” and “beasts of burden” for those who tried to introduce the changes. In order to resist the changes, however, defenders drew on existing power relations, such as those evident in hierarchical positions, that allowed chiefs and seniors to treat interns in this way; professional norms whereby interns’ reputation with surgeons had consequences for their careers; and the well-established macho identity of surgeons. Thus the ability of defenders to resist the proposed change relied on the (re)articulation of power relations expressed in the constitution of organizational meanings and professional identities.³

Vignette 2 shows how reformers then resisted the resistance of the defenders by mobilizing support through stories and gossip aimed at creating a common language and identity, as well as by creating new rationales for practices. Reformers subsequently gained support for these new practices from directors, who then authorized their staff to implement them. Thus we can see that, in their attempts to bring about the change, reformers had to *resist* existing professional norms through the creation of new ones and, at

³ The material in the vignettes is quoted verbatim from Kellogg (2009) with page numbers provided. Any insertions or deletions made by the authors are indicated with the use of square brackets for the former and dots for the latter.

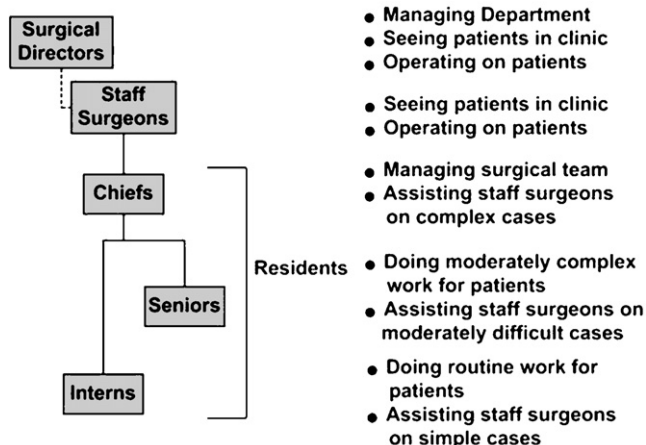


Figure 1 Hierarchical Levels of Doctors⁴.

the same time, draw on the power relations embedded in the hierarchy.

Vignette 3 shows how reformers met with further resistance as defender chiefs asserted their seniority in the hierarchy to blame interns (rather than the night float) when lapses in patient care occurred. This interpretation was then passed up to directors and, although it clashed with alternative interpretations from reformers, defenders appear to have prevailed at this point as a result of the power embedded in the hierarchy. Here we see the iterative nature of power and resistance – as power is applied at one point, resistance is used to “push back”. However, what constitutes power and what constitutes resistance is hard to separate out since it depends on whose perspective is being taken: defenders are resisting reformers; while reformers are resisting defenders; and both are asserting existing professional norms and organizational status at the same time as they resist these self-same power relations.

Vignette 4, shows that, over time, reformers at Advent were able to pass their positive interpretations of new work practices up to directors in such a way as to displace the negative interpretations of defenders. Directors then drew on their position in the hierarchy to promote this interpretation to their subordinates – the staff surgeons – and to authorize the composition of night float teams, which helped to provide evidence that convinced defenders that the changes in work practices were effective and manageable. As a result, the new practices started to become institutionalized and new work norms emerged.

Thus, from these four vignettes, we can see how power-resistance relations were intertwined in ways that permeated the change programmes at the two hospitals. At Advent, changes in work practices were introduced and, over time, identities changed and defenders become reformers. Accordingly, we should be wary of pre-determining and essentializing particular individuals or groups as change agents and change recipients. At Bayshore, the changes in practices did not ensue. Reformers ultimately failed to challenge defenders even though the same solution used successfully

Vignette 1. “[Defenders chiefs and seniors] rewarded interns who broke the formal rules of the new system and stayed late in the hospital by not punishing these interns for minor mistakes, by “throwing them bones” (assigning them interesting cases), and by including them in the daily practical joking that they reserved for members of their select group . . . They also punished those who attempted to change practice by gossiping about them to their defender peers and to the staff surgeons. Staff surgeons at both hospitals lent the defenders their support by making snide comments about the 80-h working week when in the OR [operating room] with residents and by withholding teaching from those who attempted change. Several staff surgeons . . . [felt] less motivated to help these interns and took less time showing them how to do things in the OR. Interns working with defender seniors feared gossip and did not want to risk having their reputations ruined in the eyes of the staff surgeons . . . [D]efenders resisted change by emphasizing the traditional surgeon identity—displaying individualism, living in the hospital, and being an iron man—which conflicted with the planned changes . . . They also emphasized their iron man personas by enacting the cultural vernacular of machismo through their appearance: short haircuts for men, tucked-in scrubs tops with the pants worn low on the hips, green surgical masks around their necks long after leaving the OR, and black leather surgical clogs . . . Defenders also reinforced the traditional position-specific identities in their language by referring to chiefs as ‘commanders’ (responsible for breaking the will of the interns), day seniors as ‘wingmen’ (who did whatever was required to

⁴ Figure reproduced from Kellogg (2009: 666).

help the chief), night floats as 'stopgaps' (who covered only emergencies and performed no routine work overnight), and interns as 'beasts of burden'" (p. 679).

at Advent was available. Thus a lack of "resistance" on the part of reformers meant that the "resistance" of defenders prevailed. In both cases, we can see that power-resistance relations were not fixed, but fluid and socially constructed depending on the particular actions of different actors over time. Nor were there clearly demarcated

Vignette 2. "Groups of reformers often ate lunch together in the hospital cafeterias. When defenders were not present, these cafeteria tables allowed for isolation and face-to-face interaction among reformers" (p. 681). "[R]eformers began to tell stories to one another about their defiance of defenders and of traditional practices ... they began to feel a sense of loyalty to one another and to develop a belief that others would act with them to challenge defenders" (p. 681). "When reformers met with one another in free spaces, they created new arguments about patient care (promoting continuity of care in the team rather than in the individual) and resident education (advocating learning by doing, but over a longer period of time)" (p. 682). "Reformers at both hospitals [eventually] successfully convinced the directors to begin reemphasizing their support of the official rule that night floats should accept handoffs from interns ... Thus, interns began attempting handoffs again to defender night floats" (p. 683).

Vignette 3. "At both hospitals, defender chiefs responded to dropped balls [i.e., lapses in patient care following handoff] by blaming specific interns for tasks not completed by night floats. For example, a Bayshore defender chief became outraged when he heard that a preop had not been done, but rather than blaming the night float, he blamed the intern" (p. 683). "At both hospitals reformer chiefs responded to dropped balls by alerting directors to this problem and by naming specific night floats as rule breakers. ... But at this point in both hospitals, defender night floats were being supported by the powerful defender staff surgeons and chiefs and they continued to drop balls" (p. 684).

Vignette 4. "[R]eformer chiefs [at Advent] pointed out that dropped balls were not a necessary outcome of handoffs. They argued that handoffs between interns and reformer night floats had been handled easily without lapses in patient care whenever the chief, senior, and night float on the service had been willing to work in a less hierarchical manner by taking on routine work. ... Advent could solve the problem by replacing these rotating seniors with a designated intern.. The directors talked to the staff surgeons about this possibility ... Presented with the evidence of successful handoffs among reformers, ten-and-a-half months after the introduction of the night float program and five months after the advent of dropped balls, the staff surgeons accommodated the suggestion and agreed to have the [designated] intern" (p. 696). The previously defending chiefs also now suggested that although the interns might learn more slowly, they would learn all they needed to know by the end of residency. One said, 'It might be that they can't put in chest tubes and lines themselves. But that's a technical thing that can be taught in their second year. That is not what makes a good intern or a good doctor. I'll teach them lines and chest tubes next year'" (p. 697). "Once the intern was moved onto the night float team, and the previously defending staff surgeons, chiefs, and seniors came to terms with handoffs, night floats began to accept handoffs in sign-out encounters [at Advent]" (p. 697).

sets of actions, one constituting "power" and the other "resistance". Instead, the circulations of power in relation to the change initiative provoked adaptive responses, which not only provoked more resistance but also made subtle changes to the prevailing power relations that had given rise to it. This pattern was repeated many times during the change programme and the particular dynamics of these interactions resulted in changes in practices in one hospital but not the other.

Discussion and conclusions

We have proposed an understanding of organizational change in which power and resistance lie at the heart of the negotiation of meanings that shape particular instances of change. Such an approach acknowledges that there is always the possibility of resistance. This is not necessarily in a bi-directional way, with change agents against change recipients, but in multiple, transversal, iterative ways. Our approach throws light on how these dynamics unfold, and whether – and in what ways – organizational change occurs.

Our conceptualization offers a number of benefits compared with the dominant approaches, which label individuals as either for or against change, or designate them as change agents vs. change recipients. Theoretically, it is more consistent with contemporary ideas on the co-construction of meaning in organizations and the social construction of identities. It recognizes that what constitutes resistance cannot lie solely in the eye of the change agent and it avoids fixing and essentializing particular identities within change processes. Rather than making predetermined judgments on who is “for” or “against” change, based on membership of particular groups, our interest is in understanding how different organizational members contribute to the negotiation of meaning, and in what ways. Our conceptualization also acknowledges that, while individuals do attempt to shape meaning, they are situated within webs of power, which enable and constrain them in diverse, multifaceted ways. Therefore the negotiation of meaning is shaped by power-resistance relations that are not necessarily consciously mobilized, such as when discourses reproduce taken-for-granted meanings.

Our study also calls for greater reflection on how organizational change is conceptualized. Both demonizing and celebrating approaches assume organizational change to be top down and episodic. Like Choi, Holmberg, Lowstedt, and Brommels (2011), our study confirms the limitations of this taken-for-granted view of change, by showing the importance of power *and* resistance. Our approach complements a “strong process” (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), or “organizational becoming” conceptualisation of change (Carlsen, 2006; Chia, 1995; Nayak, 2008; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Here, even though for analytical purposes researchers do still focus on instances where certain organizational members attempt to bring about new organizational arrangements, change is not viewed as a clearly defined episode that occurs “within” an organization. Rather, organizations are understood as unfolding enactments, constituted by local communicative interactions among its members. Whether and how new arrangements constituting change ensue depends upon the meanings that emerge from iterative negotiations involving multiple organizational members. Such negotiations do not divide neatly into the dualism of “power” and “resistance” or into an artificial distinction between change agents implementing change and recipients responding to change.

However, despite emphasising the “multi-authored” nature of change, the organizational becoming approach fails to acknowledge how power relations among actors influence negotiations and thus offers little opportunity to examine how certain individuals and groups are marginalized during change programmes (Thomas et al., 2011). Consequently, few studies on organizational becoming have examined asymmetrical power relations among different organizational members or assessed how they influence negotiations. Ultimately, therefore, organizational becoming suffers from the problem of obscuring the challenges that some members face in attempting to shape organizational change initiatives, and downplays the experiences to which they are subjected.

In problematizing power and recognising the role of resistance in organizational change, our approach therefore, also addresses some of the ethical problems associated with the dominant approaches. Specifically, it provides insights into how individuals who are affected negatively by change might

resist, thereby facilitating consideration of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals by examining the way that resistance to such change is institutionalized through organizational denial, inaction and repression (cf. Agócs, 1997). Our approach also deals with one of the weakness of the approach that celebrates resistance, since it allows for situations where resistant subjects do not wish to see their responses appropriated, and do not want to contribute to the change, i.e., where resistance is adversarial and intended to prevent change. It is important to give voice to – and allow for resistance on the part of – identities rendered invisible in conventional studies of organizational change; typically, less powerful individuals such as front-line service workers, non-unionized employees; the poor and the sick, who often bear the brunt of the more negative aspects of organizational change, as clearly shown in the recent global financial crisis and the various structural adjustments that have followed it in many countries around the world.

Even when asymmetrical power relations appear less evident, and the effects appear more benign, organizational change is rarely an unequivocal “win-win” situation. While the reduction in working hours may have benefitted medical staff in our illustration, the change involved a transition period during which patients may very well have been adversely affected (Kellogg, Breen, Ferzoco, Zinner, & Ashley, 2006) and some individuals may have resisted the changes in order to protect patient care. Such ambiguity makes the issue of resistance harder to dismiss, showing the limitations of demonizing approaches. In sum, by problematizing power and recognizing resistance, we provide means by which organizational change initiatives can be held up to greater scrutiny, to assess the way in which diverse organizational members and other stakeholders may be affected by change.

Practically speaking, our approach draws attention to how organizational change is accomplished through complex, messy, day-to-day working practices, rather than through planning and design. Such an understanding increases the chances of “successful” change by providing greater insights into how change occurs in unexpected ways; explaining the multiple points at which changes in direction occur; and identifying the multiple and shifting identities that might contribute to change. The scope for more flexible interventions is extended in ways that are more sensitive to multiple resistances – both adversarial and facilitative – than the “knocking of heads” approach found in the demonization of resistance, or the deification of change agents associated with its celebration. The complexity of large-scale organizational change programmes also means that they are likely to involve input from people from multiple levels, over time. Accordingly, one can expect shifting views, positions and allegiances. Those who face change being imposed upon them at one point may find themselves driving a particular meaning of change at another time. In refusing to divide organizational members as change agents and change recipients, and eschewing preconceived notions of resistance, it becomes possible to incorporate input from a wide range of organizational members and accord a voice to marginalized identities.

Our conceptualization also complements the work on celebrating resistance insofar as it also allows for situations where resistance is productive or facilitative so as to give rise

to more effective or successful organizational change. However, it emphasizes that deciding what constitutes resistance cannot be confined to change agents. Resistance has to be judged on its merits and from multiple perspectives, and the activities of those who see themselves as resistant subjects must be factored into this analysis.

References

- Agócs, C. (1997). Institutionalized resistance to organizational change: Denial, inaction and repression. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16, 917–931.
- Beer, M., & Nohria, N. (2000). Cracking the code of change. *Harvard Business Review*, (May-June), 133–141.
- Bennebroek Gravenhorst, K. M., & In't Veld, R. J. (2004). Power and collaboration: Methodologies for working together in change. In J. J. Boonstra (Ed.), *Dynamics of organizational change and learning* (pp. 317–341). Chichester: Wiley.
- Bercovitz, J., & Feldman, M. (2008). Academic entrepreneurs: Organizational change at the individual level. *Organization Science*, 19, 69–89.
- Boonstra, J. J. (Ed.). (2004). *Dynamics of organizational change and learning*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Carlsen, A. (2006). Organizational becoming as dialogic imagination of practice: The case of the Indomitable Gauls. *Organization Science*, 17, 132–149.
- Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change. (2009). An Alternative Report on UK Banking Reform. <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/publications/document/AlternativerereportonbankingV2.pdf>. University of Manchester: Centre for Research on Socio Cultural Change.
- Chia, R. (1995). *From modern to postmodern organizational analysis*. *Organization Studies*, 23(6), 863–868.
- Choi, S., Holmberg, I., Lowstedt, J., & Brommels, M. (2011). 'Executive management in radical change – the case of the Karolinska University Hospital merger'. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 27, 11–23.
- Coch, L., & French, J. (1948). Overcoming resistance to change. *Human Relations*, 1, 512–532.
- Courpasson, D., Dany, F., & Clegg, S. (2011). Registers at work: Generating productive resistance in the workplace. *Organization Science* doi:10.1287/orsc.1110.0657.
- Cummings, T. G., & Worley, C. G. (1997). *Organization development and change*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing.
- Deetz, S. (1992a). *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Deetz, S. (1992b). Disciplinary power in the modern corporation. In M. Alvesson & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Critical management studies* (pp. 21–45). London: Sage.
- Dent, E. B., & Goldberg, S. G. (1999). Challenging 'resistance to change'. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 35, 25–41.
- Dobosz-Bourne, D., & Jankowicz, A. D. (2006). Reframing resistance to change: Experience from General Motors Poland. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 17, 2021–2034.
- Dreyfus, H. L., & Rabinow, P. (Eds.). (1982). *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. With an afterword by Michel Foucault. Brighton: Harvester.
- Feldman, M. S. (2004). Resources in emerging structures and processes of change. *Organization Science*, 15, 295–309.
- Ford, J. D., Ford, L. W., & D'Amelio, A. (2008). Resistance to change: The rest of the story. *Academy of Management Review*, 33, 362–377.
- Ford, J. D., & Ford, L. W. (2009). Decoding resistance to change. *Harvard Business Review*, 87, 99–103.
- Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. C. Gordon (Ed.). Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Foucault, M. (1982). Afterword: The subject and power. In H. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 208–266). Brighton: Harvester Press.
- French, E., & Delahaye, B. (1996). Individual change transition: Moving in circles can be good for you. *Leadership and Organization Development Journal*, 17, 22–28.
- French, W., & Bell, C., Jr. (1990). *Organization development: Behavioral science interventions for organization improvement* (4th ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Furst, S. A., & Cable, D. M. (2008). Reducing employee resistance to organizational change: Managerial influence tactics and leader-member exchange. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 453–462.
- George, E., & Chattopadhyay, P. (2005). One foot in each camp: The dual identification of contract workers. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50, 68–99.
- Giangreco, A., & Pecen, R. (2005). The nature and antecedents of middle management resistance to change: Evidence from an Italian context. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 16, 1812–1829.
- Greiner, L. E. (1992). Resistance to change during restructuring. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 1, 61–65.
- Hardy, C., & Clegg, S. R. (2004). Power and change: A critical reflection. In J. J. Boonstra (Ed.), *Dynamics of organizational change and learning* (pp. 343–365). Chichester: Wiley.
- Harvard Business School Press (2005). *Managing change to reduce resistance*. Harvard, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hodgkinson, G. P., Maule, A. J., Bown, N. J., Pearman, A. D., & Glaister, K. W. (2002). Further reflections on the elimination of framing bias in strategic decision making. *Strategic Management Journal*, 23, 1069–1076.
- Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 135–154.
- Kan, M., & Parry, K. W. (2004). Identifying paradox: A grounded theory of leadership in overcoming resistance to change. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, 467–491.
- Kellogg, K. C. (2009). Operating room: Relational spaces and micro-institutional change in surgery. *American Journal of Sociology*, 115, 657–711.
- Kellogg, K. C., Breen, E., Ferzoco, S. J., Zinner, M. J., & Ashley, S. W. (2006). Resistance to change in surgical residency: An ethnographic study of work hours reform. *American College of Surgeons*, 202, 565–714.
- Kelly, M. G. E. (2009). *The political philosophy of Michel Foucault*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Klein, D. (1996). Some notes on the dynamics of resistance to change: The defender role. In W. G. Bennis, K. D. Benne, R. Chin, & K. E. Corey (Eds.), *The planning of change*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Knights, D., & Morgan, G. (1991). Corporate strategy, organizations, and subjectivity: A critique. *Organization Studies*, 12, 251–273.
- Kotter, J. (1995). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, 73, 59–67.
- Kotter, J. P., & Schlesinger, L. A. (1979). Choosing strategies for change. *Harvard Business Review*, 57, 106–114.
- Lawrence, P. (1954). How to deal with resistance to change. *Harvard Business Review*, 32, 49–57.
- Lüscher, L. S., & Lewis, M. W. (2008). Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox. *Academy of Management Journal*, 51, 221–240.
- Maguire, S., & Hardy, C. (2009). Discourse and deinstitutionalization: The decline of DDT. *Academy of Management Journal*, 52, 148–178.

- Maitlis, S. (2005). The social processes of organizational sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48, 21–49.
- Marnet, O. (2007). History repeats itself: The failure of rational choice models in corporate governance. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 18, 191–210.
- McCarthy, D. J., Puffer, S. M., May, R. C., Ledgerwood, D. E., & Stewart, W. H., Jr. (2008). Overcoming resistance to change in Russian organizations: The legacy of transactional leadership. *Organizational Dynamics*, 37, 221–235.
- Morgan, G., & Sturdy, A. (2000). *Beyond organisational change: Structure, discourse and power in UK financial services*. London: Macmillan.
- Nayak, A. (2008). On the way to theory: A processual approach. *Organization Studies*, 29, 173–190.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1973). *The politics of organizational decision making*. London: Tavistock.
- Pettigrew, A. M. (1987). Context and action in the transformation of the firm. *Journal of Management Studies*, 24, 649–670.
- Piderit, S. K. (2000). Rethinking resistance and recognizing ambivalence: A multidimensional view of attitudes toward an organizational change. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 783–794.
- Poole, P. P., Gioia, D. A., & Gray, B. (1989). Influence modes, schema change, and organizational transformation. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 25, 271–289.
- Quinn, J. B. (1980). *Strategies for change: Logical incrementalism*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
- Reichers, A. E., Wanous, J. P., & Austin, T. T. (1997). Understanding and managing cynicism about organizational change. *Academy of Management Executive*, 11, 48–59.
- Roberts, L. M. (2005). Changing faces: Professional image construction in diverse organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review*, 30, 695–711.
- Rouse, J. (1994). Power/knowledge. In G. Gutting (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (pp. 92–114). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sawicki, J. (1991). *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, power, and the body*. New York: Routledge.
- Schulz-Hardt, S., Frey, D., Lüthgens, C., & Moscovici, S. (2000). Biased information search in group decision making. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78, 655–669.
- Sorge, A., & van Witteloostuijn, A. (2004). The (non)sense of organizational change: An *essai* about universal management hypotheses, sick consultancy metaphors, and healthy organization theories. *Organization Studies*, 25, 1205–1231.
- Spreitzer, G. M., & Quinn, R. E. (1996). Empowering middle managers to be transformational leaders. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 32, 237–261.
- Staw, B. M., & Epstein, L. D. (2000). What bandwagons bring: Effects of popular management techniques on corporate performance, reputation, and CEO pay. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 26, 501–524.
- Thomas, R., & Linstead, A. (2002). Losing the plot? Middle managers and identity. *Organization*, 9, 71–93.
- Thomas, R., Sargent, L., & Hardy, C. (2011). Managing organizational change: Negotiating meaning and power-resistance relations. *Organization Science*, 22, 22–41.
- Tsoukas, H. (2005). Afterword: Why language matters in the analysis of organizational change. *Journal of Change Management*, 18, 96–104.
- Tsoukas, H., & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13, 567–582.
- van Dam, K., Oreg, S., & Schyns, B. (2008). Daily work contexts and resistance to organizational change: The role of leader-member exchange, perceived development climate and change process characteristics. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 57, 313–334.
- Van de Ven, A. H., & Poole, M. S. (2005). Alternative approaches for studying organizational change. *Organization Studies*, 26, 1377–1404.
- Wooldridge, B., Schmid, T., & Floyd, S. W. (2008). The middle management perspective: Contributions, synthesis and future research. *Journal of Management*, 34, 1190–1221.
- Zander, A. F. (1950). Resistance to change - its analysis and prevention. *Advanced Management*, 4, 9–11.