'Organisational Change Research: Challenges and Assumptions. What about Possibilities?'

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Abstract

As organisations have been attempting to deal with the practical difficulties that change brings, the debates and discussions seemed to have played to a number of themes and assumptions. Although the former has benefited from extensive research the latter has been neglected over the past seven decades. Whilst researchers have focused on planned and emergent change and the discourse and practice approaches, others have proposed dualism/paradox, change agency, behavioural and positioning theory as these are assumed will help management resolve challenges and achieve successful change. However, a study is yet to be carried out on what the taken-for-granted assumptions that these debates play to really are and what they could offer to an area that has been claimed to be under-theorised over decades. This lies at the crux of the paper's aims and objectives. Through content analysis and the interpretation of the qualitative, empirical data, it has been found that employees' preferences have been neglected in organisational change (OC) research but could offer researchers and practitioners a new direction in identifying what barriers, opportunities and permutations could be at stake as attempts are undertaken to better understand how to effect successful change. The paper's main contribution is referred to as 'preferential positioning' which is argued as a theoretical addition to positioning theory and to the traditional dualistic reporting of most OC research and their theories. It is anticipated to help resolve part of the under-theorisation and offer research openings beyond dualism and in a post-planned change era.

Keywords: organisational change, research, assumptions, challenges, preferential positioning, research possibilities.

Introduction

Over the past seventy years Human Resource Management (HRM) in general and organisational change (OC) research in particular have been confronted with the real problem of how it should respond to resistance, amongst other challenges, so as to implement successful change, be it planned or emergent. Whilst researchers have attempted to theorise some of the practical difficulties involved, the underlying assumptions behind the issues have been neglected. An attempt is made to explore some of the debates and discussions about organisational change and what assumptions they play to to see if this could add anything and help resolve some of the issues. When organisational change is being referred to in this paper it is taken to signify moving from a company's current to a more desirable and effective future (Cummings and Worley, 2005). Although there is a plethora of theories that inform us about types of changes, the stages, the approaches that might be open to management, the reactions of different participants, there is a research deficit on the underlying assumptions that these play to and what other non-recognised change drivers (apart from management) could contribute to the deficit in the theoretical developments.

On the other hand, organisational transformation is a more radical revamping that is organisation-wide and it is claimed to require speed and learning (Wischnevsky et al., 2004). There is a recognition of an organisation moving or attempting to move its practices from an old to a new or different and, it is assumed, more effective state of affairs. Leaders are tasked with developing strategies with the assumption that they know what the appropriate processes and structures for the new organisational goals and vision are or should be. In as much as types of organisational change have been covered – e.g. changes to an organisation's structure (e.g. changes to roles, team compositions, departments, merging with or acquiring other businesses…), changes to its culture (e.g. its norms, practices, expectations on staff, ways of conducting business and interactions) or changes in the ways/processes that work is conducted in order to realise a company's new strategy, mission and vision or product/service development - their coverage tends to follow thematic lines that have been reproduced in various guises over the past seven decades. These themes are largely categorised under the literature as either planned (as part of a structured, step-by-step approach to bring about a more effective state) or emergent/unplanned change (as part of an organisation's response to internal demographic reconfigurations of its workforce or external economic instabilities or new government legislation(s)). Those that subscribe to a planned type of change such as

Lewin (1947) and his followers (Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979) are led by assumptions that organisations operate in stable environments and changes can be introduced by management in a methodical and structured way whereas emergent change proponents such as Burnes (2004a), Kanter (2012) and their followers see change as ongoing, nebulous and that internal and external environments are in a state of flux, fluidity and constant turbulence. Such theoretical labelling (planned and emergent) follows the traditional duality approach in OC research which interestingly fall within two dominant approaches: discourse and practice, whose adoption it is claimed by proponents will lead to a resolution of the difficulties and usher in successful change. The current paper will analyse the nature of these assumptions where they apply in the literature and the context of four SMEs to see whether there are challenges and, if so what their nature is and how these might be viewed and potentially resolved from a theoretical, methodological and practical perspective. It is anticipated that what is found to be missing will provide a basis for proposing a way forward be it in the form of a theoretical, methodological and/or some other form that could be claimed to be part of developments in OC research. The aims and objectives for this paper can therefore be summarised as follows 1) to provide some evidence by using the paper's theoretical framework to see what might be some of the taken-for-granted assumptions in OC research, 2) to analyse the underlying assumptions to see whether any challenges are posed and 3) to show what additional theoretical insight might be possible through an empirically/evidence-based study.

Practice and Discourse Approaches

The paper will now analyse some of the major theoretical contents in OC research, whose selection has been based on their inherent assumptions which have not been explored previously, the way they seem to provide organisations and their management with answers in resolving the problem of unsuccessful change, or the possibility to resolve resistance, disengagement, political infighting amongst members and so on. Planned and emergent change types could be generally categorised under the predominant discourse and practice approaches based on their characteristics. When Lewin proposed his three-step model seventy years ago as a basis for societal change, its characteristics have increasingly been applied to OC management and research. The model consists of three interlocking stages which are designed to help managers to identify what parts they can use to bring about successful change outcomes. The first of his stages starts with an organisation needing to 'unfreeze' its practices so as to move onto a new set of activities.

In the second stage, Lewin acknowledges an entity's turbulence during change (e.g. emotional, psychological and related traumas to its members) and a need to try new things and acquire new sets of competencies in so doing. Stability becomes part of a new norm once management have begun to understand the complex nature of the challenges faced with their newly acquired skills, the types of roles they need to initiate and the setting up of a new order or a new culture.

These characteristics include a stage-by-stage or incremental process whereby organisations, as social representations identify the steps they need to take in their adaptation and development, potential difficulties that might be faced (e.g. resistance) and ways of surmounting these such that change becomes 'refrozen' into the organisation's DNA. Lewin's and subsequently Kotter and Schlesinger's (1979) planned change models are fascinating in so far as they provide insights into the processes and *actions* management need to take to acquire absolute control over the things needed to bring about successful change. These characteristics fit those observed in the practice approach of change.

Researchers who use the *practice approach* focus on actions as they happen in the organisational structures that are identified to be changed in a planned manner. When adopted over time, the actions become a culture as members learn to share their taken-for-granted assumptions of what their actions signify. Organisational change therefore assumes materiality of action. Jansson (2014) proposes 'phronesis' as a way to study what happens during change in the tradition of Schatzki (2002). Jansson (ibid) defines the concept as 'particularity in practice' (p. 771). He claims it is situated in human action rather than theory. It is claimed phronesis can be used to understand things that are of a non-particular nature thereby reminding us of dualism. It is also claimed that people have to personally experience the action(s) of change and over time this tends to enhance learning as people become sensitive to the impact of words which might provoke a range of reactions from excitement to resistance to change. Personal preferences are excluded.

Within the emergent change type, management are at the mercy of a fluid and less stable environment thereby rendering their control and use of an organisation's resources less efficient compared to a planned change process as explained earlier. There are multiple participants whose engagement and involvement is thought to be crucial to minimise the chaos and potential messiness and to effect a successful outcome. These characteristics can

be fitted within the discourse approach of change. The *discourse approach* enthusiasts use stories, mythologies and language as a way of legitimising accounts of change (Vaara and Tienari, 2011; Bathurst and Monin, 2010) or facilitating socialisation of change processes through network setting (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011). It is assumed that the appropriate conversations will help members make sense when they enact their new roles within an unplanned change context. The emphasis here is in the manner in which (i.e. the 'how') discourse is enacted (Grant and Marshak, 2011) to understand actions. Discourse is assumed to have a sense of being and can be systematically changed by users who identify and enact the appropriate conversations. There appears to be a negation of inappropriate activities, value systems, practices (Farjoun, 2010) thereby robbing the area of vital resources.

Following the debates and discussions, the paper has identified three major theories which not only fit within the paper's aims and objectives but they also are replete with taken-for-granted assumptions about successful change that remain largely unexplored; the first labelled as change agency theory, the second is behavioural theory and the third strand is positioning theory (see next three sections). Through agency theory economists have emphasised the necessity for management's goals to be crafted and directed towards creating shareholder value (similar to planned change). On the other hand behavioural theory advocates for people's participation and commitment so as to bring about successful change outcomes (as required in a fluid, emergent change environment). Positioning theory has recently begun to look at what people can contribute by using their positions within an organisation's structure (again similar to planned change). All three sets of theories assume that organisations can reinvent themselves and be successful by emphasising on the contribution of roles in stable (e.g. planned) or unstable environments (emergent change). The paper proposes to resolve the issue by exploring, through research and empirical work on four SMEs, whether there might be some theoretical addition beyond planned or emergent change as shown within the two dominant discourse and practice approaches. The analysis of the assumptions, challenges posed and the empirical data produced three research steps and the concept of 'preferential positioning' whose benefits and implications for OC research are discussed.

Change agency theory

OC research has borrowed extensively from change agency theory which dichotomises the debate between implementers (e.g. managers) and resistors (e.g. employees) of planned

processes. Initiators of 'proper things' are reported and assumed to be met by recipients posing 'obstacles or barriers' (Ford et al., 2008, p. 362). Change implementers are depicted favourably using a simplistic planned change perspective. Such a presentation inhibits a deeper understanding of what else might have been missed when studying a phenomenon as change (Schwarz and Stensaker, 2014) or theorisation process (Burke, 1993; Suddaby et al., 2011; Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011). Realising the theorisation gap, Kanter (2012) calls for equipping employees with the necessary skills to deal with the practical difficulties posed by resistance, disengagement, non-commitment and buy-in. It is assumed that employee skills will generate the necessary knowledge and help management resolve unplanned change difficulties. However, practical barriers to successful change such as politicking, imbalances in power (Bovey and Hede, 2001; Buchanan and Badham, 1999) remain unresolved especially as the underlying beliefs and resistance remain unexplored.

Knowles and Linn (2004b) noted that resistance could highlight new values as organisational members negate 'old' practices and try to adapt their practices in an emerging change situation. However, the process of doing so is not as straightforward and rational as change agents' involvement/engagement in the new culture could vary thereby posing implementation difficulties. Piderit (2000) identifies cognitive, emotional and intentional aspects as a way to understand participants' reactions to change and it is assumed this will help deal with an emerging chaotic environment and resistance. However, apart from attempts by Cadwell (2003) to model change agency, the way these dynamic reactions could be observed and whether they may constitute a frame for constructing personal preferences is a missed opportunity.

Behavioural theory

Parish et al. (2008) propound that change recipients can modify their behaviour, minimise resistance with management support. It is assumed employee behaviours can be changed through management's rebranding of culture. It is assumed that things will naturally work out as planned. Part of the difficulty is personal culture and organisational contexts vary whether in planned or emergent change situations. When this happens, there is a risk of under-theorisation (Suddaby et al., 2011; Fleetwood and Hesketh, 2005) or over-theorisation (Piderit, 2000).

In the case of the former, the short-term empirical surveys have failed to capture the full breadth, holistic and interconnected nature of the change and their difficulties as initially captured by Lewin and some of his followers or even the theoretical implications of their limitations as claimed by post-Lewinian scholars like Burnes (2004a). When this happens, organisational change is treated as a single, snapshot activity without paying due regard to what happened prior or subsequent to the event and the way we make sense of it (Hodgkinson and Starkey, 2011). When this happens antique theorisation follows. When it does not, there is a risk of over-emphasising the practical gains. Using empirical data from four SMEs in the UK over a seven-year lifespan, this paper sets out to look into the nature of the theoretical assumptions, the difficulties caused and offer a way out.

Positioning theory

Recently, positioning theory has been added as part of the theoretical developments in OC research to look at the ways people use their roles and responsibilities in communication settings (Day and Kjaerbeck, 2013). It is assumed that this could aid understanding of the change challenges and help in their resolution. It is also claimed that positioning is enhanced through storylines that denote a certain plot, a set of characters and an emerging narrative, characteristics similar to the discourse approach. Positioning is also claimed to entail beliefs and an expectation of its members to act and behave accordingly (Harre, 2012). Positioning elements are modelled in a triangular structure in order to highlight the interconnected nature of its elements such as position, storyline and enactment similar to Lewin's three-stage model of planned change. When all three are utilised and aligned, it is assumed that this will bring about the expected change. James (2014) added strategic communication to complement the cultural angle as part of what was missed earlier. It is also claimed that intentions and actions are key in achieving a given or planned change outcome. However, what is still missing is firstly the way employee preferences are communicated, how they emerge and what these could serve.

Assumptions and Challenges

In this section, the paper will explore the difficulties that emerge as a result of an analysis of the assumptions. In their seminal work Barratt-Pugh and Gakere's (2013) started a research trend to examine whether organisational change agents have a direct impact on outcomes similar to work done earlier by proponents of planned change processes. This has been referred to elsewhere as the so-called 'black box' (Becker and Huselid, 2006). It is assumed

that when management revert to a set of planned prescriptions successful change mythically beckons (Farjoun, 2010) although we are reminded of the co-existence between stability and change. An assumption is that organisations are expected to be accountable for their actions as they change working practices. Whether they do is another thing. It is also assumed that societies want to see performing and thereby profitable organisations. This implies that organisations need to continuously reproduce themselves – their structures, processes, procedures in a planned, logical and systematic or sometimes unplanned way. However, there is a counter ecology-narrative which posits that 'older' organisations are less likely to change their structures but are more likely to survive turbulent environments compared to smaller and newer ones (Hannan and Freeman, 1989). The assumption in the argument that organisations have the resources and can redesign roles and responsibilities in a prescriptive way even in emerging contexts is defied. A new conversation is timely to see what else might be possible. It is anticipated that exploring the implementation of Organisational Change practices in four SMEs that have been adversely challenged will help shape the nature and direction of such a conversation.

Organisational Contexts

The study started in order to explore the taken-for-granted assumptions in OC research to see whether personal preferences matter and whether these might add something. Four SMEs were chosen for data collection purposes because they were each challenged and had to deal with a variety of issues all of which highlighted that the organisations faced changes of a planned type following characteristics from the literature. These included dealing with the increased customer demands, falling productivity, waste management and disposal, a disenfranchised and demotivated labour force and so on. Increasingly, all four also had to deal with an increase in government legislation and an unstable supply of a more divergent workforce similar to emergent or unplanned change characteristics. All four companies operate in the Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire areas of the UK whilst one has branches internationally. SME backgrounds are reported and the nature of their challenges and responses (*in italics*) highlighted. They employed workers from across the globe.

Longhurst Housing Association ran a group of organisations that provided housing that may be rented or contracted out for longer spells of time. Longhurst faced challenges from government to modernise their services and to provide additional affordable homes to an

increasing customer base. Employees came under increased scrutiny to make the new changes stick.

Bakkavor-Laurens Patisserie, the UK's largest cake manufacturer, produces cream cakes for national supermarkets and also caters for smaller parties. The organisation needed to expand and integrate into its new parent company, the Bakkavor Group, with headquarters in Iceland. They were facing an increasing demand of their products and to comply with nutrition labelling.

Eden Enhanced Housing provided care and housing services to approximately a hundred and fifty people who had various disability and health issues. The company aimed to expand to other parts of the UK. This meant additional responsibilities for existing and incoming staff as the Care and Quality Commission increased the erratic nature of their service inspections.

Lagat provided a range of services including educational and career counselling to students of college going age. Amongst its challenges were market pressures, changing customer demands, less financial support from government thereby signalling a boost or cut in staff numbers. Employees and managers were challenged to adopt the new requirements.

Research Schema

Two interview sets were carried out between 2004/2005 and 2011. The first set focused on the challenges people in the four SMEs faced and the ways both employees and managers reacted to/dealt with the difficulties. In the second set there was need to look into what each of the four organisations did, the types of strategies managers tried to implement to see whether these followed descriptions in the literature and what the outcomes were. In total eight-five interviews were held (sixty-eight interviews in the first round and seventeen in the second). In 2011, the following breakdown provides a picture of interviewee distribution: Longhurst Housing - 10 employees and 7 management staff, Bakkavor-Lauren's Patisserie - 10 employees and 7 management staff, Lagat -10 employees and 7 management staff and Eden Housing - 10 employees and 7 management staff. All four companies consented to waive anonymity. There was a fairly even distribution of manager and non-manager (i.e. employee) roles/responsibilities as a way of looking out for differences in roles and to see whether positioning and the change approach used played any part in the results. No specific role-conditions (e.g. age, gender, national origin…) were favoured at the detriment of others.

Participants were given opportunities to add or amend their experiences in each of the interview rounds as they considered appropriate.

Based on interviewee statements from each company and for both sets of participants, themes were checked with two other independent researchers to verify their validity and categorisation. The initial thematisation produced six stages. The three researchers independently counter-checked their validity with respondents and the final result produced three stages. These are reported and their reporting fitted in the form of a story or a fusion of experiences in the tradition of Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000). Analyses were conducted with the help of the literature, where applicable. The results showed the types of changes adopted, the nature of the challenges involved (including assumptions of how these were produced) and how the organisations dealt with them via what change approaches.

Empirical Data from Four Organisational Cases

The results from the interviews are reported here. They showed both the positive and negative reactions when employees and managers felt challenged to change their working practices and procedures. Before the changes were introduced and the need to deal with the pressures identified, roles were distributed in a planned, methodical way based on each company's set of difficulties. Subsequently, there was an intensification of monitoring, supervision, appraisals and staff development sessions following a planned process. As a result of the changing context, Longhurst paid additional scrutiny to staff performance, Lagat increased training and development, Eden introduced additional responsibilities for staff whilst Laurens phased in a waste-reduction strategy. The results, when backed up with participants' statements, identified additional characteristics that are observed and categorised as post-planned change especially by stage three where the effects of the planned process became keenly felt.

Stage 1: New Structures and Procedures

When the changes started new structures and procedures were introduced by managers. They did so by imposing disciplinary measures on staff which they thought will help employees expedite tasks. Managers started new networks and brought these to employees' attention and asked that they joined. They thought the new mechanisms will alleviate some of the problems when they attempted to set up bureaucracies. Although their intention was to informalise relationships with staff, staff started to complain about the structures. When employees failed

to do so or under-performed they were punished, reprimanded or threatened with disciplinary action as this employee at Bakkavor noted '*we will have to start taking disciplinary action on employees who don't want to change because they don't see the need; these are minimum wage jobs and we might be asking too much; we are asking people to do things differently; there is some impact on retention...from this support office 8 people have handed in their notice to leave, which is high in the last 9 months; employees don't like the way we operate now*'.

The HR Manager at Eden remarked '*there is a lot of work on disciplinary issues, staff training and quality support…*'whilst the HR Director at Longhurst remarked '*you need to be very disciplined; it is important to have the plan and revisit it...we ask staff views and they participate in focus groups, it may take time for a seed to germinate.*'

The Business Advisor said '*we have regular communication, operations meetings to rectify communication blockage...we used to work independently whereas everybody has talents we can pool together in a team to contribute to targets*'. A Senior Training Officer mentioned '*some management are also Internal Verifiers for various courses and they work with employers, we also go out and have Lagat Days and we talk about the company training plan, the company business plan and so on... All new staff are encouraged to do the key skills they require. Several of them want to branch out*'.

The Systems Manager at Bakkavor said the following: '*In the old performance matrix, supervisors/line managers did service customer-needs; now they are asked to service the order whilst doing so at the right quality while looking after people in a financially viable way…*' whilst another employee remarked '*we have restructured senior management team; now we are restructuring the middle management team as the business is evolving so that the structure works for business…*'

The Training Manager at Lagat mentioned '*as the business is evolving to work for business, obviously you have to make sure you comply legally with employment law so you have your consultation period...we need to work a lot more around communication across functions…*' The Quality Manager talked about '*putting up and maintaining communication structures/loops as communication channels are open on a range of issues* (e.g. KPIs, targets…)'.

An Employee at Eden pointed out '*Learning to introduce clearer defined structures for the business but this hierarchy has rendered higher management less visible and less accessible …there's more structure in the company now than before…*'

Stage 2: New Ways of Communicating

Managers then began to routinise quality inspections and monito exercises when they received clients' complaints. As a result, they also set up quality and customer satisfaction teams and followed these with frequent surveys to see what the outcomes were. When these fell short of management's expectations, they set up additional monitoring regimes and expected staff to comply by sending out constant notifications. When they did not, managers started to use their positions to communicate their plans via alternative channels such as emails and social media. Interestingly, employees began their own communication networks and relied on their initiatives to improve tasks. Managers were taken aback.

The Training Officer at Lagat remarked '*it is good that lines of communication are much more open; they are a bit out of touch because they are management they are sometimes a little bit different and difficult.*'

An employee at Longhurst made the point that '*there's a lack of communication between management and staff regarding the sale of our properties, it's nice if management say 'this is what we are planning to do; what do you think? It's difficult; nobody likes not being considered and breakdown of communication brought about employee frustration; interaction stops at certain levels*'.

The Systems Manager at Bakkavor remarked '*communicating the new culture to employees is the biggest challenge. I don't think new management have grasped that yet; my senior management speak to me about the changes; I speak to other employees and that is how this gets filtered across…the CEO has only spoken once to the business; senior management have negative views of staff and staff contributions because they don't understand the culture here; management communicate through a chain of command; unless you are in direct chain with your senior management they don't speak to you so interaction has decreased; a lot of manufacturing staff and a lot of lower management in offices have been removed from one position to another so there is a resentment; management have their own agenda and staff are relayed those agendas so you get a disjointed framework …*'

Stage 3: New Collaborations

Staff started to work on new schemes via collaborations. They thought that these help their organisations improve on their difficulties. They also began interpreting previously-allocated tasks and talking to colleagues. Doing so would make these tasks reasonably achievable as they would have been broken down in more manageable ways. Increasingly, they viewed the potential to talk about their interpretation of the changes to their roles and the new structures. They started to work out how their colleagues could use their positions and buttress the efforts and contributions of other members against what they saw as an increase in management imposition of tasks, structures and a new culture. They started to communicate the purpose(s) of their actions to each other whilst not disclosing these to managers. They caught their higher-ups by surprise. When the latter chose to react they re-instated bureaucracy.

Employees said the following '*I want to have responsibility on the way things are going. I operate on a higher role as head of finance; recognition is important to me; the new Business Director would never tell me my function, he can give his recommendation and there is more of a collaborative approach.*'

An employee at Longhurst said '*it's better to have employees work to their best strengths; everyone had to do their roles and dip into other people's roles to support staff; employees have gone above and beyond their job description, change matters, it's not all about me*'.

An employee at Eden remarked '*it's about developing a positive attitude, enhance team working across departments and develop core care values 'it's a very 'can do' approach. There's a lot of cross working, a lot of cross function work that goes on… Cross departmental working is always appropriate in staff training and the delivery of quality support…*'

Another employee said '*it's all about learning to balance between performing one's role and doing additional administrative/paperwork. Recently, I've been doing my job again.*'

New Possibilities for OC Research – Methodologically

Based on the previous three stages, the paper develops three steps which are anticipated to help people under similar change circumstances deal with some of the issues. Secondly, the steps are introduced to address the fundamental methodological issues that partly accounted for the over or under-theorisation of OC research. It is shown how people can initiate the necessary changes and help their organisations achieve successful change. It is shown, based

on the data and its analysis, what people's preferences can contribute to the enactment of their roles and ways of communicating these in three steps that denote strategic intent.

The *first step* is for organisations that have been challenged to recognise that the nature of the challenges and the type(s) or responses required would be dependent on an initial assessment of the type of organisational change (planned or emergent or post planned or post-emergent). The assessment is based on characteristics of the change type as drawn from the literature. The *second step* is to identify what variety of roles within the organisational framework there might be, activities which highlight the ways the roles may interact (noting any forms of engagement, disengagement or ambivalence, resistance and/or cooperation…) and what approach is needed for each party. The *third step* is to look at ways in which the activities and what people contribute to them (i.e. their resistance, their preferences…) can be (re-)positioned and where necessary improved for mutual benefit. This can be achieved by initially seeking to modify people's responsibilities and the tasks they are contracted to carry out (using the practice approach), by improving the ways they communicate and make sense of other's actions (the discourse approach) so as to improve the effectiveness of the reporting of management's change strategies (post-practice and post-discourse). Simply positioning themselves within an organisation's structures within planned or emergent change-type situations has been observed (through the literature and material data) not to enhance the use of people's preferences or how they might choose to modify their positions given their importance as proposed by Day and Kjaerbeck (2013) and subsequently refined by Kjaerbeck (2017). The refinement needed to show how preferences are embedded in a process of research beyond communicating one's positon to include how to resolve OC challenges in post-discourse and post-practice organisations. Such a methodology would allow for the identification of damages that might be caused earlier on when managers introduce workplace structures and procedures that might stifle organisational creativity and employees' inability to use their preference positively. It is important that all stakeholders in similar change situations are aware of these steps and their benefits.

Discussions – Theoretically and Practically

This section highlights commonalities between aspects of the literature and the empirical data and areas where addition(s) may have been made. When most researchers have attempted to look into the area, they have prescribed variables which they assume would resolve some of the difficulties caused by resistance, communication blockages, politicking and so on without an initial exploration of the assumptions that might have led to the nature of what caused the

difficulties in the first place. As change continues to exhibit more dynamic and complex characteristics over and above those identified under planned and emergent change or the practice and discourse approaches, it has been noted that there is a theoretical deficit that remained unresolved since Burke's (1993) observation and since Lewin generated interest in the area. An attempt has been made to look at the taken-for-granted and underlying assumptions in the theoretical debates and discussions in the area as one way of surfacing the change challenges but also to see what else could be contributed.

Theoretically, it has been noted that advocates of change theory have succeeded in dichotomising the debates into change implementers and recipients with behaviours split between active contributors and passive or negative recipients. Such a paradoxical presentation (Smith and Lewis, 2011) has not also helped behavioural change researchers resolve practical issues related to engagement with and commitment to change processes. What we are left with is to identify what might be added to what has been missing in the debates for the past seven decades using the following argument. A combination of people's positions/roles and their preferences when they enact these roles is what has been referred to as 'preferential positioning' and serves as the paper's main theoretical contribution.

Practically, it is derived from a recognition, based on the empirical data and its analysis that within a post-planned/post-Lewinian organisational change setting, members choose/prefer to use a range of language to talk about how they wish their preferences to be felt. This is not restricted to dualities or paradoxes as reported by Smith and Lewis and their followers or earlier renditions of change agency theory by Buchanan and Badham (1999) and their followers. It was found that when organisations have been challenged to adapt internally and externally and the difficulties appear to bear characteristics similar to emergent change, it is noted that 'preferential positioning' highlights the preferences of people and the ways they chose to interact with the organisational structures, other members (including management) and the external environment as part of a process of adapting to the new requirements or new culture. This is claimed to have added to the work of Kjaerbeck (2017) in the sense that it goes over and beyond communication as it includes ways people choose to interact with processes, structures and parties. This appears to follow a storyline which produces possibilities beyond those reported in dualism (Smith and Lewis, 2011) or the assumption that those at management level should be viewed as drivers of change processes especially in a post-planned or post-emergent/post-Burnes change conversation world where practice and

discourse approaches are no longer sufficient to highlight the complexity of reactions, the underlying assumptions and the practical difficulties. Managerial prescriptions as proposed by Kotter and Schlesinger (1979), Kanter (2012) and others are no longer enough to deal with the practical difficulties as observed in the four SMEs as doing so would have continued the theoretical under-reporting. 'Preferential positioning' has been shown to add something new in OC research as presented.

Conclusions and Future Research Direction(s)

In conclusion, organisations are having to deal with a number of difficulties especially those associated with change. Work that has been done in the field has been limiting as studies have concentrated on narrowly defined aspects (e.g. difficulties or barriers to organisational change and ways of resolving these) or on dualism (e.g. planned and unplanned/emergent change, cooperation vs resistance, implementers vs resistors, discourse vs practice). The taken-for-granted assumptions and the challenges which these dualities play to have been neglected over seventy years thereby leading to claims of under-theorisation, over-theorisation and missed opportunities. Drawing from the debates and discussions the paper has identified the underlying assumptions in OC research by looking into planned and emergent change types, the approaches used (discourse and practice) as well as three dominant change theories (change agency, behavioural and positioning). This examination has revealed that OC research needs to focus on its underlying assumptions to help researchers and practitioners deepen their understanding of some of the root issues related to the success or failure of change initiatives – e.g. cooperation, resistance, ambivalence and so on. This exploration has helped in identifying a post-planned and post emergent change world now seem prevalent. The first research aim and objective has been achieved. Analysing the nature of the assumptions behind the theories has had an additional benefit – it helped to surface the practical challenges organisations face and what could be done as management implement change in what would appear to be a post-practice setting. The second research aim and objective has therefore been met. In addition to the practical difficulties, the analysis also identified some methodological and theoretical issues and proposed steps in their resolution.

Limitations ranged from the narrow scope of the themes to an over-emphasis in other areas. These have been caused by the way OC research has been presented over the decades in what has been described as prescriptive. The fact that we are still talking about planned and

unplanned/emergent change, their approaches and theories highlight the lack of success that the prescriptions and dualistic proposals have registered (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004) or the over or under-reporting on assumptions and possibilities. The analysis of these with the help of the empirical evidence led to some theoretical resolution as noted. This has led to the paper's major contribution referred to as 'preferential positioning'. Although the role that positioning could play in addressing some organisational change concerns was attempted earlier by Kjaerbeck (2017) it is claimed to have registered limited success as it constrained itself to what staff did (the way they communicated tasks) within a planned change environment. Exploring the post-planned change type scenario was found to be inspiring as it has not been attempted previously. The third research aim has been met. It has been found within this scenario that employees' preferences need to be acknowledged and, where possible, supported with the appropriate structures that would allow them to communicate as well as position these for their organisations' overall capability to resolve survival challenges in a post-discourse/post-Vaara and Tienari world. Implications include the need for management to recognise what other change agents can contribute, adopting the appropriate language/discourse to facilitate to organisational change practice and for researchers to step beyond the dichotomous and dualistic presentations and reporting of research results. Future research may look into whether an investigation of 'preferential positioning' within non-SMEs could open up additional theoretical and methodological benefits or pose further challenges to OC theory and practice….

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