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2003

Telling Tales: Authoring Narratives of Organizational Change

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Authoring Narratives of
Organizational Change

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the challenges of authoring case study narratives of organizational change in a processual perspective. Most theoretical and managerial accounts of change are narrative-based. They tend to begin with a problem period, then describe interventions, and end with an assessment of outcomes and 'lessons'. However, in the construction of coherent and credible narratives, the voices of competing accounts of change may be silenced. Evidence suggests that accounts of change compete on at least four dimensions, concerning assessments, interpretations, facts, and audiences. The framework developed by Deetz (1996) is used to illustrate how narratives can be authored through normative, interpretive, critical and dialogic research orientations. The author of the organizational change narratives faces challenges concerning research methods, inclusivity, exposure of aberrant narratives, and ethical principles. The main challenge, however, concerns the discourse within which to frame narrative accounts, a choice which influences audience receptivity and academic credibility.

Telling tales of change

Pettigrew's (1985) longitudinal analysis of organization development and change in the chemicals company ICI, and Reisner's (2002) popular account of the transformation and subsequent profits collapse of the United States Postal Service around the turn of the millennium, have one feature in common. They are narrative-based, describing sequences of events, to improve understanding of underlying processes, extracting lessons for the effective management of change. Such narratives typically begin with a problem period ('once upon a time'), introduce interventions ('and then, and then'), and end with the outcomes ('lived happily ever after'). Organizational change narratives share those properties with fiction.

Narratives pervade organization studies, in overt and disguised forms. Examples include teaching case studies, and executive autobiographies which provide idiosyncratic accounts of managerial success, neither of which may be regarded as sources of valid knowledge. Critical incident interviewing methods also generate narratives that have been combined with content analysis to derive the infamous two-factor theory of work motivation (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman, 1959), and more recently to identify formative events in the development of leadership capabilities (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). However, several commentators argue that narratives are a significant and overlooked source of understanding in their own right (Putnam, Phillips and Chapman, 1996; Butler, 1997; Czarniawska, 1998 and 1999; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Gabriel, 1998 and 2000; Boje, 1991 and 2001). Expressing the terminological richness of this area, Putnam et al. (1996, pp.386-7) argue that:

> Narratives are ubiquitous symbols that are prevalent in all organizations. Also referred to as stories, scripts, myths, legends and sagas, narratives are accounts of events, usually developed chronologically and sequentially to indicate causality. [..] They are the vehicles through which organizational values and beliefs are produced, reproduced, and transformed. They shape organizational meanings through functioning as retrospective sensemaking, serving as premises of arguments and persuasive appeals, acting as implicit mechanisms of social control, and constituting frames of reference for interpreting organizational actions.

The narrative form also pervades the change management literature, in case studies and in shorter accounts. Researchers using processual-contextual perspectives have tended to adopt the rich case study format (Dawson, 1994 and 1996; Clark, 1995; Preece, Steven and Steven, 1999). Commentators with a more managerialist perspective tend to rely on shorter accounts of corporate failures and successes (Kotter, 1996 and 1997; Kanter, 1989; Hamel, 2000). Despite stylistic variations, the common aim of these approaches lies with illustrating claims about the nature of the change process, and how it can be managed more effectively. However, these change narratives depart in two fundamental respects from the narratives which interest, for example, Gabriel and Boje. First, the organizational stories and anecdotes of interest to the latter tend to be terse, attenuated, incomplete; change narratives in contrast attempt to capture the experience of whole organizations, or business units, over extended periods of time, and strive to be comprehensive, detailed, complete, inclusive. Second, and perhaps more significant, the latter collect and analyse stories and anecdotes retailed or 'performed' (Boje, 1991) by organizational actors; change narratives in contrast are 'second hand', authored by researchers, based on the stories and anecdotes revealed to them by informants. While mining anecdotes for insights into sensemaking and political advantage in conversation, Boje (1991) is analysing primary data. While mining case accounts for insights into the interactions of change substance, context, and process, processual researchers are analysing narratives which they have constructed themselves.

The aim of this paper is to explore the dilemmas generated by the act of authoring narratives of change for analytic purposes. Returning to terminology, the term *narrative* appears to be appropriate in this context: 'A narrative, in its most basic form, requires at least three elements: an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs' (Czarniawska, 1998, p.2). The term *account*, referring to the construction of a coherent explanation, is used here synonymously (Bies and Sitkin, 1992; Read, 1992). A narrative needs a plot, 'that is, some way to bring [those three elements] into a meaningful whole' (Czarniawska, 1998, p.2). Czarniawska notes that plots rely on intentionality and context,

and are thus theory-laden, expressing causal relationships, and providing explanations. Czarniawska describes 'organization theory as a literary genre' and, equating fiction with case research, (1999, p.16) argues that, 'In a good story, the events are its facts, and the point is its theory. A story without a point is meaningless; so are field reports that are not informed by theoretical insight'.

More conventional theoretical and managerial accounts of change focus on the comparatively abstract notions of change substance, goals, implementation processes, contexts, and political agendas. Narratives pay attention to the flow of events, highlighting the cast of characters, the contrasting motives, the evolving relationships, the tensions and the backstage behaviours, without losing sight of context or political objectives. Critical of the current state of conceptualization in this field, Pettigrew et al. (2001, p.697) call for approaches that display, 'dedication to time and history [. . .] portraying change as continuous processes and not just detached episodes'. Pascale et al. (1997) and Collins (1998) also argue for the need for more creative theoretical and practical developments that are able to capture the complex dynamics of change.

A potential problem derives from the observation that processual researchers are typically confronted with multiple competing narratives of the change process which they are seeking to understand (Dawson, 2003). This is not surprising. Organizations generate for internal and external consumption accounts designed to gloss decisions and actions in terms of public relations, marketing, and corporate and brand image. Individuals construct personal accounts, knowing that career opportunities hinge on how their actions are interpreted. As already indicated, organizational narratives not only describe but also explain (this happened first, therefore that happened next), and justify decisions and behaviours (this action was necessitated by that event), and focus attention on selected characters and themes. As photographers when composing an image must decide what lies inside and beyond the frame, narrators must decide what information to reveal and to obscure. These decisions are often purposive, based on intent, but may also be unwitting. While fictions are variously designed

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to entertain, and to inform, narratives in an organizational context are invariably intended to explain, to shape perceptions, and perhaps change behaviour. Accounting for change, therefore, is an activity with political intent, designed to influence. Narratives are not neutral.

Competing narratives of change occur at an individual level, as accounts of lived experience, and at a group level, as shared organizational narratives. In qualitative longitudinal processual studies (Dawson, 1994, 1996, 1997), variation in individual accounts can be seen to coexist with competing public accounts. Individual accounts of the lived experience of change differ, in more or less significant ways, with reference to the same series of events (Buchanan, forthcoming). The 'facts' underpinning change are modified and recast by various narrators, for varying purposes, in the narrative 'performance' (Boje, 1991). The result is polyphony, encompassing a number of competing views, not unity of voice. The conventional approach to data such as these is triangulation. However, triangulation deployed in this manner, in this context, becomes a dubious technical device for arbitrating between competing narratives, potentially legitimizing one particular dominant account.

Capturing competing narratives involves research methodology that goes beyond superficial surface information about change processes, and abandons techniques of triangulation which aim to remove inconsistencies. Dawson (1994 and 1996) conducted longitudinal studies of case study organizations, involving repeat site visits, and the development of friendships with key informants. Buchanan (2000) combined interview data with information from managers not directly involved with the research project, but known to the researcher through other local channels. The exposure of competing narratives cannot therefore be taken for granted, but is dependent on a protracted, probing, in-depth methodological approach.

The aim of this paper is to explore the dilemmas in authoring narratives of organizational change, and in particular to identify the implications arising from the claim that there is no one single 'accurate' or 'true' narrative of change.

Ghosts and voices

As Czarniawska (1998 and 1999) has observed, authoring narratives of organizational case research involves skills not so distant from those of the novelist as may at first appear. Case studies of change are crafted, based on the creative presentation of data from various sources, sifted and selected in order to provide understandable and credible accounts. Fontana and Frey (1994, p.32) discuss the need for data to be 'cleaned and streamlined and collapsed in rational, noncontradictory accounts'. Dawson describes the 'daunting task of trying to prepare the material in a digestible form for publication' (1997, p.401), an open admission that the ghost of the reader is present during the authoring process.

The voices of competing narratives are frequently silenced by the sound of the dominant, or official, organization account. The dominant account is usually not difficult to discern. This is the version given to researchers in preliminary interviews, the version that appears in company newsletters, the version that senior management expound in conference speeches and short articles, the version on which internal evaluation reports are based. A social construction of technology perspective (e.g., Bijker, 1995) draws attention to the role of established players and their diverse interests, and also to the manner in which social spaces provide arenas in which interpretations can be debated, questioned and shaped. The diversity of actor interpretations ('interpretative flexibility') becomes stabilized and 'closed' through a political process in which a dominant narrative is constructed and maintained by the proactive suppression of competing views. There is never permanent closure, as there are always opportunities, given shifts in power-political positioning, for the 'rewriting of history' (Forster, 1994) to support other agendas, replacing current narratives with alternate accounts. However, once a 'history' has been written and published, and comes to be seen as 'the version of events', challenge simply becomes more problematic.

The prescriptive literature tends to marginalize the significance of political processes, and is preoccupied instead with the derivation of lessons from 'successful' change interventions (Eccles, 1994; Ward, 1994; Kotter, 1995; Ulrich, 1998; Leigh and Walters, 1998; Taffinder, 1999; Senge et al., 1999). Conflict and resistance are viewed from a managerial perspective as barriers to be overcome. The insights that might be derived from 'failure' are largely ignored, as are challenges to dominant narratives. Stace and Dunphy (1994) and Nilakant and Ramnarayan (1998) focus respectively on Australian and Indian organizations that have managed change successfully. The dominance of success stories has promoted rational linear models which ignore multiple and politically motivated narratives of change.

Power and politics are topics fundamental to an understanding of organizational behaviour (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1992, 1993). Mainstream texts cite French and Raven (1958) who identify reward, coercive, referent, legitimate, and expert power. Benfari, Wilkinson and Orth (1986) list eight sources of power, adding information, affiliation and group power. However, as Hardy and Clegg (1996, p.626) observe, 'All resource lists are infinite, since different phenomena become resources in different contexts. Without a total theory of contexts, which is impossible, one can never achieve closure on what the bases of power are'. One source of power not captured by these lists concerns the ability to manage meaning through symbolic actions (Pettigrew, 1973, 1985). This involves manipulating perceptions and attitudes using a range of signs and signals highlighting, for example, goal significance, strategic priorities, and preferred behaviours.

One way to manipulate meaning, to establish dominance of a viewpoint, is through narrative; versions of 'reality' can be articulated in a manner that justifies actions, protects positions, and deflects challenges. Narratives or 'telling tales' are another power resource in the organizational politics game of influence, used to justify particular goals and actions, and to mark as dubious the motives and actions of others. The history of change at a given location is more thus productively viewed as an account authored to service the present and future objectives of the narrator(s). Such reconstructions of the past, in the light of future

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expectations, are important to understanding current contextual conditions under which change processes unfold. The dominant or 'official' version of change may simply reflect the political positioning of key individuals or groups, and cannot be regarded as an 'accurate' account. Therefore, the notion of one unitary, accurate, authentic account of the change process and its outcomes is a delusion. Acts of 'account giving' are politically charged. Claims to the 'official' or 'accurate' account of strategic change and its consequences must be treated as partisan and suspect. There is no 'accurate' account'.

The researcher works at the interface between the ghost of the reader and the many voices of informants. This location is characterized by intrinsic dilemmas concerning which voices will be heard and believed, how they will be contextualized, and whether and how they will be articulated in a written account. The case author is therefore inevitably complicit in the political system of the organization under analysis. The researcher as case author becomes a political actor by producing a sanitized account of events, which privileges particular voices, and marginalizes others. The objective external voice is not neutral.

The central concern of this paper thus lies with the tension between dominant corporate narratives, and the varied individual accounts of the lived experience of change that tend to remain hidden or silenced. What dilemmas are posed for those seeking to research and author organizational change narratives for analytic purposes?

Competing narratives

Evidence suggests that narratives of change compete on at least four dimensions, concerning conflicts of assessment, interpretation, fact, and audience.

conflicts of assessment

Conflicts of assessment concern differences in perception with respect to evaluating the benefits of change, the outcomes, and the achievements. Examples can be drawn from the

whole-hospital re-engineering project at Leicester Royal Infirmary in the 1990s (Buchanan, 2000).

One 'macro measures' evaluation of this project tracked performance measures over four years, comparing indicators with other hospitals, covering operating and staff costs, productivity, inpatient activity, quality indicators (waiting times, re-admission rates), and other resource and output measures. This revealed that the hospital was initially efficient, that on some measures performance had improved, while on others performance had decreased. Despite over 60 pages of text and over 50 pages of detailed statistical tabulation, the report (Brennan et al., 1999, p.6) concludes that, 'It will clearly not be possible to disentangle the effects of re-engineering from other general initiatives and improvements in efficiency at the macro level'. A second 'implementation and impact' study took a broader view, considering qualitative and quantitative results, concluding that although hospital re-engineering was complex, it had been a catalyst for change, and quality of care had improved. However, a sub-heading summarized the conclusion; 'changed but not transformed'. Bowns and McNulty (1999, p.41) argued that, 'there is little evidence of the dramatic transformation of the performance of the hospital, routine quality indicators remain broadly stable [and] the general picture is of marginal improvements in most of the main traditional indicators of efficiency'. They also conclude (p.4) that, 'the redesign of patient care processes has not resulted in sufficient savings to consider the initiative to have paid for itself'. An internal report of the same change programme claimed recurrent annual cost savings of £900,000 and capacity increases of 20 per cent in some processes (LRI, 1997, p.3). Of the 140 projects reviewed, 120 delivered positive results, in five categories: quality improvement, cost improvement, capacity, generalizable benefits (releasing staff time, creating more bed nights), and 'hidden' benefits. While 64 per cent of projects delivered quality improvements, 30 per cent delivered capacity increases, and 8 per cent achieved cost improvements. In diagnostic endoscopy, for example, time from first patient visit to diagnosis was cut from 30 weeks to 5 hours as the patient process was redesigned into a single visit, increasing the capacity of the

service by over 130 per cent, creating more time for teaching and research, and increasing the proportion of time nurses spent on direct patient care from 10 to 70 per cent.

At an individual level, there was a range of assessments of this programme, from 'great success' to 'disaster'. One individual actively involved in process redesign commented:

> I think at Trust Board level, it's been a great success. It put Leicester on the map. Having seen falling standards of nursing care in the main unit, even though from outside there's a lot of publicity that the Royal has done this, and lots of people coming to see what has happened. But actually since the change of director of nursing, it feels that more people have had these feelings, which they're now coming out into the open, that we have lost something. I don't know if it was a difference [of opinion] or if it was a perceived difference and people kept quiet because you toe the management line.

Another individual who had been involved in the re-engineering programme commented:

> I think most of the colleagues that I know very well who would talk openly about this - you never know if they're just being polite - no I think most people see it in a similar way. I think there are some people who may consider it more of a success in concrete measurement terms than perhaps I do. There are some people who think it's been a big disaster. But I do take a tempered middle role here. I think in many respects we've come a long way and I think people forget how far we've come. I don't think it's been disastrous, but some colleagues do. And there is no evidence for that, and this is one of the problems that you've got to put up with in change management. There are people, when their working lives are so much better, patients come through the department easier, more expeditiously, having treatment at appropriate times, they'll say, 'no it was still better before'. It's a great frustration.

At the level of 'official' change programme assessments, and also at an individual level concerning those involved and affected, it appears that the outcomes of this strategic change initiative were indeterminate.

conflicts of interpretation

Conflicts of interpretation concern differences in perception with respect to why events happened, why things were done in a particular way, reasons, and justifications. As one of the strengths of narrative lies in embedded causality, conflicts of interpretation have theoretical implications in supporting competing explanations for events. Returning to the hospital re-engineering project, the dominant narrative explained that 'the brightest and the best' staff had initially been seconded into re-engineering laboratories (Bevan, 1997). Two

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other accounts were identified, presenting a contradiction between 'nomination of the best',

'selection of the worst', and 'rolling negotiation'. One manager commented that:

> It was interesting to note the reference to 'the brightest and the best' being seconded
> to the teams. From the inside, several colleagues had been seconded to the re-
> engineering teams with the warning that this was a last opportunity to prove their
> worth. Some managers certainly seconded known troublemakers and those who
> couldn't cope in their current roles. Interestingly, some of these people did very well
> in the changed environment.

However, another manager explained this in different terms, reflecting an untidy negotiation

process which changed as the project evolved:

> What we did was, we chose the leaders to start with, and we tried to pick fairly senior
> and credible people in the organization, and then worked together to work out who
> would be good people to have on that team. And it was a process of negotiation. So
> other people in the organization would be saying, this person's good, that person's
> good. And sometimes people were good and sometimes they weren't. But when we
> got to the second stage of the project, what we were learning was, actually you had to
> have people who could influence, people who could go in and talk to a senior nurse,
> and be able to say to that person, you know, suggest making changes and not be
> frightened, and actually having the influence and the credibility to do that.

conflicts of fact

Conflicts of fact concern differences in perception with respect to concrete observations,

matters of record, quantitative measures. Surely triangulation, using different data sources,

would obviate such contradictions? According to the dominant narrative of Leicester Royal

Infirmary's re-engineering programme (Bevan, 1997; LRI, 1997; Bowns and McNulty, 1999),

around 140 projects took place between 1994 and 1996. One manager commented:

> One of the enduring criticisms is the amount of projects that re-engineering took
> credit for that had absolutely no link with re-engineering at all. Memos used to
> regularly appear on managers' desks asking for a breakdown of every change in
> practice that was either occurring or planned. For example, the consultants in [our
> area] had planned to implement an initiative to increase day-case activity, and the
> new unit was set up and piloted by the nursing team. [The central re-engineering
> team] got to hear about it and suddenly it was presented as a re-engineering pilot and
> credited to the re-engineering team. That was a common occurrence and one that did
> serious damage to the whole programme. I was very angry about that because it took
> credit from staff who had worked really hard to make a project happen. Some
> consultants still refuse to have anything to do with the Centre for Best Practice
> because of similar experiences.

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In other words, as a political process theory of organizational change would predict, individuals and groups not only choose what 'facts' to present, but also how to contextualize those 'facts' to personal advantage.

conflicts of audience

Conflicts of audience relates to the different individuals and groups who are the spectators, listeners and actors in accounts and stories of change. These comprise both internal audiences from the senior executive group to union representatives or small work groups in particular office or factory sections; and external audiences including local government, industrial collaborators, the public and of course, the academic researcher in search of data on change. In the making and telling of stories there remains considerable room to recreate, alter and modify well-rehearsed stories of change to accommodate the expectation and responses of particular audiences. Although there may be general accepted stories of change at a given time, these are not only open to revision during ongoing story making battles as various individuals and groups struggle to get their story as the accepted and official narrative on change; but they are also likely to be enhanced and re-emphasized by the skilled story-teller who is able to engage with the reactions of different individuals or groups (audiences).

These refinements of the story to meet particular audience needs can, over time, become an established and central element of the 'accepted' story of change. In this sense, there are two elements to the audience dimension. First, the way the storyteller may refine the story to accommodate the needs, expectations and responses of different audiences. Second, the way these revisions to audience responses actually become part of the story-making process and hence, are accepted as integral to the dominant narrative of change. This in turn raises the issue of multiple competing narratives that service the needs of different audiences and the emergence of a type of meta-narrative that whilst in contention, is nevertheless the 'official' story of change. Clearly, there are considerable political tensions evident in the process by which certain stories are silenced and contained in the emergence of a meta-narrative of

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public consensus (as opposed to actual consensus). This official story captures knowledge of change processes and in storing an accepted version of events may serve as a form of organizational memory. In practice however, it is not simply the making of an official organizational story of change, it is also in the maintenance or failure to maintain such stories over time that highlights the importance of a political perspective for understanding the organization of knowledge in the creation of particular stories of change. The dominant or 'official version' of change may be replayed to audiences who whilst not accepting this version of events nevertheless remain silent in no longer publicly challenging either the story or storyteller. These dominant narratives largely reflect the political positioning of certain key individuals or groups within an organization, rather than serving as an impartial 'factual' record of events that services the storing of 'objective' information on change (as may be suggested in a de-politicized notion of knowledge management). These oral and sometimes documented histories, may also act to shape, constrain and promote the direction and content of future change programs. In short, during the complex dynamic of workplace change a company may move in and out of a number of states, sometimes concurrently, as the process of change is continuously influenced by the interplay and conflict between historical reconstructions, current contextual conditions, and future expectations of the storyteller and audience.

The longitudinal processual study of plant-level change at General Motors (Dawson, 2003) usefully illustrates how change narratives can compete, and also the way in which *the* company story of change was managed and sustained. The study demonstrates how different individuals recount and reconstruct stories that reflect their own interests, and how the maintenance of common organizational stories often reflects the influence and political action of certain powerful actors and groups. In the General Motors case, the plant manager set about orchestrating a rational narrative in the process of implementing plant-level change. This involved creating a stakeholder coalition comprising internal managerial and supervisory staff, trade unionists and a body of outside experts to advise on plant redesign. Interestingly,

although the trade union officials recognized that the narrative constructed by the plant

manager was biased, they did not seek to undermine this account of events. As they indicated

during a series of interviews:

> Some of the old timers there, especially the production workers and forklift drivers, say: 'shit this is not going to work, how can you go from here to get materials to there and there without forklift drivers'. I think maybe they're talking because they know their future isn't going to be around, because at the moment you have fifteen forklift drivers. So they're kind of looking more at their future jobs than anything else and their probably thinking about trying to bloody have a negative attitude towards it.

This quotation from a union official illustrates how casualties of change were not only

expected but also accepted. An almost utilitarian philosophy predominated which limited

action for the minority in support of better conditions for most. In the context of plant one,

relations between employees and management were comparatively good and the narrative of

management (in promoting PM as the champion of change) although not endorsed, was not

openly disputed. Provided the changes were viewed as being beneficial, then the union's

position was to maintain a hands-off approach and yet also, to ensure that shop stewards

maintained their loyalty to the union and were not absorbed into the more conservative

ideology of management and in particular, the plant manager.

On a number of occasions and throughout a range of interviews, union officials and their

representatives pointed out that the Plant Manager (PM) was one of the most conservative

managers within the GM complex. For some, this raised a contradiction whereby this more

traditional conservative manager was seen to be better at relating to employees then many of

the younger 'trendy' managers. Although recognition was given to the organising,

communicative and delegating skills of the PM, from the union perspective, the notion of PM

being the champion of change was seen to overstate his role in the process. He was a

storyteller par excellence and the union whilst recognising the 'inaccuracy' of the promoted

story of change were happy not to challenge this version of events provided the outcomes

were generally beneficial to their members. In this context and at this time, were a lot of

stakeholders involved either in actively supporting the process or in not seeking to block what was viewed as a favourable and important change. The union through evaluating change and speaking to employees on the shop floor, decided not to put any barriers in the way of change and this included a 'silent endorsement' of the PM story of change. Their articulated view is that given the economic threat to the survival of the plant there would be a lot of support for any change initiative which sought to save jobs and make the plant a commercially viable entity. As such, although there were competing narratives of change which services and interests and views of different audience groups, there emerged a meta-narrative as told by the PM which became 'accepted' as *the* story of change.

This case also highlights how narratives of change can be modified over time. Two examples are instructive. First, during the third interview with the plant manager (twelve months into a longitudinal study of shop floor change), a number of competing narratives and revised versions of the change programme emerged. In part, these revisions reflected recognition of a greater understanding of the change process by the researcher; the plant manager recognized that his audience was becoming more sophisticated and knowledgeable about events at the plant. It was therefore no longer feasible for him to avoid discussion of some of the more 'negative' aspects of change. A second example arose when the researcher witnessed the plant manager providing an account of change on the shop floor that did not reflect operations. Although the plant manager was aware that the researcher knew that this was not the case he maintained his story, knowing that the researcher needed continual access to the plant to complete the study, and would not blow his cover. However, the public story of change recounted to a manager from another manufacturing company was not revised in this external context to accommodate the researcher. In this example, we have someone who was identified as a key change agent who refined and modified *the* story of change according to his assessment of his audience. Key actors may thus tailor their narrative to accommodate different audiences.

In this we see the two dimensions to audience being played out in the context of competing narratives of change that are further refined and developed over time. What is interesting is the way that revisions to accommodate audiences or the silent acceptance of others of a 'public' story (or meta-narrative), can result in fabricated tales becoming the stores knowledge on change that informs the speed and direction of future change projects. It is perhaps not surprising that the official tales and storylines of the successful management of change rarely service future 'success' and yet, the recipes for managing change continue to be extracted from these adventurous tales of change champions.

The narrative challenge

What is significant is how competing narratives of organizational change pass into theoretical and practical utterances, sieved not only through research objectives, but also through research orientations, or what Burrell and Morgan (1979) called 'paradigms'. To illustrate this point and its implications, we will adopt the more recent analysis of 'dimensions of contrast' between research orientations developed by Deetz (1996). (See also Schultze and Leidner, 2002, for an application of this framework to organizational knowledge management.) Deetz (p.195) argues that trends in organizational research suggest a classification of research approaches relying on language-based discourses.

In Deetz' framework, dimensions of contrast are based on the 'linguistic turn', locating differences between approaches in discursive moves and social relationships, rather than in research procedures and individuals. Deetz identifies two dimensions of difference. The first is 'local/emergent' versus 'elite/a priori', and is based on the sources of research concepts and problems, either in participative dialogue with respondents, or established by the researcher from prior theoretical considerations. The second is 'consensus' versus 'dissensus', and is based on relationships between the research objectives and the dominant social discourse, with the aim either to confirm unity of understanding, or to expose conflicts and tensions.

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These dimensions produce what Deetz (1996, p.198) describes as a 'convenient four-space

solution', identifying four Weberian 'analytic ideal types' (p.195), summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1: Discourses in organization research

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dissensus with respect to dominant social
discourse

</div>

local/emergent source of concepts and problems	**dialogic**	**critical**	**elite/a priori** source of concepts and problems
	interpretive	**normative**	

<div style="text-align:center">

consensus with respect to dominant social
discourse

</div>

The four discourses each represent a different way of engaging in research, and of articulating

arguments. Of particular relevance to a narrative perspective on change, Deetz (p.195) notes

that, 'Each discourse provides an orientation to organizations, a way of constituting people

and events in them, and a way of reporting on them' (p.198). In practice, Deetz notes, there is

significant interplay as research approaches 'meet at the crossroads', and as researchers are

adept at 'dodging criticism by co-optation' of other orientations (p.199). Of interest here is

the manner in which each of these discourses regard competing narratives of change, and the

mechanisms through which 'closure' of discrepancies between accounts may be achieved.

A normative or 'modern' discourse assumes progressive enlightenment, rationalization and control. Here the concerns lie with codification, with the nomothetic search for cumulative facts and universally generalizable laws, with establishing covariation and causal relations through hypothesis testing. Competing narratives of change in this discourse thus represent minority, aberrant views, which can be marginalized by weight of other evidence and triangulation. Closure is achieved by conformity with and reinforcement of the dominant social or organizational discourse.

An interpretive discourse regards individuals as sense-making, as engaged participants, as co-creators of social structures, and is based on ethnographic and hermeneutic research methods designed to establish local meanings and interpretations and 'the lived experience', grounded in social and organizational practices. Competing narratives in this discourse thus represent socially positioned attempts at self-interpretation, and are thereby allocated equivalent weight. Closure is achieved when the diversity of views uncovered has been adequately represented.

A critical discourse views organizations as sites of continuous political struggle. The objective, therefore, is to unmask modes of domination and distorted communication by demonstrating how these are reproduced, to highlight how social practices and institutional structures create and sustain power differences, silencing and obscuring alternative perspectives. The aim is to establish the conditions in which conflicts can be surfaced and discussed. Competing narratives in this discourse thus represent silenced voices whose resistance to dominating discourses are exposed and emphasized. Closure is achieved by social reform, in which conflicts are addressed openly and resolved.

A dialogic or 'postmodern' discourse focuses on the role of language in the constantly constructed and multi-vocal nature of social reality. Organization is viewed as disjointed narratives and perspectives that fail to establish a coherent reality. Dialogic discourse seeks to unpack taken-for-granted realities, to uncover their complexities, lack of shared meaning, and hidden resistances. Competing narratives in this discourse thus represent narrative

fragments, elements in a kaleidoscopic tapestry. Closure cannot be achieved as the notion of a single reality is illusory, and any such truth claims are deeply suspect and partisan.

The narrative challenge

The researcher working with a processual-contextual perspective on organizational change, developing a rich longitudinal case study narrative, based on a prolonged multi-methods engagement with the research site or sites, exposing multiple and competing views and interpretations of events, is thus faced with a number of challenges. These include:

➢ Selection of research methods and information sources; while interviews with a small number of key senior management informants may flush out an uncontested dominant narrative, sustained access may be jeopardized by an overt agenda which aspires to 'probe beneath the surface' of perceptions, decisions and events;

➢ Selection of voices to include in a case account; usefully exposing the 'backstage' political dynamics of the organizational change process, including the cast of characters, the motives and agendas, and the plots and ploys, frequently alluded to but rarely detailed, and thereby exposing behaviours which those responsible may prefer to remain 'backstage', thereby encouraging exclusion of such viewpoints;

➢ Challenging or buttressing the dominant narrative of the organization; exposing aberrant accounts can destabilize the dominant narrative on which depends the validity of theoretical claims, the value of prescriptive advice, and a range of corporate and individual reputations, a series of challenges which thus impinge of the credibility of a number of individuals, including the researcher;

➢ Maintaining research ethics; with regard to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the respondent's right to withdraw, but particularly with regard to the subsequent public disclosure of comments subverting the dominant narrative - by

which time it is too late to withdraw respondent utterances which, even stripped of obvious identity cues, are often recognizable to other organizational members.

The primary challenge, however, concerns the choice of discourse (Deetz's framework is a convenient engine to propel this argument) with which to author the change narrative. This choice may be constrained by personal values and aspirations, and by research methods and data quality. It is possible, however, that some academic authors, untrammelled by those constraints, adapt their narrative discourses such that they are commensurate with an intended target readership adopting, say, a normative discourse for practitioner audiences, an interpretive discourse for contemporary sociologists, and a critical or dialogic discourse for academic publications with more radical postmodern affiliations. We are not aware of research into personal academic publishing strategies that would inform this cynical claim. However, adaptational failure in this regard has negative consequences. First, academic authors are likely to reach only the target readership receptive to materials expressed in the discourse of choice. Second, credibility and reputation in the view of organizational respondents may be threatened by an admission that the researcher working with a dialogic discourse cannot feedback either an accurate account of their investigation into an organization's change initiative, or generate clear guidelines for the future based on their findings. As practitioner needs and expectations remain committed to a normative discourse, and as trends across the social sciences continue to favour interpretive, critical and dialogic discourses, the communications gap between theory and practice in this field observed by Pascale et al. (1997), Collins (1998) and Pettigrew et al. (2001) will widen.

The Scots poet Norman McCaig (1969) wrote a piece which begins, 'Hear my words carefully. Some are spoken not by me, but by a man in my position'. Authors of organizational change narratives do not invariably clarify the position from which they speak, the discourse within which they operate. This may be discernible by inference. The reader, however, in the absence of explicit indication, may be uncertain whether or not the presenting narrative, and its theoretical and practical derivatives, reflects a 'fiction', a crafted selection

and a tailored presentation of the evidence, 'discoursed' for a particular audience.

Czarniawska's (1999) equation of organization theory with literature, and her insistence on

the importance of 'a good story', is particularly poignant in this respect.

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