

# **Navigating Institutional Complexity: Textual Agency for Cross-Level Change**

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### **Introduction**

Current reforms in for instance the financial sector and health care, or community development in troubled neighborhoods, are brave attempts at social innovations toward a more sustainable society (Moulaert et al., 2013). Such innovations ask for the questioning, discarding and renewal of ingrained practices and their re-assemblage into novel forms of collective, coordinated action. Societal, macro-level transitions play out in organizational change efforts that are especially challenging because they need to address “wicked problems” (Stoppelenburg & Vermaak, 2009). These tough, persistent issues are highly complex and ambiguous in terms of both content and process and therefore defy the application of simple, short-term solutions. Instead, they require a multidimensional approach and the involvement of many actors with different interests, viewpoints and affiliations (Vermaak, 2013). For social innovations to emerge and succeed, these actors will have to find ways to constructively work with differences in thinking, talking and acting that relate to the institutional levels and logics from which they operate. We see such “institutional complexity” (Greenwood et al., 2011; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013) as a given and enduring quality of the wicked terrain that needs to be navigated in order to envision and enact meaningful change. How might we go about such navigation?

We propose that issue complexity should be matched by a finely tuned simultaneous use of contrasting change approaches. Where in such efforts different levels, logics and processes are deliberately distinguished, they also ask for interaction and connection and will undoubtedly collide. When frictions and tensions occur, these incidents can be used as opportunities for reflection and renewal (Seo & Creed, 2002). In this paper we explore the potential of a discursive lens and the notion of “textual agency” (Putnam & Cooren, 2004) to understand and utilize such moments as openings for cross-level change. We thus combine the institutional concept of agency with the constructionist belief in the constitutive power of language. We tap into the realm of organizational discourse to read, interrupt and sway institutionalized practice (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004). The premise that discourse and organizational change are mutually implicated phenomena (Grant & Marshak, 2011), opens up possibilities for the facilitation of deliberate discursive change efforts. Such facilitation can be seen as “dialogic organization

development (OD)” interventions (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, 2013; Marshak & Grant, 2008) that aim to impact the processes of meaning making that underlie feasible action repertoires.

In the exploration of textual agency as pathway for cross-level change, we take our practical experience in the facilitation of organizational change as starting point. In our OD work we find that the impetus for cross-level change often arises from the desire to engage in more sustainable interactions with the client, customer, or citizen. In such instances, we deliberately zoom in on the organization’s primary process where professionals are at work and assist them in their acts of embedded agency. This micro-level perspective of getting the job done and renewed, immediately intertwines with different and competing logics. In the actuality of change, a practice orientation is easily undermined by tertiary and secondary processes that have a more macro view and favor political- and organizational logics. Change agents thus stumble upon cognitive biases and experience the hegemonic conflict between contrasting logics that inform, legitimize and maintain certain roles, routines, identities and vocabularies. Clearly, it’s a struggle to deal with the incompatibilities of this ambiguous context. Yet, true leverage for social innovation may well be found at the core of primary processes where organizations add real value and complexity is often greatest (Vermaak, 2013). This micro-level, inside-out perspective fits with a practice approach to organization studies (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) that zooms in on the lived experience of organizational actors and on how their acting and interacting influences the institutional realities in which they work. For this paper we are especially interested in the discursive practices that organizational actors use to exercise their agency. We address the question how their acts of textual agency can be enabled and augmented by dialogic OD interventions.

In what follows we first frame the wickedness of social innovation in terms of institutional complexity, which for us implies that change efforts must handle multiple, contradictory logics. We explain why we focus on micro dynamics of institutional work as the pivotal grounding for what we define as cross-level change. We then connect institutional theory with the organizational discourse lens and discuss how embedded agents can impact change through discursive acts. Once we have developed the theoretical context, we use the remainder of the paper to explore the repertoire of dialogic OD interventions that may enable the agency of authors and their texts. We thus introduce a practical change orientation in a conceptual,

discursive-institutional framing to not only understand, but also enact change possibilities for social innovation.

### **Institutional Complexity and Agency**

Local, organizational change initiatives are often sparked by societal, macro-level transitions. That is what we clearly notice in the Netherlands, where many understand that ingrained forms of governance and practice are no longer workable. This understanding guides their search for social innovation, which we define as intentional efforts to renew social practices in order to jointly create a system that better meets the interests of societal actors (Jonkers & Zandee, 2014). Impatient citizens develop communal ways to safeguard energy, child care and mobility, whilst municipalities struggle to prepare themselves for new responsibilities, and the Dutch health care sector goes through fundamental changes. In many of these game shifting change efforts, actors have to grapple with wicked, persistent problems. According to Loorbach (2010, p. 164), such issues are unstructured and highly complex since they occur across societal domains at varying levels and with various actors involved. Handling them includes the coping with uncertainties of future oriented, sustainable development (ibid). Though we see change as a continuous rather than an episodic phenomenon, we do feel that we now live in the midst of what can be typified as a periodic shift. Urgency, ambiguity and novelty define the societal transition context in which social practices and their foundational structures are shifting simultaneously. In such context, slumbering distinctions and tensions between varied social realities, contrasting rationalities and dissimilar perspectives are awakened and sharpened. Where in the past change efforts could perhaps uphold distinctions and address them as separated domains for sequential designs and facilitation, we currently don't see that as a feasible approach. The intensity of tensions and the necessity to act demand that we deal with wicked issues in change initiatives that can handle paradoxical requests in settings where dimensions of time and place are compressed. That's why we seek leverage for change in the primary processes that are central to any organization's existence. To utilize this transformative potential we need to grasp the dynamic complexities that surface at the organizational core. The notion of institutional complexity is a helpful concept to develop such understanding.

Organizations can be understood in terms of the "institutional logics" that guide their habitual practice. These logics are defined as the overarching principles and rationales that prescribe how

actors should interpret what is going on and how they should behave in social situations (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 318). Most organizations embody multiple logics that may, or may not, be mutually compatible (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Where compatibility can advance consistency in organizational performance, incompatibility between logics will more typically be the case. Examples of contrasting logics are, for instance, the logics of professionalism and managerialism in a hospital, or the logics of science and commerce in a business school. Where multiple logics contradict and collide, organizations are faced with the condition of “institutional complexity” (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 318). Such complexity challenges actors to somehow cope with sometimes highly divergent prescriptions for thought and action.

Authors vary in how they perceive institutional complexity in terms of its temporality, locality and functionality. Where many studies assume that contradiction between logics is transitional, others underline its enduring quality (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 322). Where early writings suggest that contrasting demands can be split between central and peripheral functions, recent studies show that multiplicity may permeate work activities in the organizational core (Besharov & Smith, 2014, p. 369). In addition to disparate views on permanence and centrality, authors also differ in how they see institutional complexity impacting organizational performance. Where some may view complexity as a destructive force, others appreciate its potential for making organizations more sustainable and innovative (ibid, p. 371). They recognize that institutional contradictions can function as triggers and enablers of change (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 4). In our study, we explore discursive possibilities to navigate institutional complexity. Not to smoothen it out, but to learn how to live with it and utilize the unavoidable frictions as opportunities for change. We agree with recent studies that multiple logics conjoin in the primary process where professionals are at work. Self-organizing teams in health care are a good example. Whilst taking care of clients they now have to include the managerial logic of how to organize for it. Indeed, precisely in everyday, seemingly mundane operations we may start to discover how institutional complexity influences interactions in ways that can block or enable wanted change. Such practice orientation fits nicely with the idea of “institutional work” (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), that takes the lived experience of the organizational actors who populate our institutions as vantage point.

Where macro-institutional theory concerns itself with large-scale social and economic change (Lawrence et al., 2011), the institutional work perspective focuses on “the agency of individual actors laboring day-to-day at maintaining and transforming institutions” (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 322). This micro-level view on embedded agency departs from more grand accounts of institutional change in terms of successful institutional entrepreneurship (Garud, Jain & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006), widespread innovation adaptation, or disruptive social transformation (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 52). Instead, it pays attention to the manifold ways in which actors cope with, tinker with, tear down and renew the institutional structures that guide their interactions, resources and routines (ibid, p. 53). When faced with institutional complexity, actors can influence how contradictory prescriptions are manifested by exercising their agency in selectively drawing on, interpreting and enacting contrasting logics (Besharov & Smith, 2014, p 368). According to Smets and Jarzabkowski (2013, p. 3) the notion of institutional work allows for a more refined view on agency in which three dimensions can be distinguished. The first, iterative dimension underpins the reproduction of ingrained practices and established institutions. Such maintenance is far from mindless, since it requires that actors interpret situations and choose appropriate behavior from an expansive repertoire. The second, projective dimension supports planning and future change and sees institutional work as the purposive acts of actors who may be labeled as institutional entrepreneurs. The third, practical-evaluative dimension draws attention to how actors exercise judgment to get things done when confronted with institutional contradictions and dilemmas. This dimension “allows actors to ‘go on’ in the face of complexity” (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 26). The use of practical-evaluative judgment can function as a bridge between iterative and projective agency. It invites the improvisations and experiments through which actors develop the vision and ability to reconstruct the institutional orders to which they belong (ibid). The three dimensions of agency show that the experience of institutional complexity gives embedded agents some wiggle room for change. When aware of such leeway, actors can use their embeddedness as opportunity to create small wins towards institutional renewal (Reay, Golden-Biddle & Germann, 2006). However, such purposeful action requires the reflexivity to understand their own logic and its interplay with contrasting logics, as well as the ability to use frictions as openings for reconstruction. The development of such capacity is one of the focal points of our OD work. In

collective change efforts we look for wiggle room and leverage points to create space for cross-level change.

### **Seeking Pathways for Cross-Level Change**

The idea that through institutional work actors use the inherent contradictions of institutional complexity for change, supports what we see as a feasible approach in the search for social innovation. Namely that, paradoxical as it may seem, a focus on micro-level dynamics is a powerful locus for renewal in the direction of macro-level, societal transformation. Indeed, an emphasis on work-level actions may show how individual, organizational and institutional levels interact (Smets, Morris & Greenwood, 2012, p. 880). Just like the work of embedded actors can result in organizational-level change, such practice-driven changes may impact institutional reconstruction (ibid). Where dealing with institutional complexity may be inherently cross-level, empirical studies tend to focus on one level at a time (Besharov & Smith, 2014, p. 376). They highlight individual agency, or internal organizational dynamics, or dynamics in the field and at societal levels. Where in theory such levels may be distinguished, we find that in organizational life and the practice of change, multiple levels and logics are commonly nested and intertwined (ibid).

We embrace such complexity as opportunity for renewal and therefore focus on issues that persist at the core of an organization's primary process. When we do so, contradictions and dilemmas immediately appear. For instance between maintaining organization stability versus organizing for flexible activity, or between designing change as a controllable transitional state versus guiding change as an unpredictable emergent process. Probably because we ground change initiatives in the practices of the primary process, we often see logics collide in cross-level terms of contrasting secondary (managerial) and tertiary (governance) logics. In these instances, power differences and struggles are integral to surfacing tensions and conflicts. If we take the institutional work of embedded agents seriously, change facilitation is most vital in the moments where such frictions occur. Indeed, as unpleasant as frictions or interruptions may be, these are exactly the spots "where a plot can take a turn" (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 97). When change agents are alert to when and how such moments occur, they can help organizational members to navigate contrasting logics for meaningful interaction and reconstruction.

OD facilitation can advance the potential for change by explicating, expanding and utilizing the leeway that exists in conditions of institutional complexity. Such advancement includes the simultaneous unraveling and interlocking of the multiple logics that guide organizational practice. Thus, the enabling of complex, cross-level change entails the creation of cognitive, relational and emotional space to cope with difference and incompatibility. First of all, actors who are involved in a collective change effort need to become aware of their contrasting logics. How might they address cognitive blind spots and find ways to confront and accept disparities in co-existing perspectives? Creating awareness of multiplicity includes the punctuation of emotionally reassuring routines of habitual change practice. Secondly, paradoxical endeavors ask for design and facilitation of change as layered processes that each have their own principles, participation, timing and outcomes. How can change agents sufficiently untangle institutional complexity to co-create distinct yet balanced approaches? Thirdly, such parallel processes need to somehow be aligned and connected into coherent cross-level change for social innovation to occur. How can productive interchanges and connections be accomplished in ways that avoid the previous dominance of certain logics? We propose that a discursive lens gives a valuable perspective for both interpreting and impacting the institutional landscape in which organizational actors do their work. A focus on organizational discourse, illuminates how language constructs organizational reality (Grant & Marshak, 2011, p. 207) and shows how actors can influence change through discursive acts that utilize the constitutive power of words.

### **Discourse, Institutions and Organizational Change**

Organizational discourse analysis informs a view on institutional dynamics as processes of social construction (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). It adds a symbolic-linguistic layer to the more dominant practice-material understanding of how institutions become, are maintained and changed (Silence & Barker, 2012). A discursive perspective on institutionalization highlights how discourses are shaped through the interplay between social action and the texts that describe and communicate such action (Phillips et al., 2004). Novel, unusual or disruptive actions that need interpretation or justification can result in texts that may become embedded in the discourses that underlie, explain and legitimize the institutional practices that prescribe acceptable action repertoires (ibid). In this equation, discourse is defined as “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being”

(Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Texts are the units that make up a particular discourse and that are accessible to others in written, spoken or visual form (Phillips & Oswick, 2012, p. 443). Examples are research reports, corporate stories, work orders, artful imagery or tweets. We propose that an understanding of the connections between action, text, discourse and institution, opens opportunities for institutional transformation through instances of “textual deviance” (Zandee & Bilimoria, 2007). Evocative texts that accompany meaningful actions that depart from institutionalized practice can interrupt and re-write underlying discourses in ways that open up new possibilities for action. A focus on this deviant, constitutive character of texts creates an interest in what they do and how they travel. Indeed, the agency of texts lies in both their content and trajectory: where they emanate from, how they are used by organizational actors and how they interconnect with other texts (Phillips et al., 2004, p. 646).

Texts show their agency in how they participate in the daily production and reproduction of organizational life (Putnam & Cooren, 2004). But wherein lies such agency? Hardy (2004, p. 418 - 421) discusses three key questions that help frame the scope of textual agency. What characteristics imbue a text with agency? This first question refers to how texts, on their own, make a difference in organizational settings (Cooren, 2004). Texts may be ignored or, even unintentionally, be disseminated and welcomed and used across organizational logics and localities. Clues for such agency lies in connections with other texts and in how their genre fits within a certain context. What types of actor have sufficient agency to produce texts? This second question points to the authorship of texts. The institutional positioning, power and resources of the actors who produce certain texts influence their readership, interpretation and impact (Phillips et al., 2004). What is the process of scaling up from the local to the organizational? This third question explores how texts with agency come to exercise it. It looks at how texts move from one context to another and how processes of recontextualization may generalize and standardize their meaning.

The notion of textual agency adds a fruitful dimension to the institutional work of embedded agents. It shows how they can use discursive practices such as storytelling, documenting, presenting, coaching or gossiping to enact their agency (Vaara & Whittington, 2012, p. 311). In contexts of institutional complexity actors constantly interpret, translate and combine texts that belong to different logics in order to create sufficient coherence to perform. Only when a

dominant logic goes uncontested, actors don't have to use language to interpret and discuss their then taken for granted practice (Sillince & Barker, 2012, p. 9). What and how they communicate about what happened can create texts that may interrupt and renew the logics that guide local action and create conditions for cross-level performance and change. Discursive acts such as the telling of stories belong to the regular repertoire of organizational members. Change agents can utilize and stretch such spontaneous acts into deliberate interventions to impact the discursive realm that underlies institutionalized practice.

Just like organizational discourse contributes to the constructionist understanding of institutional transformation, it also enriches the study and facilitation of organizational change (Grant & Marshak, 2011; Oswick et al., 2010; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). The discursive lens looks at organizational discourse and change as mutually implicated phenomena (Grant & Marshak, 2011) and zooms in on their interrelated qualities and dynamics. It highlights change as ongoing, emphasizes shared meaning making, appreciates the plurivocality of change guiding discourses, underscores the power dynamics in privileging certain logics, and sees conversation as an important practice to coordinate and impact the discursive complexity in which organizational activity is firmly embedded.

Studies of organizational discourse are commonly based on a social constructionist and/or critical perspective (Marshak & Grant, 2008, S11). Where a constructionist perspective shows the potency of language in changing institutional practice, the critical stance highlights how power and politics influence the texts and voices that might be favored in such reconstruction. It matters who is involved and who are excluded in change seeking conversations, who speaks and who is listened to, what can be said and how. Indeed, the hegemonic struggle between contrasting institutional logics plays out in both organizational practice and the ways of talking about such practice. A practice orientation that sees the primary process as pivotal locus for change may thus necessitate the empowering of its underlying discourse. The punctuation of discursive dominance is therefore an important intervention in the enabling of cross-level change. Punctuation and other discursive interventions, that aim to enable agency amidst institutional complexity, belong to the practice of dialogic OD.

In the remainder of this paper we explore the character and range of such discursive interventions. This means that we engage with organizational discourse as a form of "tool talk,"

which pursues a more pragmatic-interventionist interest in how language can deliberately be used to accomplish the purpose of change (Oswick et al., 2010; Marshak, 1998). The idea of tool talk is attractive, because it upholds the connection between talk and action that fits with our notion of textual agency. The focus of our exploration is on how dialogic OD can enable embedded actors to exercise their agency through discursive practice.

### **Enabling Cross-Level Change through Dialogic OD Interventions**

Dialogic approaches to organizational development set out to influence change in organizations as discursive systems or networks of meaning-making conversations (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Bushe, 2013; Marshak & Grant, 2008). Dialogic OD interventions emphasize changing the frameworks and vocabularies that guide how people think and act, rather than aiming to influence their behavior. The guiding constructionist assumption is that new ways of talking and thinking will inform novel possibilities for action. In short, organizational change is a process of shifting conversations (Ford, 1999). Thus, dialogic practices facilitate “containers” and organize events for the fostering of constructive, inquiring conversation that may renew the intelligibilities that underlie organizational practice (Bushe, 2013). Large-group methods such as appreciative inquiry, open space and world café are well documented examples of dialogic change approaches. They welcome inclusive, whole system participation and deliberation to utilize multiple perspectives to ponder, guide and inspire collective change.

The facilitation of dialogic containers and events nurtures new ways of talking *about* existing action as well as talk *for* novel action. Through these conversations actors can develop both reflexivity and projective change capacity. Where dialogic containers are often created as temporary spaces outside the flow of daily activities, our institutional, practice oriented perspective, also shows the importance of interventions that enable talk *in* action and safeguard the move from new talk *to* new action. Such interventions can support the institutional work of embedded actors and augment their practical-evaluative agency. The four distinct talk/action combinations demarcate a wide repertoire for dialogic OD practice. We propose that all four types of talk/action interventions need to be utilized in order to navigate the institutional complexity of the wicked issues that are at the core of cross-level change.

In what follows, we concretize intervention possibilities for each talk/action combination and give examples from our own change practice. In our discussion, we highlight how external change agents can collaborate with embedded actors to develop mutual textual agency for social innovation. We intend to show how discursive interventions can highlight the existence and interplay of multiple institutional logics, can use inescapable frictions for reflection and learning and can interweave contrasting, but simultaneous approaches to change.

### **Talk *in* Action**

In a Dutch health care organization we use an appreciative approach to assist a group of professionals in studying their practice as a starting point for organizational change (Jonkers & Zandee, 2014). We notice how they spontaneously utilize new insights to experiment with an affirmative stance in their daily work. They now share uplifting stories to start a team meeting, include a focus on individual strengths in the team's next year plan, or interrupt the problem-centric conversation of other health care workers by highlighting the resilience of a single mother who is labeled as a problematic case. Where the first two examples are team oriented, the last example shows how embedded actors can impact change across organizational boundaries. In our interventions we invite the sharing of these talk *in* action instances among colleagues and encourage the continuation of such experimentation. We thus nurture actors' agency to produce and disseminate influential texts. But our practice shows that texts can also gain traction without our interference. This happened, for instance, at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs where our consultancy report was distributed through informal channels as a "must-read" document after the assignment ended (Stoppelenburg & Vermaak, 2009). Another example of the agency of texts, is the popularity of a YouTube video that captures a keynote speech about the do's and don'ts of cross-level change (Vermaak, 2012). When aware of such textual potency, change agents can influence the trajectory of texts through deliberate interventions that heighten their evocative quality and help assure their dissemination (Zandee & Bilimoria, 2007).

### **Talk *about* Action**

With its focus on shared meaning making, dialogic OD pays ample attention to the talking *about* action. In appreciative inquiry, for instance, people are invited to share stories about life-giving experiences in an organization's past and present. Such conversations are habitually organized in

containers where business and talk as usual are suspended so that reflective, generative dialogue can take place (Bushe, 2013). With our intend to enable cross-level change, we guide specific types of conversation about daily practice. We aim to intervene in ways that create awareness that multiple logics are at work, that problematize their intertwined complexity and that bridge contradictions to create connection through existing differences. In the Dutch health care organization, for instance, we asked professionals to tell stories about the dilemma's they handle in their interactions with customers and clients. Such narration made them aware of the contradictory prescriptions for their work and heightened an appreciation for how they succeed in the face of complexity. When these stories were shared with management, they brought to surface what normally stays hidden. Namely, both the lived complexity and its inherent wiggle room that professionals use (like circumventing protocols) in order to perform.

Stories act as boundary objects when they help translate and connect across multiple logics and contexts (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Oswick & Robertson, 2009). Where stories bridge because they point to shared experience and identity, other documents can be boundary spanning in finding a common language to problematize. For instance, causal loop diagrams of wicked issues explicate their persistence in a language that actors with diverse backgrounds can understand (Stoppelenburg & Vermaak, 2007).

### **Talk *for* Novel Action**

Talk for novel action may focus on the stimulation of projective agency. Indeed, dialogic OD approaches such as future search meetings and appreciative inquiry summits, include conversations about future aspirations to spark and guide novel action. In situations of institutional complexity however, such future oriented dialogue may be more effective when it is combined with interventions that punctuate and reframe the logics that prescribe existing practice. Where strategic plans and rhetoric are used to induce collective action and cooperation (Sillince & Barker, 2012, p. 9), tropes like metaphor and irony may punctuate the discursive dominance of managerial and other logics. Through tropological interventions change agents can create a “cognitive discomfort zone” (Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002) in which tensions and conflicts may be confronted in order to create space for cross-level change. Barrett and Cooperrider (1990) for instance, give a rich account of how their generative metaphor intervention helped a group to liberate itself from dysfunctional conflict and defensive routines.

They define generative metaphor as the invitation to see anew in order to overcome areas of rigidity (ibid, p. 224). Their account shows the successful use of metaphor as intervention in the relatively coherent context of a managerial team. In more complex situations, it may be necessary to actively disrupt domineering logics and reveal how existing power structures silence certain viewpoints and stifle productive action. Irony as intervention can help to ridicule the familiar and loosen the grip of fixating structures and dynamics. To then redirect attention from internal strife to what really matters, we sometimes bring in the external voice of customers or clients.

In a more equal playing field, actors can engage in dialogue to envision new action possibilities. Interventions to facilitate such dialogue may help actors to reframe problems into affirmative topics for consideration, craft questions to induce renewing conversation and invent fresh words to replace used-up vocabulary and empty jargon.

### **From New Talk to New Action**

Though dialogic OD concerns itself primarily with the interruption and renewal of discursive practice (Oswick, 2013), our institutional perspective also creates an interest in how new intelligibilities are enacted in tangible activity. Indeed, for cross-level change to occur, actors need to be assisted in their moves from text to performance in context. Interventions that belong to such situated approach, are for instance the design and facilitation of experiments that materialize new talk into new forms of action. Experiments help to see what works and to create small wins. But however small these experiments may be, they will undoubtedly bump up against persistent contradictory logics. Where frictions occur, change agents need to help redress the space for change amidst complexity. In our practice, such interventions often concern the support and strengthening of the professional logic in the primary process. In such instances, it helps tremendously when in preceding change conversations actors have addressed the multiplicity of contrasting logics that guide their organizational practice.

Shared linguistic framings of complexity – such as the distinction between primary/secondary/tertiary process – help to develop reflexivity and the dialogic ability to understand and talk about what happens in situations where new action conflicts with ingrained procedures and routines. Interventions that aim to safeguard successful moves from talk to

action, therefore include the co-creation of language that legitimizes attempts for cross-level change and that assists embedded agents to engage with such change collectively. Situated meta-language thus helps to navigate, rather than ignore, the institutional complexity that characterizes the wicked issues that are part and parcel of social innovation.

### Conclusions

In this paper we combined a discursive-institutional lens with a practice orientation to explore the notion of textual agency toward a new understanding of how embedded agents can use the ambiguity of institutional complexity to impact change. We grounded our discussion in the micro dynamics of institutional work, because we believe that such focus on the primary process is a pivotal pathway for social innovation. Change initiatives around wicked issues run across multiple levels and logics. For such maneuvering to be successful, we need to zoom in on the nuance of daily interactions to see how they may gradually interlock into what we then come to recognize as macro-level change. We discussed how “dialogic OD” interventions can advance such movement by influencing the different talk/action combinations that can be identified for the fruitful navigation of institutional complexity.

With this study we make contributions to both institutional theory and dialogic OD. We explicate how actors can use discursive practice to exercise their agency. Through how they talk *in* daily action they show their practical-evaluative judgment for renewal. Where the theoretical connection between discourse and institution is well established, we discuss the implications of such connection for the practice of dialogic OD. Where most discursive interventions focus on talk *about* action and new talk *for* action we point out that change agents also need to help safeguard the move from new talk *to* new action.

Our focus on dynamics of institutional complexity in handling wicked issues such as sustainability and social inclusiveness, implies a reconsideration of OD practice and its contributions to societal change. There is a clear need to develop finesse in combining dialogic/diagnostic, micro/macro, top-down/bottom-up, outside/in realities in change processes that match issue complexity in their design and implementation (Oswick, 2013). Such finesse includes the thoughtful interplay of discursive and materialistic approaches (Oswick et al., 2010). In our attempts to co-create a more sustainable and just society we need to talk *and* act in novel ways.

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