Title: Navigating Institutional Complexity: Textual Agency for Cross-Level Change

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Abstract

This workshop looks at organizational change in the context of macro-level transitions toward a more sustainable society. Such issues are often characterized by the involvement of many stakeholders (often surpassing organizations' boundaries) interacting on different levels (micro, meso, macro) with divergent perspectives. Change agents stumble upon the institutional complexity of such endeavors even when they focus on the micro-level of every day practical work of professionals. We explore how textual agency may help navigate the incompatibility of contrasting institutional logics and may enable the space for using contrasting approaches to change concurrently. We suggest that such cross-level change can be more effective while also demanding more of those involved. We wish to explore how descriptive studies of institutional work and embedded agency can be enacted and advanced through a range of dialogic OD interventions.

Workshop Overview

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. Societal, macro-level transitions play out in organizational change efforts that are especially challenging because they need to address wicked, persistent problems (Stoppelenburg & Vermaak, 2009). These tough, complex issues involve many stakeholders (often surpassing organizations' boundaries) who interact at different levels (micro, meso, and macro) from diverse disciplines and disparate perspectives. Dealing with such issues asks for a simultaneous use of contrasting change processes that match issue complexity whilst also

creating pathways for productive interchange and connection between these processes. In this paper we explore the potential of textual agency to enable such cross-level change.

In our workshop we combine a practice orientation with the theoretical framing of institutional complexity and a discursive exploration of intervention possibilities. We propose that textual agency may help to navigate the incompatibility of contrasting institutional logics and concurrent approaches to change. We discuss how "dialogic OD" interventions (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Grant, 2008) can advance sustainable development by punctuating, bridging or renewing the multiple logics that interplay, contradict, enable and obstruct inside-out organizational change.

Institutional Complexity and Change

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 – as patient, customer, or citizen. In this work, we deliberately zoom in on the primary process of adding value to the world outside and assist professionals in their acts of embedded agency (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). This micro-level perspective of getting the job done and innovating on the job, 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 or meso view and favor political- and organizational logics over the professional logic of the primary process (Vermaak, 2006). Change agents thus stumble upon cognitive biases and experience the hegemonic conflict between contrasting logics that inform, legitimize and maintain certain organizational roles, routines, identities, values and vocabularies (Greenwood et al., 2011). Clearly, they struggle with the contradictions of this ambiguous context. Not in the least, because institutional logics also guide habitual approaches to change. Preferred approaches can sometimes be maintained, but more often need to be disrupted to enable the emergence of new action perspectives. We argue that contrasting change processes can be productively organized into paradoxical endeavors (Smith & Lewis, 2011) that make create a more deliberate, balanced and aligned change effort.

<u>Creating Space for Cross-Level Change</u>

The enabling of complex, cross-level change entails the creation of cognitive 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 ingrained 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 be somehow aligned and interlocked into coherent cross-level change. How can productive interchanges and connections be accomplished in ways that avoid the previous dominance of certain logics? We propose that discursive acts may help change agents to navigate the tricky incompatibility of multiple institutional logics and pathways to change.

Link to the annual theme 'the power of words': textual agency

The field of organizational discourse informs a view on institutional dynamics as processes of social construction (Phillips & Oswick, 2012). Institutional complexity can thus be understood in terms of its underlying organizational discourses and influenced by acts of textual agency (Zandee & Bilimoria, 2007). In this constructionist understanding, organizational discourse and change become mutually implicated phenomena (Grant & Marshak, 2011). Discursive interventions may facilitate the interplay between multiple institutional logics and simultaneous approaches to change. Cognitive fixations can be disrupted by metaphors and other texts that reveal dominant logics, power structures and ethical choices. Such interruptions deconstruct and create space for silenced voices and viewpoints. Stories can act as boundary objects (Oswick & Robertson, 2009) that bridge and combine multiple logics by pointing to shared history, identity and aspirations. The invention of new vocabularies can provide situated linguistic

framings that help develop reflexivity and the dialogic ability to understand, question and play with the rules of different institutional games.

Relevance to ODC as sponsor

The PDW's focus on facilitation of change is at the heart of the ODC divisions' domain. 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. Discursive acts such as the telling of stories or the framing of experience belong to the regular action repertoires of organizational members. Dialogic OD can utilize and stretch such spontaneous acts into deliberate interventions to impact the discursive realm that underlies institutionalized practice. The aim of these choiceful interventions is not only to disrupt and renew current practice, but also to construct language that legitimizes more layered, cross-level change and that assists change agents to engage with such change collectively. There is a clear need to develop finesse in combining micro/macro, top-down/bottom-up and outside/in realities in change processes that match issue complexity in design and implementation (Oswick, 2013). Such finesse may well include 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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