

Bridging Theory and Practice in Organizational Change: An Existential Phenomenological View

Haridimos Tsoukas
University of Cyprus, Cyprus
&
University of Warwick, UK

“...practitioners who develop planned change interventions have not been taking the recent developments in organizational and management scholarship into account”

(Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011:4)

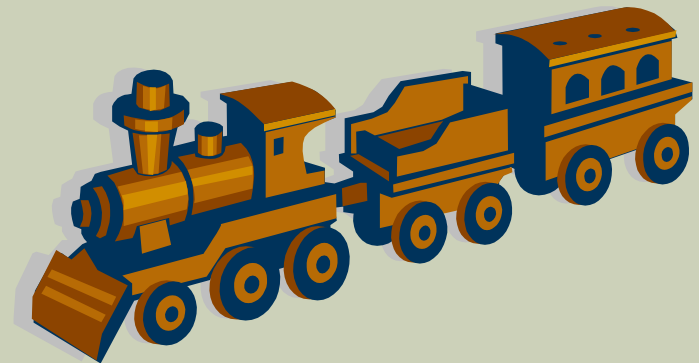
- How can we make our research findings about organizational change (OC) *relevant* to practitioners?

It is unlikely that we will ever make our findings completely relevant to practitioners since scholars and practitioners work in *different* work systems

However, there are ways of making our findings *more* relevant to practitioners. How can we build bridges between theory and practice in approaching OC?

Case study: McNulty, E. (2002), Welcome Aboard (But don't change a thing), Harvard Business Review, October, pp.32-35

Cheryl Hailstrom, six months in her job as the new CEO of Lakeland Wonders, a century-old, family-owned, very successful US maker of high-quality wooden toys, with 3 plants in Minnesota and 5000 employees, has an ambitious plan for offshore manufacturing that would take advantage of a market opportunity and deliver results to a newly constituted Board that has tasked Cheryl with growth. Although Cheryl was received with enthusiasm for her energy and freshness, her plan was met with caution, even opposition, from senior managers and even the former CEO and part owner.



Case study: McNulty, E. (2002), Welcome Aboard (But don't change a thing), Harvard Business Review, October, pp.32-35

“Why”, she wondered, “does everyone up here seem to be dragging their feet? My manufacturing head doesn't want to manufacture overseas”, she missed, “and my design director protects his little, mediocre design firm. I've been trying since my first week to get the procurement people to look at consolidating vendors for core parts, but you'd think I'd asked them to cut off their hands. Everyone here is in the slow lane. They're all wedded to the ways things have always been done”
Cheryl Hailstrom, CEO, Lakeland Wonders

Source: McNulty (2002:34)

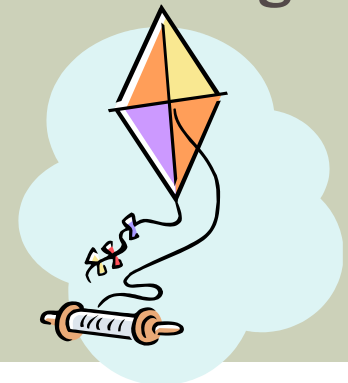


For our OC theories to resonate with practitioners, they must capture the richness of practitioners' experience on the ground - to refrain from “artificializing” (Bruner, 1990:xiii), and “stripping out most of what matters” (Weick, 2007: 18) in, the phenomena at hand.

Otherwise, we end up with:

“mainstream journal articles [that] are written as if they apply to some disembodied abstracted realm” (Zald, 1996 : 256).

Such findings are of primary relevance to the members of the scholarly knowledge production system (scholars) but much less so to members of organizations and human systems at large (practitioners).



From *representational* theorizing to *enactivist* theorizing

Representational theorizing

Focus on propositional statements

- “The chance of success improves when intervention and participation are used to install a decision and declines when edicts and persuasion are applied, no matter what decision context or situation is being confronted” (Nutt, 2001:46)
- “The level of individuals’ emotional aperture for assessing the proportion of negative emotions in an organization will be lower than that of positive emotions; consequently, leaders are likely to underestimate the prevalence of negatively valenced emotions among their followers” (Huy, 2009:29)

What can Cheryl Hailstrom find relevant in the above statements?
What can she learn from them?

Features of representational theories:

- a) the world consists of discrete entities with pre-given properties
- b) a cognitive system (be it lay or scientific) *re-presents* to key features of the world
- c) the cognitive system acts on the basis of those representations

Dualistic onto-epistemology: The *subject-object relation* is the most basis form of developing knowledge about the world.
Emphasis on outcome explanations

Lay and scholarly knowledge are isomorphic: they consist of “manipulable variables” (Hrebiniak and Joyce, 2001: 612) that are contingently linked

Example: Change as a cognitive reorientation process and an affective experience

- Change leaders vs. change recipients
- Sensemaking vs. sensegiving
- Task-oriented vs. emotion-oriented managers

“As organizational change unfolds, there is ongoing sensegiving from change leaders and sensemaking by change recipients, through which the recipients construct the meaning(s) of the change for themselves. As they construct their meanings of organizational change, change recipients experience decreased cognitive dissonance, and shape their commitment and engagement to the organization and its change”

(Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011: 16)

Problems with representational theories

- a) underestimate the meaningful totality into which practitioners are immersed
- b) ignore situational uniqueness
- c) abstract away from time as experienced

“The success of Large Group Interventions may reside in the fact that they are more consistent with a constructionist epistemology in which thinking, talking, and acting co-occur, bringing formulation and implementation simultaneously into the room”
(Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011:30)

An existential phenomenological alternative towards studying OC

Basic principles:

- What is important to study is not how something is in itself but how something appears to someone, that is, phenomena
- “Bracketing” the “natural attitude” – i.e. the assumption that there is an objective world populated with distinct objects about which we seek to know more.
- What is important is how the everyday world with which we are unavoidably entwined appears to us in our engagement with it, as opposed to what the world is like from the perspective of an overseeing spectator.
- Theoretical structures - the reflective consciousness of the world - are rooted in the *pre-reflective experience* we obtain through our involvement with the world

An existential phenomenological alternative towards studying OC

- Humans experience the world not primarily as detached intellects but as embodied, conscious beings *already* engaged in some way in the world.
- Things are what they are in so far as they show up as something in the context of certain sociomaterial practices.
- To explore how things appear to us is to explore how things appear to us in the course of our ordinary (that is, pre-reflective) coping/engagement with the world. We have no knowledge of the world outside some mode of engagement with specific practice worlds, which make up the world.

Consequences of the phenomenological view:



- The *subject-object relation* is not our most basic way of relating to the world but, rather, is derived from a more fundamental way of existence – that of *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1996/1927)
- Our most basic form of being is *entwinement* – we are always already entwined with others and objects in specific sociomaterial practices
- Being entwined with the world makes it possible for something to *be* at all, to be intelligible as something. Entwinement is the *logic of practice* (e.g. teaching)

Modes of engagement with the world



Immersion (absorbed coping)

Unreflective engagement in a relational whole; spontaneously responding to the unfolding situation at hand

Temporary breakdown (involved thematic deliberation)

Practically involved but paying deliberate attention to what we do; the relational whole is momentarily brought to view

Complete breakdown (theoretical detachment)

Disconnected from absorbed coping; the relational whole in which we are involved withdraws and becomes inaccessible

The subject-object relation is a derivative mode of being-in-the world. We are first absorbed in practice before we start reflecting on it

Onto-epistemological-methodological conditions for making our research finding about OC relevant to practitioners

Purpose: Stay close to the logic of practice – thematize practice without turning it to a set of discrete entities

“while the change processes [involved in Large Group Interventions] are very carefully designed and scripted, they also include *ongoing processes that are not explicitly acknowledged by Large Group Intervention designers*, but almost certainly have impacts on the course of the interventions. Many of these processes can be illuminated by scholarship...”

(Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011: 27; emphasis added)

How?



(1) Shift from disconnected entities to entwinement – capture the relational whole of specific sociomaterial practices

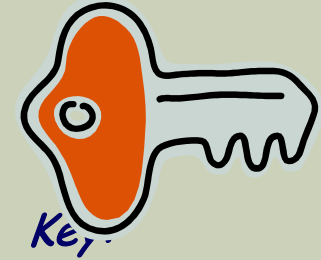
Focus on the *relational whole*: what practitioners routinely do – Self-understandings. How relational totalities are accomplished

(2) Shift from the scholastic attitude of theoretical detachment to involved thematic deliberation

Focus on temporary breakdowns for bringing out the *significance* of taken-for-granted assumptions, concerns and anxieties.

Self-understandings

Social Phenomena are Language-Dependent



A, B: individuals

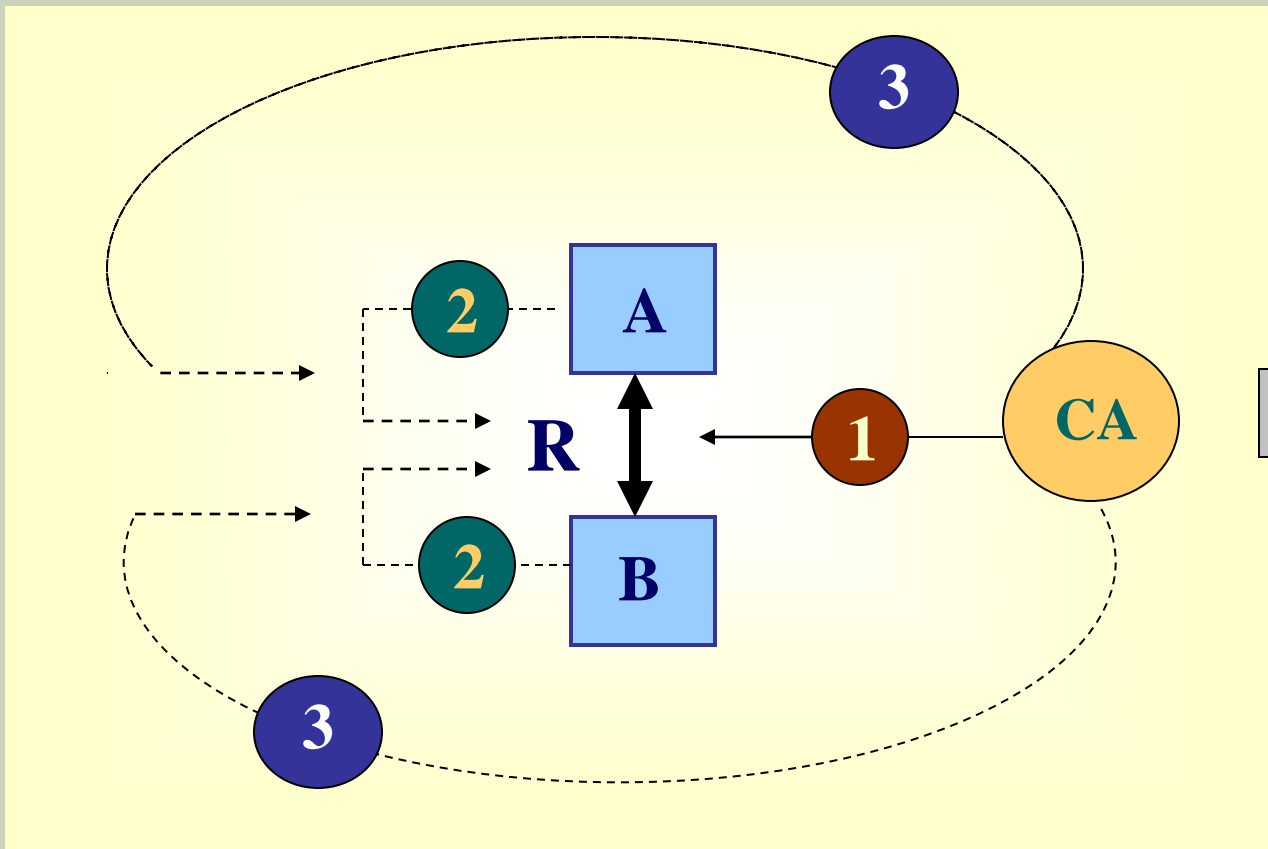
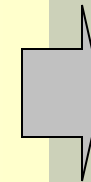
R: the relationship between A and B

CA: Policy maker/observer

(1) CA observes social relationship R

(2) A's and B's self-understandings. The nature of R is dependent on A's and B's self-understandings.

(3) CA's understanding of A's and B's self-understandings. CA has access to social reality through making sense of individuals' self-understandings.



Source: Tsoukas and Papoulias (1996)

Example

OC often involves the emergence of new understandings from old understanding developed in the context of current and past practices (Bartunek, Balogun and Do, 2011: 15). This is a *paradoxical* process (Luscher and Lewis, 2008; Watzlawick et al, 1974).

- *“I am not sure how to effectively delegate now. [...] I did appoint a project leader, but I worry that he isn't selecting the best people for his team” (Luscher and Lewis, 2008: 228)*
- *“How can I ensure that my delegate makes good decisions?” (Luscher and Lewis, 2008: 229-9)*
- *“How can I be in charge and let others make the decisions?” (Luscher and Lewis, 2008: 230)*

Exploring how practitioners respond to calls for new practices reveals what is *significant* in their own particular practice

How?

(3) Capture the “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1996) of the experience of OC

(4) Explore how power and self-interest shape the experience of OC for those involved

(5) Show the *emergent whole* (i.e. the patterned interactions) from within which (re)actions to change initiatives arise.

In their absorbed-coping mode practitioners are not focally aware of the already formed ways they have been drawing upon for doing what they specifically do – the tacitly held ways of looking, listening, speaking, deliberating, etc, of which they are subsidiarily aware while engaging in a particular project

ΓΡΗΓΟΡΟΣΗΜΟ
ΤΕΛΟΣ,
ΕΙΠΑ!
Υ



Του Κώστα Μπρόπουλου

ΜΑΛΙΣΤΑ!
ΜΙΑ ΣΤΙΓΜΗ
ΝΑ ΔΩ ΠΟΣΟ
ΓΡΗΓΟΡΟΣΗΜΟ
ΠΡΕΠΕΙ ΝΑ ΡΙΞΕΙΣ,
Γ' ΑΥΤΟ!



The (then) Greek Prime Minister (on the left) address the Greek Civil Service: *“Bribes are finished, I say”*.

To this the Civil Service (on the right) replies:

“Let me work out how much you need to bribe me for this”.

[Stop bribing] → Bribe me to [stop bribing]

Phenomenological /enactivist/performative/reflective theorizing is oriented towards:

(a) *Actors' experiences* and how they change over time,

(b) *Process*, tracing interacting nexuses of actors and objects over time, and

(c) *Action*, offering practitioners the possibility of attending to the “grammar” of their actions – i.e. to their habitual, subsidiarily aware, ways of acting - thus contributing to elucidated action

