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# Things fall apart? Discourses on agency and change in organizations

*Raymond Caldwell*

## ABSTRACT

The history of the concept of 'agency' in organizational theory over the last 50 years makes dismal reading. From a position of unbounded optimism that organizational change could be managed as a rational or planned process with a transparent agenda, we now confront restructured workplaces characterized by new forms of flexibility, hyper-complexity and chaos in which the nature, sources and consequences of change interventions have become fundamentally problematic. How did this occur and what implications does it have for our understanding of agency and change in organizations? Should we assume that rationalist concepts of centred agency are no longer viable, or should we welcome the plural and promising new forms of decentred agency emerging within organizations? This article presents a selective interdisciplinary history of competing disciplinary discourses on agency and change in organizations, classified into *rationalist*, *contextualist*, *dispersalist* and *constructionist* discourses. Although the four discourses clarify the meta-theoretical terrain of agency in relation to organizational change theories, the growing plurality of discourses challenges the social scientific ambitions of the research field to be objective, cumulative or unified. It is concluded that the future for research on agency and change in organizations is characterized by new opportunities for empirical investigation and intervention, but also by mounting threats to the epistemological rationale of objective knowledge and the efficacy of practice.

## KEYWORDS

agency versus structure ■ change agency ■ decentred agency ■ discourses ■ dispersal ■ organizational change

What should the unit of analysis of 'agency' be in organizational change theory? Is it possible to integrate competing concepts of agency into a coherent theory of organizational change? Can we have theories of organizational change without purposeful or intentional concepts of agency? Fifty years ago these perplexing questions were often answered positively. Archetypes of agency were identified with models of rational action, and organizational change was conceived of as a process that could be effectively planned and managed to achieve instrumental outcomes. A classic exemplification of this rationalist view is Lewin's concept of the 'change agent' as an expert facilitator of group processes of planned change, although his original concept has gone through many reformulations within various traditions of organization development theory and consultancy practice (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Tichy, 1974). Outside the organizational development tradition, however, over-rationalized models of agency have been challenged from their very inception, both theoretically and practically. Simon's (1947) persuasive critique of decision-making processes in complex organizations is still a classic starting point for 'contextualist' attacks on the rationalism propounded by corporate planners, functional specialists and other experts (Mintzberg, 1994; Pettigrew, 1997). His work also anticipated later ideas on 'logical incrementalism' and 'emergent' concepts of strategy and organizational change, although this has rarely been acknowledged (Quinn, 1980).

Challenges to rationalism, planned organizational change and expertise have also emerged from far-reaching transformations of the workplace over the last two decades. During the 1980s, post-Fordist models of organizational flexibility and new modes of information technology radically undermined the idea that organizational success depended on traditional bureaucratic modes of workplace authority, stability and control. Managerial agency and leadership was no longer identified primarily with the traditional roles of instructing, directing and controlling work processes. Instead, managers and leaders were now expected to encourage 'commitment' and 'empower' employees to be receptive to culture change, technological innovation and enterprise. The new vehicles for this 'dispersal' or distribution of agency were new self-managed teams, quality circles and task groups, which acted as internal agents of transformation and change, as well as sources of distributive knowledge and expertise (Nonaka, 1994).

This overall picture of a gradual shift or dispersal of agency in organizations towards decentred groups or teams, has been popularized in concepts of the 'learning organization' and, more recently, in the idea of 'communities of practice' (Senge, 1990; Wenger, 1998). These concepts broadly conceive of organizations not as top-down structures of rational control, but

as loosely coupled systems, networks or processes of 'enactment' and collective knowledge creation that devolve autonomy to agency at all levels. These ideas are, of course, partly a recognition of the fact that central hierarchical control has declined in many organizations and that large-scale organizational change is simply too complex and high-risk for any one group or individual to lead. It is in these terms, that proponents of the learning organization have rejected the bureaucratic and mechanistic idea that organizations 'need "change agents" and leaders who can "drive change"' (Senge, 1999). Instead, leadership and agency become identified with systemic forms of learning by broadening leadership theory to encompass potentially participative models of learning across the whole organization (Stacey, 2001).

Although this history of the growing diversity and plurality of forms of agency in organizations can be plotted in relation to transformations of the workplace, it can also be delineated in terms of an overall transition from rationalist epistemologies of agency to the increasing fragmented discourses of 'social constructionism' (Gergin, 2001). Rationalist epistemologies of agency have, of course, a long and complex intellectual genealogy in philosophy, but they are broadly characterized by a belief in human beings as rational subjects or autonomous actors who can act in an intentional, predictable and responsible manner towards predetermined goals or planned outcomes. These assumptions are essential in creating 'objective' ideals of rational scientific knowledge and its application to human action and practice, including universal ideals of ethical behaviour. Rationalist epistemologies are therefore scientific, prescriptive and interventionist. In contrast, the multi-various forms of social constructionism invariably undermine science and rationalism and with it ideals of agency and organizational change centred on rationality. Not only does knowledge of the natural world not have a predetermined structure or laws discoverable by rational investigation, but also ideas of 'human action', 'personality', 'intentionality' and 'agency' are equally problematic. For social constructionists, all forms of knowledge, understanding and action are culturally and historically relative and must therefore be situated within competing discourses (Foucault, 1992).

This brief historical and epistemological overview of the nature of agency and change in organizations charts a profound and increasingly disconcerting transformation. From a position of great optimism regarding the practical efficacy and potential emancipatory role of rational action, expert knowledge and 'change agency', we now confront a plurality of conflicting ideals, paradigms and disciplinary self-images that are increasingly difficult to meld in any coherent manner. We must ask how this fragmentation occurred, and what epistemological implications it has for

understanding the future prospects for new forms of agency and change in organizations. Should we give up the search for an 'integrated paradigm' or interdisciplinary ideal of change agency that goes beyond the Babel of increasingly competing discourses and the disparate contingencies of practice? Or, should we accept the plurality of discourses and the eclecticism of practice as itself a positive affirmation of new and more positive ideals of decentred agency?

This article presents a selective, synthetic and critical historical review of some of the literature and empirical research on agency and change in organizations. The review, however, is not strictly chronological and takes the form of a heuristic classification of four 'discourses' on agency and organizational change: *rationalist*, *contextualist*, *dispersalist* and *constructionist*. Rationalist discourses tend to give priority to centred agency, concepts of planned change and the possibilities of strategic action. Contextualist discourses focus on processes of 'emergent' change and the bounded nature of centred agency in organizations. Dispersalist discourses focus predominantly on systemic or self-organizing processes of learning in organizations, while giving autonomy to new forms 'conjoint agency', 'sensemaking', 'distributed leadership' and 'communities of practice' (Gronn, 2002; Weick, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Constructionist discourses decentre human agency within discursive practices over which human actors appear to have little rational or intentional control. Overall, these four discourses can be defined as forms of language, meaning and interpretation representing and shaping relatively coherent social, cultural or disciplinary fields of knowledge and practice that embody contextual rules about what can be said, by whom, where, how and why.

Although the review of the four discourses is deliberately interdisciplinary, it cannot hope to encompass all the various paradigms and traditions of research and practice within each set of discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Despite these limitations, the classification of the four discourses provides an overarching meta-theoretical framework for exploring the nature of agency that straddles different and competing *disciplinary discourses* about organizational change. The meta-theoretical task is therefore conceived of as an overall attempt to: (i) gain a better understanding of competing disciplinary discourses and the diversity of theories; (ii) develop an overall perspective on the nature of agency and change in organizations; (iii) explore the difficulties in developing multidisciplinary theories or models of organizational change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995); and (iv) indicate, where appropriate, future avenues for empirical research.

Although the four discourses provide a way to map the meta-theoretical terrain of agency and change in organizations, they do not offer

the prospect of a 'grand theory', meta-narrative or a new paradigm. A parallel search for synthesis has constantly been reinvented in sociological explorations of agency and structure, but without any success in achieving theoretical integration; and there are lessons here for other disciplines (Archer, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1984). Nor is there any remote prospect of a synthetic 'recontextualization' of an overall 'order of discourse' that would somehow link micro-discourses on agency to more grandiose macro-level structural analysis of social order or social change: a move from discourses to *Discourse*. In this respect, the oppositions and relationships between the concepts and dichotomies explored within a cultural or disciplinary field of discourse cannot be stated universally. Instead, the formulation and reformulation of concepts of agency and change depend on the specific theoretical discourses or practices within which they occur (Bourdieu, 1990; Foucault, 2000). Moreover, social 'scientific' knowledge of agency is itself a socially constructed discourse and practice that may simply reproduce old dichotomies in the conceptual language of an apparently new paradigm (Abbott, 2000; Hacking, 1999). This epistemological dilemma presents a challenge not only to rationalism, but also to many versions of social constructionism which appear to affirm the nominalism of discourse analysis while somehow claiming to 'critically' transcend the dichotomies that underpin their often debilitating theorization of agency. In this respect, discourse analysis is always in danger of sliding from nominalism to reductionism.

The article begins by selectively discussing the four discourses. This leads to a discussion of possible research agendas within each of the discourses. The theoretical implications of a temporal, fragmented and non-cumulative understanding of knowledge and action for the future analysis of agency and organizational change are then discussed. Finally, it is concluded that organizational theories of change are in danger of falling apart because they cannot reconstruct a coherent epistemological or moral idea of agency as a basis of knowledge, human action or change management practice.

### **Rationalist discourses: In search of change agency**

There is a vast range of rational concepts of agency in the social sciences, from rational choice models of economic action to cognitive theories of instrumental behaviour. In the field of organization change theory, however, the most influential models of rationalist discourses of change agency have their origins in the influential work of Kurt Lewin (1947, 1997, 1999), although his ideas have gone through many reformulations within the

various traditions of organizational development ('OD') research and practice (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). It is impossible to examine all these reformulations while doing justice to the scope of Lewin's work. Instead, the primary focus here is on the four key attributes of rationalist discourses of centred agency that are invariably synonymous with the Lewinian legacy and the OD tradition: *rationality*, *expertise*, *autonomy* and *reflexivity*.

### Rationality

Lewin's work created a framework for a profoundly rationalist approach to change agency and organizational change. All three of his core concepts of 'force field analysis', 'group dynamics', and 'action research' involved an overriding search for a rational and participative methodology of behavioural change (Lewin, 1997, 1999). Force field analysis was based on the assumption that group behaviour is held in a 'state of quasi-stationary equilibrium' by a constellation of equal and opposite forces that can be measured in terms of their strength and direction (Lewin, 1999: 34). These relatively stable structures of group behaviour form homeostatic systems that can be subject to planned change by processes of rational interventions operating through *negative* or compensating feedback mechanisms. This model both allows Lewin to conceive of 'change and constancy as relative concepts', and also to conceive of feedback as a way of indirectly pushing a fluid and changeable system towards a rational or predetermined goal. At its most schematic, negative feedback entails comparing the current state of a behavioural system to a desired functional state, and then moving the system in a direction that minimizes the differences between the two. This is the decisive idea that informs Lewin's three-stage process of 'unfreezing, moving and refreezing' behaviour into a new quasi-stationary state: 'by adding forces in the desired direction or by diminishing opposing forces' (1999: 280). It also underpins his idea of 'resistance' to change as a dynamic within a system of forces: 'Only by relating the actual degree of constancy to the strength of forces toward or away from the present state of affairs can one speak of degrees of resistance or stability of group life in a given respect' (Lewin, 1947: 13–14). Essentially, resistance is a systems concept that allows Lewin to conceive patterns of continuity and discontinuity within relatively static structures of group behaviour. In this respect, behavioural change is not conceived of as intrinsically emergent or processual, but rather as a planned process requiring the intervention of a 'change agent'. Ultimately, Lewin's rational systems model is expert-centred in that the change agent or action researcher acts as a feedback mechanism ensuring transitions between states of stability while helping to diffuse or dissipate resistance.

## Expertise

Although the concept of the change agent as expert (or action researcher) offering rational persuasion has its origins in Lewin's work, it has gradually been differentiated and broadened within the OD tradition to cover a whole array of expert interventions involving 'technical, specialist or consulting assistance in the management of a change effort' (Beckhard, 1969: 101). This assistance may take a variety of forms. Some situations call for an advisor role, whereas others may emphasize the role of the consultant as educator, analyst or councillor. The paradigmatic OD consultancy role is, however, that of the 'process consultant' as defined by Schein: 'The process consultant seeks to give the client insight into what is going on around him, within him and between him and other people' (1988: 27). In this expert-centred role the consultant seeks to act as an 'unbiased' facilitator positively involved in consultative or consensus-seeking interventions based on feedback and group ownership (Tichy, 1974). The attributes required in this role are, therefore, broadly synonymous with 'process consultation': listening, providing feedback, counselling, coaching, and intergroup dynamics (Schein, 1988). However, given that this is partly an expert-consultancy or diagnostic role, the organizational development practitioner must also be able to demonstrate general consultancy skills and an instrumental knowledge of OD tools and techniques (Worley & Feyerherm, 2003). Essentially, the process consultant offers expert knowledge both in the objective-neutral manner of the interventions and the diagnostic tools applied.

## Autonomy

Within the OD tradition, 'autonomy' or the possibility of choice appears to be invested primarily in the change agent and the practice-oriented model of action research. As a consequence, there is virtually no discussion of the ability of individuals to freely choose rational ends. This curious absence can be traced back to Lewin (1999) in which the rationality of the group takes precedence over the individual as an explanatory framework; and choice is reduced to participative methods of group learning towards a predetermined end. It is also evident in the various stands of the OD tradition, which appear to suggest that autonomous individuals and groups operating within learning organizations freely choose functional goals in relation to holistic ideals or transcendent ends (Senge, 1990). But if individuals have limited autonomy to choose ends and organizations or groups are not systems with pre-given goals (e.g. adaptiveness), then the neutral benevolence of action research as a participative methodology of behavioural change becomes fundamentally problematic.

This issue raises a central question: what, precisely, is the goal of action research as an experimental science of practice, *persuasion or empowerment*? If it is only rational persuasion, then action research is in danger of becoming purely an instrumental technique of control with agendas set by others: leaders, managers or consultants. This self-abnegation would also leave it with very little to say on the vast range of moral issues raised by its expert ideal of scientific practice. For the continuum of persuasion can lead from rationality to coercion, and all sorts of congeries in between. Alternatively, if action research is identified with empowerment then it becomes a mechanism for 'joint consultations' within an agreed ethical framework. This would appear to partly concur with Lewin's vague notion of action research as a microcosm of a free and democratic society, a sort of mini-theory of participation and consensus in operation. 'The only hope . . . for a permanent foundation of successful social management, and particularly for a permanent democratic society of the common man, is a social management based to a high degree on a scientific insight which is to be accessible to the many' (Lewin, 1999: 334). But this liberal ambition remains oblique and it appears unrealistic without a definition of autonomy and its link to rationality (Habermas, 1984). Only in the most idealized form can action research amount to a rational consensus-seeking intervention free of manipulation, power or coercion (Gergin, 2003).

Faced with this dilemma, some OD practitioners have fallen back on a conflation of instrumental expertise and power: 'The OD consultant strives to use power that is based on rationality, valid knowledge, and collaboration and to discount power based on and channelled by fear, irrationality and coercion' (Bennis, 1969: 79). Other practitioners have, however, sought to stretch the participative ethos into a new world of decentred agency defined by participative self-organization processes of communicative interaction between equal partners in an open dialogue. Neither of these approaches stands up to critical scrutiny, precisely because they do not propose a credible concept of autonomy defined by the possibility of choice.

### Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity in the OD tradition has assumed many forms, but it tends to be fundamentally Janus-faced: pointing in opposite directions towards epistemologies of knowledge and epistemologies of practice. If the link between knowledge and action, theory and practice is defined by scientific presuppositions, then the nature of reflection on change processes tends to follow the logic of 'instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique' (Schon, 1983: 22). The

change agent is essentially an expert providing reflexivity in the form of feedback (Weick, 2001). If, however, the main focus is on practice or 'reflection in action', as in models of action research, then change interventions follow an experimental methodology, iteratively moving back and forth between theory and practice. In this formulation the change agent is essentially a reflexive practical theorist committed to the service of theory to practice.

Most OD practitioners tend to vacillate between these two positions, although some have sought a fusion between science and practice in the notion of 'action science' that yields causal propositions and highly formalized techniques of reflexive practice – a hard position that harks back to Lewin (Argyris, 1982). But even the apparently weaker or softer intervention techniques of the 'reflective practitioner' (Schon, 1983) and 'process consultant' (Schein, 1987) tend to involve a strongly rationalistic bias in that the practitioner is the scientist in action involved in and yet detached from both his subject and the diagnostics of practice: 'The process of relating to others have decisive influences on outcomes and must themselves become objects of diagnosis and intervention if any organization improvement is to occur' (Schein, 1988: 17). Moreover, the central goal of reflexivity is to reveal the causal nature of action and harness the capacity of human agents to make conscious rational choices to change their behaviour. This amounts to a partial attempt to create a bridge between the epistemological asymmetry of the individual or group as an object of investigation set apart from the investigator. But again, this linkage is based on a participant–observer concept of reflexivity as feedback that is fundamentally rationalistic in its understanding of the 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu, 1990). Ultimately, the only way out of this epistemological dilemma is to contextualize the temporal and embedded meanings within practice by decentering them from a subject–object episteme of knowledge creation, thereby extending the possibilities of reflexivity beyond rationalism (Foucault, 1992). This is precisely what occurs in constructionist discourses and to a lesser extent in more moderate 'sensemaking' concepts of agency (Gergin, 2001; Weick, 2001).

Although organizational development theory and practice has provided some important insights into the nature of organization change, it faces increasing challenges to its agency-centred concepts of *rationality*, *expertise*, *autonomy* and *reflexivity*. These challenges first emerged from moderating explorations of bounded rationality and the examination of organizational contingencies, but they gradually broadened into more wide-ranging critiques coming from contextualist and constructionist discourses. Here, the persistent criticisms are that the model of change envisaged by OD

appears more suited to *planned change*, conceived as a rational and linear process within relatively stable organizational systems that have the resources and time to implement incremental change (Dumphy & Stace, 1993). Attacks on expertise have also reinforced this questioning of rationalism, and these attacks have perhaps been even more corrosive of the OD tradition (Weick, 2001). Certainly, the normative assumption that the change agent can facilitate consensus or agreement on change and that this apparently participative mode of change is 'best', tends to underplay the expert rhetoric and vested interests that underpin consultancy interventions, as well as the manipulative dynamics at work in group processes and the broader coercive and political aspect of power relations in processes of organizational change.

Organizational development practitioners have partly addressed some of these issues by broadening the scope of practice to embrace larger issues of power and culture. However, this has only highlighted the intrinsic ambiguities and oblique concept of 'autonomy' that partly sustain the apparently unbiased neutrality of the change agent role, both as an expert intervention or a mode of reflexive practice.

This is a critical issue that will not go away. As originally conceived, the change agent role mixed rhetoric and reality, power and expertise (Lewin, 1999). It was an expression of the core democratic mission of the OD movement to further equality, empowerment and consensus-building within the workplace, as well as a practical action-centred mechanism for successfully implementing change. However, the increasing shift of OD practitioners towards management-driven interventions that can deliver 'value' or 'performance' has led to a greater emphasis on more instrumental, mechanistic and product models of consultancy that place the change agent primarily in the role of expert selling change tools or solutions. Given this convergence, it is increasingly difficult to differentiate the collaborative process role of the change agent as a facilitator of autonomy from other managerialist conceptions of agency (Worley & Feyerherm, 2003). The history of organizational development theory and practice is one of repeated failures to come to terms with the ambiguities and paradoxical nature of change agency as both an expert intervention and a self-empowering or democratic form of group involvement. In these circumstances, the OD concept of reflexivity looks increasingly problematic; not only because its prescriptive claims to rationalism fail to address issues of interest or power, but also because it appears outmoded in the face of competing discourses on the temporal and embedded nature of agency as a form of enacted practice (Weick, 2001: 399).

## Contextualist discourses: Embedding agency and change

Contextualist discourses have a long and distinguished academic lineage, crossing a range of disciplinary fields and assuming many sub-varieties. Simon's (1947) critique of 'objective rationality' in complex organizations, Lindblom (1959) on 'the science of muddling through', Cyert and March (1963) on 'bonded rationality', and Quinn (1980) on the 'logical incrementalism' of the strategy process are all forerunners or proponents of contextualist ideas, as is the more recent work of Mintzberg (1994) on 'strategy as craft'. However, the most influential recent exponent of a contextualist approach within the change management field is undoubtedly Pettigrew (1987, 1997, 2003). His programmatic intent is to create 'theoretically sound and practically useful research on change', that explores the 'contexts, content, and processes of change together with their interconnectedness through time' (Pettigrew, 1987: 268). This was conceived as a direct challenge to 'ahistorical, aprocessual and acontextual' approaches to organizational change; especially planned change approaches, instrumental ideals of managerial agency, and the variable-centred paradigms of organizational contingency theories (Pettigrew, 2003). Moreover, Pettigrew appeared to create a new variant of contextual analysis: *incrementalism with transitions*; an approach that sought to pragmatically accommodate both continuity and discontinuity in the organizational change process by 'embedding' agency in context.

Although Pettigrew's position is complex and has evolved (and is still evolving) in various directions, it can be summed-up in four core propositions:

- 1 the iterative, non-linear or processual nature of change over time: 'an organization or any social system may profitably be explored as a continuing system, with a past, a present and a future' (Pettigrew, 1985: 36);
- 2 the multiplicity of internal and external 'levels of analysis', including those within organizations and their external environments;
- 3 the central influence of micro-politics and conflicts between organizational actors over the direction, rationality and outcomes of change (Pettigrew, 2003); and
- 4 the unintended consequences, unpredictability and paradoxical nature of all rational action, management planning and strategic decision making.

Although none of these ideas is new, Pettigrew's original contribution was to transform case histories into context-rich case studies of strategic change

and strategic choice that embedded agency in organizational change processes.

Although Pettigrew's contextual analysis of the embeddedness of agency and organizational change is often powerful and illuminating, it also has four main weaknesses.

### Processual change

Pettigrew claims that: 'Change and continuity, process and structure, are inextricably linked' (1985: 1). However, his historical and contextual location of organizational change within 'processual dynamics of changing' undermines the analytical clarification of *structure* as a 'continuing system' with enduring macro properties. Instead, structure or 'structuring' are diffused within the holistic and processual dynamics of 'outer and inner contexts', and this is compounded by the absence of any clear definitions or classifications of contexts. For Pettigrew, context appears to form the ontological presupposition of processes of 'becoming' that are always temporal and indeterminate: 'Human conduct is perpetually in a process of becoming. The overriding aim of processual analysis therefore is to catch this reality in flight' (1997: 338).

This implicit affirmation of temporality and choice is, however, somewhat contradictory. Organizational change as an apparent contextual counterpoint to systemic ideas of order, stability or structure is conflated with *processual change*, rather than both continuities and discontinuities that may be predetermined or open-ended. As a result, processual change becomes synonymous with incrementalism or its sub-variant, emergent transitions, rather than structural, environmental trajectories or other 'path-dependent processes'. Processual change is, therefore, by definition unintended, unplanned, unstructured and indeterminate and this allows the affirmation of agency as choice (Giddens, 1984). While these ideas erode the theoretical edifice of rationalist discourses of agency as a mode of planned intervention, they also undermine its substantive counterpoints: the possibility of continuity as order, and stability and discontinuity as radical transformational change. Ultimately, Pettigrew wants organization change defined by the perpetual transcendent temporality of processual contexts, rather than organizational change that is a temporal interplay of continuity and discontinuity, systems and processes, determinism *and* choice.

### Levels of analysis

If Pettigrew's analysis of the processual dynamics of change is truncated, so too is his multi-level analysis of internal and external environmental contexts.

He warns that it is not sufficient to treat the macro 'context' as 'either just a descriptive background, or an eclectic list of antecedents' (1985: 36–7). Yet this is precisely what occurs in his work. No systemic, functional or network concept of the interrelationships of organizational levels is offered, and the environment is contextualized as a realm of agency *with* choice rather than an arena of possible structural determinism. Pettigrew has, therefore, no adequate concepts that theorize the boundaries of organizations or the possible efficacy of organizational processes; correspondingly, in most of his work he has little or no interest in the possible causality of structure or environment. Instead, the narrative interpretation of the uniqueness of historical contexts performs an explanatory role, replacing any structural or variable-centred analysis of organizational transformation and change (Pettigrew, 1997, 2003).

### Organizational politics

The central importance Pettigrew places on organizational politics or competing interests has two key functions, it clarifies modes of 'bonded rationality' in decision making while affirming the possibility of agency and choice. In this respect, contextual analysis is anti-deterministic and anti-dualist, while retaining a strong affinity to the virtues of liberal individualism (Giddens, 1984; Pettigrew, 1987). Yet paradoxically, by emphasizing the rich narrative of context as a dynamic of partial closure and bounded choice, agency appears to lose any decisiveness in defining goals or bringing about outcomes; it is simply a micro-manifestation of competing interest group behaviours. Pettigrew has, therefore, no overarching need for a contextual theory of leadership or agency (Osborn et al., 2002). Moreover, processual analysis as a narrative of interests and power sidelines a systematic exploration of organizations as broader economic, cultural or institutional entities involved in larger patterns of resource allocation, social reproduction, normative regulation or the mediation of professional expertise (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). In this respect, clashes of interests and power and the politics of choice, replace any systematic, structural or institutional analysis of the normative, symbolic or cultural bases of power, authority or legitimacy (Castells, 2000; Habermas, 1984; Parsons, 1951).

### Theory and practice

Finally, Pettigrew has insisted that his work is designed to be practically useful. However, his focus on unintended consequences and the lack of predictability of change processes allows few possibilities to define the directionality of strategic change and therefore to prescribe any practical

advice on how change can be managed (Dawson, 1994). In particular, leadership as a mode of agency and change becomes peripheral to the holistic ambitions of contextual analysis (Osborn et al., 2002). In this respect, contextualist discourses appear to reject the apparent reductionism of 'contingency' and prescriptive perspectives on strategic change, which still retain instrumental models of expertise and archetypes of strategic agency that partly bridge the gaps between theory and practice (Ansoff, 1991). Naturally, this antipathy towards strategic action has led some contextualists to stray back towards the rationalism of practice as an escape from 'highly abstract and largely impenetrable explanations which have no practical value' (Dawson, 1994: 41). But a radically alternative approach would be, of course, to embrace a fundamental critique of the 'logic of practice' by contextualizing contextualism (Bourdieu, 1990).

Pettigrew and his colleagues have continued to develop their contextual discourse as processual analysis, while addressing many of its familiar weaknesses: the overemphasis on description and the historical particularity of each case, and the corresponding avoidance of casual propositions or generalizations. In addition, the intrinsic difficulty of Pettigrew's form of contextualism is that it places too much emphasis on choice and liberal individualism, while failing to theorize the nature of decentred agency. But perhaps the most important overall problem remains the ambivalence of contextual analysis towards theory. 'While a contextualist methodology perhaps naturally points towards the adoption of an intensive, longitudinal, case study based form of analysis, it does not by itself supply an adequate theoretical underpinning' (Pettigrew et al., 1992: 23). The reasons for this theoretical deficit are intrinsic to the particularity of case-based analysis, but they also derive from what it excludes from analysis. Contextualist discourses are constructed as a series of counterpoints against rationality, order, planned change, deliberate strategies, managerial agency and systems thinking. But as a series of competing methodological contentions, contextualist discourses have been unable to develop ideas that can really challenge or replace the theoretical edifice of rationalist discourses. Paradoxically, by emphasizing difference, contextualism is in danger of becoming simply anti-system, anti-structure, anti-planning and, therefore, the antithesis of both systematic theoretical analysis and strategic change interventions.

### **Dispersalist discourses: Decentring agency and change**

At the heart of dispersalist discourses is the idea of leadership and managerial agency as decentred or distributed team process. This is certainly not

a new idea, but its significance has grown enormously over the last decade (Gronn, 2002). There are a number of factors that partly explain this development. The reduction of central hierarchical control in organizations has resulted in a growing emphasis on project and cross-functional teams as mechanisms to achieve greater horizontal coordination across organizational divisions, units and work processes. This is also associated with a shift towards information-intensive and network organizations with 'distributed intelligence', creating new opportunities for knowledge creation and innovation at multiple levels (Castells, 2000; Nonaka, 1994). In addition, the emergence of flexible forms of manufacturing and supply chain management founded on flexible 'economies of scope', rather than Fordist economies of scale has allowed greater potential for decentralized decision making.

Dispersalist discourses on agency have grown naturally out of these changes in the workplace. Agential dispersal is the process of distributing agency throughout organizations. In principle, it is a form of empowerment and 'distributed leadership' designed to create or institutionalize a wider organizational base or network of support for change. This is reinforced by the idea that large-scale organizational changes are simply too complex and high-risk for a few individuals to lead or direct, even when there is a strong sense of vision and direction.

Although there are an enormous and growing variety of dispersalist discourses, only four are outlined here: (i) the learning organization, (ii) communities of practice, (iii) distributed leadership, and (iv) chaos or complexity theories. All of these discourses have a variety of sources, involve different assumptions and are sometimes contradictory in their implications. They do, however, share some common features in their emphasis on decentred agency and systemic self-organization.

### The learning organization

This concept is currently the most influential model of a team approach to change agency and organizational change, certainly among many practitioners. The concept of the learning organization conceives of organizations not as hierarchical structures, but as macro- and micro-processes of 'enactment' and knowledge creation that give primacy to leadership and change agency at all levels. Everyone throughout the organization is therefore expected to work collaboratively by harnessing their knowledge, skills and insights to constantly renew and improve organizational success. This amounts to an extension of leadership theory by identifying decentred agency with a distributed yet unified striving to realize collective or systemic goals (Senge, 1990). In this respect, the learning organization concept overlaps with rationalist discourses.

### Communities of practice

The concept of 'communities of practice' enriches and reformulates the idea of learning organizations by moving towards a 'social theory of learning' founded on practice. Wenger (1998, 2000) argues that organizations are both designed 'institutions' and emergent 'constellations of practice'. This is a theoretical arbitration of traditional action and structure dichotomies in that practice becomes a mediated realm of mutual engagement and shared meaning. But the *duality of meaning* is retained in that 'agency' and 'structure' are conceived as both designed and emergent: products and processes of 'participation' and 'reification' that occur within communities of practices (Wenger, 1998). Because communities of practice are relatively autonomous, this allows for the creative reshaping of organizations by participation and mutual engagement: 'The point of design is to make organizations ready for the emergent by serving the inventiveness of practice and the potential for innovation inherent in its emergent structure' (Wenger, 1998: 245). Organizational change and redesign are therefore conceptualized as an emergent and iterative process of self-organization within communities of practice, rather than the outcome of a predetermined strategy or the top-down design interventions of experts.

### Distributed leadership

The concept of 'distributed leadership' challenges many of the theoretical and prescriptive assumptions underlying conventional leadership paradigms: especially the leader-centrism implied in most leadership–followership dichotomies. Instead, the empirical focus shifts towards structural changes within the workplace that have allowed the increasing emergence of autonomous and devolved forms of 'concertive action' and 'conjoint agency' (Gronn, 2002). In this respect, the concept of distributed leadership has strong affinities with the idea of 'sensemaking' agency and the associated exploration of 'loosely coupled systems' as the structural referent of organizational change (Weick, 2001).

### Complexity theories

Complexity and chaos theories, with their origins in physics, computer science and mathematical biology, have often been transposed into discussions of organizational change as well as broader ideas of 'hyper-complexity', network organizations and societies, and the growing challenges of 'informational capitalism' (Anderson, 1999; Castells, 2000; Flake, 1998; Maguire & McKelvey, 1999). In all these discourses the central idea is that

dynamic systems are in a constant state of self-organizing dis-equilibrium, which allows them to change. This occurs through 'dissipative structures' of energy or devolved networks of information interchange that allow order and chaos, continuity and transformation to occur simultaneously, and without the hidden hand of purposiveness or teleology. Effectively, 'order is free' because it appears to emerge from simple bottom-up processes or rules that create non-linear dynamics of bounded instability (Kauffman, 1993). Applied to organizational change theory these ideas have encouraged a rejection of conventional rationalist subject-object dichotomies of knowledge creation, concepts of centred agency and a reinterpretation of organizational change as an emergent, self-organizing and temporal process of communication and learning (Stacey, 2001).

Despite the increasing significance of dispersalist discourses for understanding agency and change in organizations they have been notably weak in exploring the implications of their analysis for 'practice' in at least four overlapping areas. The systemic and 'unitarist' ideal of organizational learning as a collective process raises fundamental issues of how learning, formal and 'tacit', can be dispersed throughout an organization; who is involved in learning, where does it take place, what is being learnt, how does it accumulate, and how can it be applied (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000; Hendry, 1996)? Until these questions are answered, the learning organization remains more rhetorical prescription than realistic practice. Similarly, Wenger's (1998) idea that communities of practice are sustained through the ongoing 'negotiation of meaning' is often confusing because it operates through reciprocal processes of 'participation' and 'reification' that lack analytical clarity. Participation appears to depend on an idealized notion of mutual meaning creation in practice, whereas reification is an amorphous concept covering virtually every form of signification and objectification of human activity (Wenger, 1998). Thus, although the duality of participation-reification opens up classical organizational issues of autonomy and control, no systemic, structural or institutional categories are offered to explain how workplace control or power is produced and reproduced. Instead, Wenger claims that: 'External forces have no direct power over this production because, in the last analysis (i.e. in the doing through mutual engagement in practice), it is the community that negotiates its enterprise' (1998: 80). In this respect, Wenger is in danger of an old-style idealization of community while failing to explore the limits of communities of practice as a form of decentred agency. In a parallel manner, concepts of distributed leadership often have similar difficulties; they tend to ignore the opposite ends of their bipolar continua: 'focused' or leader-centred agency and how it fits within new modes of organizational autonomy and control within the

workplace (Gronn, 2002). Finally, complexity theories challenge the mythology of management development professionals who perpetuate the rationalist illusion of objective knowledge and change agent expertise, but their concepts of 'participative self-organizing learning' diffuse any sense of how decentred agency can be managed, controlled or developed in organizations (Stacey, 2001). All of these issues are implicit in constructionist discourses, but they take on much more radical and disconcerting implications.

### **Constructionist discourses: Change without agency?**

Constructionist discourses are enormously diverse, partly because they embrace epistemological 'perspectivism' and have multiple points of intersection with the various intellectual movements of 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism'. This makes it almost impossible to disentangle the various strands of constructionist discourses (Gergin, 2001; Parker, 1998). There are, however, at least four concerns that help define the programmatic intent of constructionism.

#### **Anti-rationalism**

Most forms of social constructionism are hostile to the claims of reason and rationalism, both as a foundation for knowledge of the world of things and as a guide to human conduct. Constructionism argues that rationalism is neither a foundation of truth nor a basis for self-knowledge, moral conduct or political emancipation; it is simply one discourse among many.

#### **Anti-scientism**

Constructionism holds that the 'laws' or 'facts' of the natural and human sciences are constructions within discourse that could be otherwise. Science is not a cumulative or progressive understanding of 'how the world is', nor does its knowledge of laws or facts predetermine how the natural or human science will evolve (Hacking, 1999).

#### **Anti-essentialism**

Constructionists hold that there are no essences or inherent structures inside objects or people. Just as nature is not immutably fixed by entities designated as 'atoms', 'cells', or 'molecules', so human subjects are not predetermined objects with discoverable properties such as 'human nature', 'intentionality',

'free will' or 'personality'. These entities do not have an existence outside socially constructed discourses.

### Anti-realism

Constructionists deny that the world has a fixed or predetermined reality discoverable by empirical observation, theoretical analysis or experimental hypothesis. There can be no truly objectivist or realist epistemologies founded on the subject–object and appearance–reality dichotomies that have characterized the history of western rationalist thought (Foucault, 2000).

These are very broad meta-theoretical statements of constructionist positions and their implications will vary enormously in relation to the disciplinary fields, research traditions or theoretical perspectives within which they are developed. Even within the apparently singular field of Foucauldian-inspired constructionist organizational theory there is enormous plurality (McKinlay & Starkey, 1998). Nevertheless, these statements broadly indicate that most constructionist discourses are compatible with the long tradition of relativism and nominalism in western philosophy (Hacking, 1999).

Until recently, there have been few serious attempts to explore the far-reaching implications of constructionist discourses for the understanding of agency and change in organizations, although this is beginning to be addressed in a more systematic and critical manner (Newton, 1998). Interestingly, some of the most challenging sociological explorations in this area have come not from within organizational theory, but from feminist theorists (McNay, 2000).

There are at least four key areas in which constructionist discourses have had an impact on the understanding agency and change in organizations.

### Dualism

Constructionist discourses offer a relentless challenge to conventional static dichotomies within theoretical systems. Binary oppositions invariably lead to polar extremes: the idea that one side of a dichotomy has greater validity or more explanatory power over the other. Constructionists, therefore, reject the either/or logic of individual–society and agency–structure dichotomies and propose a simultaneous both/and analysis that is fundamentally temporal. But it is often unclear how this unification or temporal fusion occurs. If it occurs within new nominalist discourses we are never sure of what 'agency' or 'structure' actually refers to or explains, unless of course,

discourses embrace 'realism' or some form of analysis that partly solidifies its categories (Parker, 1998). Most constructionists have, therefore, been unable to escape the epistemological problems of nominalism, although some have partly done so by replacing old dichotomies with new and apparently more integrated ones.

### Boundaries

Constructionist discourses challenge the 'reality' of organizations as entities with enduring functional, structural or systemic properties by calling into question the ontological status of the temporal boundaries that define units and levels of analysis (e.g. individual, dyad, group, organization). As boundaries are constantly defined and redefined over time within human discursive practices, so what exists within and outside organizations is always a shifting or temporal creation rather than a static given (Linstead, 2004). Some constructionists therefore reject any realist account of 'structure' or 'system' as an analytical or explanatory category and offer instead an emergent or processual view of reality which focuses on how the *differences* that define entities are produced and reproduced within discursive practices. However, to explain the endurance, stability or continuity of 'boundaries' requires systemic concepts that bridge or overcome the explanatory gaps left by the 'deconstruction' of structure (Hassard & Parker, 1993). Correspondingly, there is also a need for analytical concepts that explore the interrelationships between units and levels of analysis. Many constructionist discourses have been unable to fill these apparent gaps without importing some form of surrogate determinism to explain the routine reproduction of 'objective' or collective orders of meaning within discursive practices (Foucault, 1991).

### Power

The most influential exponent of a constructionist reading of power is undoubtedly Foucault (1991, 2000). Unlike mainstream theories of power, which focus on how power is concentrated in the hands of the few or is distributed through a plurality of institutions and collective agents, Foucault's innovation was to focus primarily on the micro-dynamics of 'disciplinary power'. The multi-various forms of disciplinary power arise within discourses of knowledge which create insidious modes of subjugation by expertise (e.g. the regulation and surveillance of behaviour) and self-subjugation through self-discipline. But, these discourses of 'power/knowledge' are intrinsically disparate and diffuse. They are not only organizationally decentralized, but also decentred from any ontological or

epistemological concept of the human subject as an autonomous or rational agent with 'causal powers'. Foucault decouples centred agency and power. The subject is, therefore, a diffused historically constituted entity, a shifting analytical fiction within discourse, always subsumed or determined by power and unable to step outside itself to unmask or deface this power (Hayward, 2000).

With no centre of ontological or epistemological gravity outside of constructed discourses, power appears everywhere and nowhere, and Foucault's (2000) use of the term is notoriously infinite and indiscriminate. Unsurprisingly, when he does address the 'infinitesimal mechanisms' of disciplinary power, they are dispersed through 'discursive formations' of expertise and 'archipelagos' of localized practices that envelop all areas of society and human behaviour. Within these disciplinary networks, human agents are the conduits through which 'embodied' interpersonal power circulates to discipline the body, regulate the mind and control the emotions (McNay, 2000). Paradoxically, disciplinary power is therefore more invisible and yet more effective than the repressive face of macro-power exercised from above because it occupies a realm of mutual culpability and constraint in which ideas of rational autonomy and freedom are problematic. Even deciding who has power over others is never clear, although Foucault (2000) argued, in a characteristically self-contradictory manner, that there was an analytical dividing line separating the powerful from the marginalized, dispossessed and powerless. Although these ideas critically 'deconstruct' notions of hierarchy and leadership, power and control in both society and organizations, they also undermine a belief in the possibility that individuals or groups can affect social or organizational change. Only in Foucault's later work (1986) is there the tentative possibility of re-engaging with the conceptual opposite of decentred agency: an active, politically engaged and potentially autonomous epistemological subject.

## Change

Most constructionist discourses reject the idea of grand meta-narratives of historical or societal change. They are also deeply hostile to all rational, teleological or directional models of organizational development and change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). The sources of this antipathy are complex. Constructionist discourses place agency and change within the processual temporality of discourses about the present. These apparently circular or self-referential discourses reject any centre of gravity in a rationalist ontology or epistemology of agency, thereby eliminating historical causality, teleology or any idea of a prescriptive endpoint or outcome. Why offer prescriptions if

all we have are ever-changing orders of discourse that enact 'games of truth and error' (Foucault, 2000)?

This apparent dissolution of narratives of the past and future has, however, some serious analytical implications. Agency and structure are dissolved or synthesized into the processual dynamics and practices of discourse about the present. This appears to neatly remove the conventional 'structuralist' and functionalist understanding of change as the opposite of stasis: external determinism or evolutionary adaptiveness. Instead, change is always emergent, always temporal – there is no structural stasis.

Is this the end of directionality? Not completely. It simply reappears in constructionist discourses in other guises, precisely because change cannot be explained or analysed in purely processual terms. For example, many Foucauldian constructionists appear to eliminate or submerge 'agency' in discursive practices, yet they hold out the self-reflexive hope of thinking new possibilities of ethical action, resistance and change that will transform the rationalist discourses of liberal individualism. By default, they create a problematic of change without agency. Similarly, even those constructionists, who openly embrace postmodernity as a world of perpetual change characterized by fragmentation and chaos, reintroduce some implicit teleology in the very dichotomy of 'modernity' versus 'postmodernity'. Despite these paradoxes, constructionist discourses often fail to seriously address issues of theorizing agency and change, beyond the standard references to the rejection of grand meta-narratives or the affirmation of ontologies of becoming.

## Discussion

### Future research

The four discourses on agency and organizational change clearly underscore the growing fragmentation and complexity of the research field. We now confront an enormous diversity of competing discourses on 'agency', both individual and team focused, autonomous and decentred, that no longer fit within the conventional rationalist ideals of organizational change theory and practice. The widespread espousal of the search for learning organizations, ideas of distributed leadership, theories of organizational complexity and constructionist discourses on decentred agency have finally crystallized this shift towards potentially more inclusive and team-based models of leadership, agency and change in organizations.

This new plurality is in some respects a positive development. All too often the variety of forms of agency in organizations have been identified with one-dimensional rationalist theories of leadership, managerial models

of control or exclusive concepts of change agent expertise (Caldwell, forthcoming). These formulations of singular ideals have both exaggerated the autonomous role of leaders and managers in organizational change and undermined the various practical roles other human actors can actually play in processes of organizational change. There are, however, new dangers lurking in the breakdown of rationalist discourses and the growing ascendancy of contextualist, dispersalist and social constructionist ideas. Some of these dangers can be briefly explored by examining both the different research agendas within each of the four discourses and the possibilities for establishing a future direction for interdisciplinary research within an intrinsically multidisciplinary field.

A central research issue for rationalist discourses is likely to be the growing challenges to expertise. As knowledge becomes more specialized, differentiated and distributed within organizational settings that are less hierarchical and more decentralized the strategic issues of how to manage, develop and exercise 'expertise' becomes increasingly central. This is an enormously difficult challenge in the face of changing forms of knowledge creation, new measures of professional 'competence', competing modes of expertise and reflexivity, and the external scrutiny of publics, 'overloaded' or disillusioned with competing expert discourses and practices (Beck, 2000; Willard, 1998). Moreover, challenges to regimes of 'disciplinary power' are likely to intensify within the workplace, especially under the assault of constructionist discourses. In this respect, the forces that lead to dependence on expertise can lead to its disintegration as it is devalued in the eyes of its users or rejected by its subalterns.

The problematic role of professions and consultants in the creation, diffusion and institutionalization of new expert discourses about knowledge, power and agency clearly present major possibilities for future research. As key carrier groups and 'knowledge entrepreneurs' they are often crucial in developing new instrumental product ideas, or the hard and soft technologies of 'managing change' or 'facilitating change' that can be engineered or programmed into organizations as quick-fix solutions. How these interventions are managed is particularly relevant to organizational development practitioners and other change management consultants, who often use a curious mix of uncodified knowledge, instrumental expertise, project management techniques, practical know-how and political skills to effect change. But the turnover of ideas and the legacy of re-engineering and change programme failures suggest a need to explore why certain ideas and process succeed or fail – and how they are rhetorically reinvented. It is also important to research the dislocation of managers as change agents by consultants. Moreover, exploration of the ethics of professional conduct and consultancy

practice are increasingly required in the face of the recurrent convergence of technocratic expertise and managerial interests and the countervailing need to include broader constituencies of employees and other stakeholders in achieving successful organizational change.

If rationalist discourses suggest generalizing research agendas around issues of intervention, consultancy practice and professional expertise, then contextualism appears to point in the opposite direction: towards an awareness of the empirical embeddedness and historical particularity of change processes as revealed through the contextual exploration of small numbers of discrete and highly intensive case studies (Pettigrew, 1997). This focus presents enormous scope for a wide-ranging case research on the context, content and processes of change, although there have been few case studies that have emulated the richness of Pettigrew's early work. More research on linking processes to a comparative analysis of organizational outcomes is also likely, and this holds out greater possibilities for combining processual analysis with larger scale statistical mapping techniques and an exploration of macro-micro issues (Pettigrew, 2003). But the overriding 'contextual realism' of processual analysis, its emphasis on the temporal interconnect-edness of past, present and future, will mean that it is unlikely to overcome its deep ambivalence towards rationality, systematic theory, causality and the directionality of change. Moreover, the continued focus on the all-enveloping complexity of context poses a research challenge in developing a theory of practice. So far, contextualist discourses simply repeat their opposition to instrumental tools, prescriptive recipes of practice or programmatic action, without providing alternative conceptions of practice. Finally, although a concept of embedded agency as socially bounded action in dynamically complex and shifting contexts is likely to remain a vital research topic, the full implications of 'leading change' as a distributed or dispersed process have yet to be fully explored within contextual research. In this sense, perhaps the greatest weakness of contextualism is that it never developed a theory of agency to complement its processual explorations of the nature of strategic choice and organizational change.

It is within dispersalist discourses that issues of change leadership and decentred agency have been theorized, although it is difficult to speculate on where research in this area will lead given its growing plurality. Concepts of self-organizing complexity and the learning organization open up myriad research possibilities for exploring the micro-dynamics of decentralized order and control. However, it is likely that the concepts of distributed leadership and 'conjoint agency' provide probably the most immediately fruitful avenues for future research on team-based forms of leadership and agency. As the tensions between differentiation and integration in organizations intensify,

concertive actions by groups provide new ways of accommodating new forms of role interdependence and work coordination (Gronn, 2002). This insight applies equally to organizational change interventions, which involve both a need for synergy between goals and a reciprocal sharing of influence among change agents. But this will require much more research work on multiple levels and micro-units of analysis of conjoint change agency, while not losing sight of the macro or structural dimensions of organizations, including the ubiquitous counterforces of control. It is often forgotten that moves towards increased autonomy, decentred agency and 'concertive action' are partly sustained by the creation of new systemic logics of electronic surveillance and 'concertive control' within the workplace (Baker, 1999). Complexity theories have also been slow to address these issues, focusing instead on the possibilities that *order without control* will emerge from simple rules of behaviour or interaction – a highly problematic idea. Nor can future research rule out the ever present danger that conjoint agency may not be able to cope with the imperatives of organizational integration or act as an effective substitute for leadership and transformation from above.

Fundamentally different research agendas of power and control are central to the *change-without-agency problematic* that threatens to envelop discussions of organizational change within constructionist discourses. Constructionist discourses are, by definition, diffuse because they argue for a perspectival image of knowledge, a decentring of the epistemological and moral subject of science, rationalism and humanism, and an accompanying fragmentation of social and organizational life. Constructionism, therefore, appears to remove human agents from centre stage by placing them within a multiplicity of discourses and practices they do not control, they are simply the conduits and bearers of discourses of knowledge and power. Yet this decentring of agency allows an illumination of the nature of power as discourse, especially the multiple forms and shifting boundaries of micro-power. This power forms an insidious basis of social control that 'produces the agent', effectively robbing human actors of their ability to choose their ends. But this 'defacing of power' or its decoupling from autonomous rational agents with free will or unconstrained choices can be viewed as a means of creating an opening for resistance and marginalized discourses that give voice to the disempowered (Hayward, 2000; Parker, 1998). This suggests potentially wide-ranging, but intrinsically fractured research agendas. For, paradoxically, the constructionist defacing of power may be unsustainable without an escape from the debilitating nominalism of discourse analysis. In this respect, constructionist research may have to rebuild an epistemological island of knowledge with a concept of critical realism, or at least a viable methodological distinction between 'knowledge'

and 'power'. Only in this way can the decoupling of autonomous agency from power be reconstituted as a connection between decentred agency and change.

Finally, the challenges of creating any coherent research pathways that link or intersect the four discourses should not be underestimated. The idea that change can be managed as a planned or linear process is central to the action-research concept of the individual change agent as both a rational and 'objective' actor who can create change (Lewin, 1947). This is central to the OD tradition and many models of leadership, managerial control and strategic planning which assume the neutral interventions of rationality or expertise in the face of competing interests (Ansoff, 1991). Contextualists also hold on to an ideal of intentionality, despite their emergent and processual perspectives: they attack rationalism as a foundation of action, but not the self-assertion of agency in the face of uncertainty (Pettigrew, 1997). Even some constructionists have embraced a linkage between rationalism and realism as a form of change intervention: 'We can intervene directly in clarifying consequences of discursive frameworks with speakers (as in training or action research, for example), as well as commenting on the discursive-political consequences of discursive clashes and frameworks' (Parker & Burman, 1993: 170). However, in transformed organizational contexts where changes are emergent, processual, political or the outcome of competing rhetorical discourses, neutral or expert-centred ideals of rationality and agency are deeply problematic (Finstad, 1998). Such ideals invariably depend on a corresponding concept of agency as intentional action by individuals or groups towards a pre-determined ends or rational outcomes. Without this concept, human actors, both individually and collectively, may be perceived as the bearers, filters or puppets of change processes over which they have little or no control. Worse still, change interventions may be conceived as a political mechanism of macro-power and disciplinary power, rather than a means of realizing the broader possibilities of shared knowledge or insight.

### Things fall apart?

Is there really any prospect of finding a way out of the Babel of competing discourses? Or should we even look for one? While the four sets of discourses offer possibilities for clarifying the future theoretical and empirical research agendas essential for the exploration of agency and change in organizations they do not hold out the possibility of a convergence of research pathways and certainly no synthetic 'theory' or unified model. There are at least four major reasons for this.

### *The limits of knowledge*

Most of the knowledge articulated within the competing and diffuse disciplinary paradigms and discourses relevant to agency and change in organizations lack a *cumulative* logic. After decades of empirical research and theoretical discussion on organizational change, innovation and leadership, we are no nearer to a widely agreed body of knowledge in any of these specialist areas. Nor is there currently any prospect of ‘universal’ or more modest interdisciplinary paradigms emerging. If anything, the opposite may be occurring, as social constructionist, postmodernist or cultural and historically relativist approaches to epistemology and knowledge creation intensify disciplinary insecurity and the territorial warfare between opposing paradigms (Abbott, 2000; Hacking, 1999). This does not, of course, rule out the legitimate middle range theoretical task of classifying the plurality of newly emerging forms of agency within organizations. One could argue that this is, in fact, the most important future empirical research goal, given the retrospective insight into the fragmented nature of specialist research and the equally diverse nature of centred–decentred agency as modes of practice. Certainly, middle range theory has always been a way of avoiding the vortex of ‘bottomless empiricism’, although it is a poor defence against both paradigm incommensurability and the corrosive logic of nominalism within constructionist discourses.

### *The failure of synthesis*

There has always been only one practical guiding principle for the exploration of agency and structure: *agency without structure is blind, structure without agency is empty*. Yet, there have been no successful attempts to link the micro-level understanding of agency to macro-level structural, institutional or ‘causal’ models of organizational change. Instead, there has been a persistent tendency to over-emphasize or privilege one side of the dichotomy. For example, Van de Ven and Poole’s (1995) fourfold typology of organizational change (life cycle, teleology, dialectics, and evolution) gives ontological priority to causal and structural models of change as ‘process’, while offering no serious exploration of agency; it therefore drifts inexorably towards mechanistic formulations and determinism. One way out of this dilemma would be to argue that the micro versus macro problem is a delusion or dualisms to be overcome. This makes ontological sense, but epistemologically it comes at the price of analytical clarity, in that most forms of constructionism dissolve agency into discourses of power and knowledge and are unable to connect agency with change. This analytical cul-de-sac highlights an equally intractable problem. Without some kind of

systemic, institutional or even larger scale 'structural' concept of organizational change and development, teleological, causal or otherwise, it is very difficult to have any really coherent models of agency that escape the unresolved problematics of the micro–macro dichotomy. Parsons' (1951) classic structural–functional theorizing could not find a way out of these problematics half a century ago and Giddens's (1984) alternative 'structuration' theory has ended in an equally dismal theory of 'agency' that moderates rationalism while lacking analytical specificity or practical efficacy. Perhaps we still need both the classic delusions of synthesis *and* dualism, for without the striving for unity or identity we cannot appreciate diversity and difference?

### *The eclipse of the subject*

Concepts of agency cannot be formally grounded in a purely 'rational' or intentional ideal of human action, knowledge or communication, despite the heroic efforts of rationalists to achieve such an ideal (Habermas, 1971, 1984). Because the nature and options for action are always externally constrained and internally context dependent, human actors are, by definition, multi-various creators of discourses and rhetorics of knowledge and expertise that both legitimize and symbolize a belief that change can be achieved, even if the goals, rationalities and outcomes of the process are often unpredictable. This predicament can engender a debilitating embrace of nominalism and a corresponding rejection of rationalism. This is the uncompromising message of radical constructionist discourses in which the subject is potentially subsumed in the contingencies of self-referential discourses of power/knowledge (Foucault, 2000). If these arguments are taken to their logical conclusion there is really no need for teleological explanations of actions and moral conduct: all action is not chosen, there is no need for a subject at all. But is this destruction of choice the end of agency directed towards rational goals or 'discursive ethics'? Certainly, agency and organizational change become precarious without a self-fulfilling belief that intention, knowledge and rational action have efficacy in a world enveloped by complexity, uncertainty and risk, even if the goals and outcomes of our actions are unpredictable. Paradoxically, theories of change agency may be able to live with the challenges of decentred agency, but they cannot live without a belief in choice. Even Foucault (1986) never really gave up on the possibility of an ideal of autonomy founded on choice.

### *The paradoxes of practice*

Almost all forms of agency, whether centred or decentred, are modes of enactment in practice that mix intentionality and moral action, power and knowledge. This is why all apparently expert or rational interventions in human affairs are subject to ethical scrutiny and self-questioning, in their formulation, planned outcomes and unintended consequences. This also explains why the ideal of the 'change agent' as an 'unbiased' facilitator of planned change has always been an intellectual and moral illusion, an illusion that has rarely been confronted within the soft scientism of action research or the instrumentalism of managerial agency and consultancy practice (Schein, 1990; Schon, 1983). It is not simply claims to expertise that have given the change agent concept a degree of theoretical coherence, but also the evaluative positions it denotes. Implicitly, change management interventions are invariably linked to some assumptions or evaluations about the direction of change in organizations and society. These reflexive evaluations may be supported by the search for 'value-relevant' objective knowledge, but they are rarely inseparable from 'value judgements' in the everyday world of action and involvement (Weber, 1949). Without such judgements, the rational intent or moral purpose of knowledge and the role of agency in organizations is deeply problematic. Yet we can rarely have the complacent assurance that our actions are ethical rather than another face of power. Ultimately, it is only through practice that these ethical paradoxes are both partly resolved and recreated in new forms.

These four issues clearly create profound difficulties in defining the scope and role of agency in organizational change, both as a form of practical involvement and as an empirical research subject. Taken together, they threaten to achieve the empirical and theoretical equivalent of the constructionist loss of the 'subject', the prospect that both the disciplinary object and subject of organizational change theory and practice may fall apart. Confronted with these dilemmas and their implications, the hybrid and eclectic interdisciplinary legacy of organizational change theories and change agency practices must affirm the possibility of a positive middle way between competing and increasingly fragmented discourses and paradigms for managing change. For without this belief in the mediation of knowledge to inform fragile ideals of 'rational' dialogue, practice and moral action in the face of organizational complexity, risk and uncertainty, all our human aspirations for change may lose their vital centre of gravity: *the hope that we can make a difference.*

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