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FUNNEL OF INTERESTS: THE DISCURSIVE TRANSLATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the role of discourse in the implementation of organizational change. We develop the concept of the “funnel of interests” to describe the process through which the perceived goals, concerns and interests of different actors are aligned with change. To illustrate our argument, we analyze organizational change in a UK public-private partnership and show how the creative use of discourse helps to “funnel” the perceived interests of different groups and thereby facilitate the implementation of change. In particular, we examine the role of change agents as “translators”, who use discourse to actively re-construct and re-align change as congruent with the recipient’s interests. Our findings suggest that change agents need to act as a *mediator*, interpreting and reinterpreting the change, rather than as a passive *intermediary* that simply diffuses a fixed set of ideas and practices, letting them pass without modification. It was through translation, we suggest, that the change agents in our study helped to “funnel” the broad range of concerns expressed by the recipients in the required direction. Our study thereby opens up a new research agenda that seeks to examine how interests and interest-groups are *constructed*

through discourse, rather than viewing interests as pre-existing entities that are simply *expressed* *in* discourse.

KEYWORDS Discourse, Interests, Organizational Change, Translation.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the discursive construction of interests in the implementation of organizational change. We draw on the concept of the “funnel of interests” developed by Callon and Law (1982, p.619) to analyze the process through which the perceived interests of various actors are aligned with change. Change agents, we suggest, need to act as change “translators” by using discourse (among other things) to convince recipients that change is “in their best interests”. We illustrate our argument with reference to qualitative data from a study of organizational change in a public-private partnership located in the United Kingdom that delivers employment services to job seekers in areas of high unemployment. Our analysis focuses on one crucial event – a training session intended to familiarize the employees with the new information system, designed to support the imposed data quality requirements. We examine the discursive interactions between the trainers responsible for implementing the new information system and the recipients of the change. Our analysis shows that, even though the change had already been sanctioned by a powerful institutional actor, its implementation was by no means a *fait accompli*. The change required the concerted discursive efforts of the trainers to make the innovation “palatable” and acceptable in the face of resistance and skepticism from the intended recipients. Appealing to, but also transforming the interests of recipients, we suggest, comprises a key component of the practice of organizational change. We argue that organizational change does not involve the diffusion of a fixed set of ideas or practices. Rather, what the change “is” and “means” is transformed during this process of “interest funneling”.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section we elaborate our theoretical points of departure by examining the literature on organizational change and discourse. In the third section we construct our argument about the translation of interests. The fourth section outlines

the methodology employed in the study and gives some context to the empirical setting we studied. In the fifth section we present the analysis of the empirical material. Finally, we discuss our findings and consider the implications of our work for theory development.

DISCOURSE AND CHANGE

The functionalist view of change presents it as a rational and linear process of ‘unfreezing’ old patterns of action and ‘re-freezing’ new patterns of action (Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1985). The premise of this functionalist approach is that organizational change is (and should be) based on the rational implementation of new practices that lead to superior organizational performance, such as culture change, empowerment or Management-By-Walking-Around (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982). More recent work in the field of organizational discourse, however, has shown that “discourse plays a central role in the social construction of organizational change” (Barrett, Grant & Wailes, 2006, p.11). This work has challenged the view that “talk” is secondary to the “action” involved in change (Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2000).

Discourse is critical for understanding organizational change at two distinct (but related) levels. First, discourse is important for how recipients make sense of, and therefore react to, organizational change. It is through language, in the form of stories, narratives, metaphors, that people make sense of organizational change (e.g. “What is it?”, “What does it mean for me?”) (Oswick, Keenoy & Grant, 2002). Telling stories, for example, comprises a significant part of what managers do, as they try to construct convincing accounts for their superiors, their subordinates and even themselves (Sims, 2003). Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004) argue that ‘conversion’ stories enable employees to make sense of losing an old ‘way of life’ and embrace the new elements of the post-change experience. Stories, however, can also act to hinder the

building of consensus around the change process when divergent interpretations form amongst different groups. Marshak et al. (2000) argue that there is unlikely to be a “single, monolithic organizational narrative held by all organizational members” (p. 247). For example, Beech (2000) found that managers and workers used different narrative styles to make sense of culture change in three organizations, leading to different ways of making sense of the actions of themselves and others during the change process. The findings of Beech (2000) are also supported by Brown and Humphrey’s (2003) study of a post-merger organization, where the “tragic” tales of the workforce stood in contrast to the “epic” stories told by management.

Second, discourse is important as a key resource for change agents in implementing change. The view of discourse as a “strategic resource” (Hardy, Palmer & Phillips, 2000) understands discourse as a tool used by agents to shape the meaning of change for its intended targets. Shaping the meaning of change can lead to a number of material consequences for those involved. The work of Leitch and Davenport (2005, 2007) has demonstrated how a shift in the discourse around science and innovation in New Zealand enabled a transformative change in the way in which science was funded. For example, the term “sustainability” acted to change the way that different actors perceived the emerging biotechnology and genetic modification industries (Leitch & Davenport, 2007). This work resonates with the findings of Vaara and Monin (2009), who examine how discourse acts to legitimize (and de-legitimize) certain courses of action during the merger of two French pharmaceutical companies.

Recent work in the field of institutional theory has shown how discourse comprises a key component in the process of “institutional entrepreneurship” where institutions are changed (see e.g. Creed, Sully & Austin, 2002, Zilber, 2007). Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) show how competing discourses were used by those who opposed and supported multi-disciplinary

partnerships between law firms and accounting firms. Both ‘sides’ used discourse to try to influence the process of change: opponents described the idea as ethically questionable, whereas those in favor described the idea as in the interests of customers. Munir and Phillips (2005) examine the role of texts in the practices through which institutional entrepreneurs use “discourses that suit their particular interests and advance their preferred technologies” (p.1667). Similarly, Maguire and Hardy (2006, p.10) focus on how actors use discourses “to fix understandings, shape interpretations, and justify practices” in the process of shaping new institutions. Phillips, Lawrence and Hardy (2004, p.648) link discourse theory to the concept of the institutional entrepreneur by suggesting that actors “work to affect the discourses that constitute the institutions or mechanisms of compliance in a particular field”. Furthermore, discourse is not only important in the building of new institutions, but also in the process of disrupting, disputing and dismantling existing institutions, as demonstrated in Maguire and Hardy’s (2009) study of the abandonment of DDT in the United States.

According to Vaara, Tienari and Laurila (2006, p.791), existing approaches “have not, however, gone very far in exploring various kinds of micro-level processes”. Some work has now begun to explore the micro-dynamics of discourse and change. For example, Hardy, Palmer and Phillips (2000) show how the discursive activity of one change agent in an NGO organization attempting to help children in Palestine helped to implement a “localization” strategy. Vaara and Tienari (2008) also use a micro-discursive perspective to examine how Finnish newspaper articles shaped the perceived legitimacy of decisions made by a multinational corporation. The earlier work of Boje (1991) also adopts a micro-interaction perspective by using observation data from a study of change in a US office supply firm to examine how individuals use stories to gain political advantage during conversations, in order to push forward

their change agenda. Our aim is therefore to contribute to developing greater insight into the micro-discursive work that underlies organizational change.

To sum up, what the literature on discourse and organizational change shows us is that discourse is not divorced from “reality”, as the often-drawn distinction between “rhetoric” and “reality” implies. Rather, discourse actually *makes things happen* and shapes the social and organizational reality (Marshak et al., 2000; Grant & Hardy, 2003; Boje, Oswick & Ford, 2004). This is why discourse is so important for the study of organizational change – it enables the construction of new organizational realities. Following Potter, Edwards and Wetherell (1993), we examine the “action done through discourse” (p. 389). Our paper aims to contribute to this existing body of work by exploring how the discourse of “interests” plays a role in the implementation of change. We ask: How are interests invoked, translated and re-cast during the implementation of change? To answer this question, we will now look at the literature on interests and translation.

THE TRANSLATION OF INTERESTS

The field of organization theory has recently been inspired by a body of work known as the “sociology of translation” or Actor Network Theory (ANT thereafter) particularly in the research of Czarniawska and colleagues (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). This approach moves beyond a rather “mechanistic” portrayal of how organizational change occurs by offering the concept of “translation”, referring to the movement and transformation of linguistic and material objects across time and space (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, p.6-7). Whereas diffusion rests on the assumption that all

adopters adopt “the same thing for the same reason” and that innovations remain “relatively invariant”, translation implies that actors modify innovations to “fit their unique needs in time and space” and are themselves transformed in the process (Abrahamson 2006, p.512-513). Hence we are interested in how people “energize an idea any time they translate it for their own or somebody else’s use” (Czarniawska & Jeorges, 1996, p.23). People do not simply accept and enact ideas and objects, they can act by “modifying it, or deflecting it, or betraying it, or adding to it, or appropriating it” (Latour, 1986, p.267). For example, concepts like “cluster” or “valleyfication” borrowed from the U.S. have been found to be ridiculed within a Scandinavian context (Lofgren 2005, p.25). In this paper we draw on the concept of “translation” and focus specifically on how the concept of “interests” is translated during periods of organizational change. Like Czarniawska, we are inspired by work in the sociology of translation field but do not subscribe wholesale to the methods and principles laid out in the work of early founders (e.g. Callon, 1986), for two main reasons. First, the epistemological, ontological and political commitments of ANT have been subject to many criticisms regarding their contribution to organization theory (Whittle & Spicer, 2008). Second, ANT tends to focus on the role of non-human and material actors involved in the translation process, such as hotel keys (Latour, 1981), scallops (Callon, 1986), electric vehicles (Callon, 1986a), microbes (Latour, 1987), speed bumps (Latour, 2005, p.71), whereas our interest in this paper lies in the role of the discursive actions of human actors. We therefore focus solely on the role of *discourse* in the translation process.

According to Latour (1987), the translation of interests is essential for enrolling other actors into a network. “Translating interests means at once offering new interpretations of interests and channeling people in different directions” (Latour 1987, p.117). For example, Callon (1986) analyzes how a group of scientists try to make themselves the ‘obligatory point of

passage' by convincing scallops, scientific colleagues and fishermen that their proposed research program is the only way to pursue their interests in the preservation of scallop stocks in St. Brieuc Bay, France. Latour outlines two key strategies through which actors attempt to enroll others into their network by appealing to their interests. The first is where the 'translating' actor claims "I want what you want" (Latour, 1987, p.108). This involves representing an idea in ways that makes others recognize it as congruent with their desires, concerns or interests. The translator is basically claiming "our interests are the same" (Callon & Latour, 1981, p.279) , "we both want the same thing". The second strategy is where the translating actor claims "I want it, why don't you?". Membership of the network is presented as the only path through which they can further their interests: the 'obligatory point of passage'. The translator is basically claiming that "you cannot succeed without going through me" (Callon & Latour, 1981, p.279). For example, Fujimura's (1996) study of proto-oncogene scientists shows how the scientists had to convince many different groups, including research funding councils, journal editors and reviewers, clinicians and treatment specialists, cell biologists, molecular biologists, immunologists, epidemiologists and surgeons, that *their* representation of cancer cells was the correct one and, therefore, in the interests of all these parties.

According to Callon and Law (1982), these strategies of enrolment enable a kind of "funnel" through which the interests of many different actors are "identified, attracted and transformed" (p.619). Callon and Law analyze how scientists working on a polymer called DIMEVA attempted to publish their findings in the journal *Cancer Quarterly* by trying (albeit unsuccessfully) to persuade the editors that their research is of interest to the readership. For instance, the abstract of the paper suggests that those interested in chemotherapy would be interested in DIMEVA because it is thought to have chemotherapeutic qualities, and therefore

also be interested in this research into how DIMEVA enters cells. Following a rejection letter by the journal editors, however, the scientists reformulated both their conception of their interests and the interests of their potential audiences. Callon and Law (1982, p.619) use the metaphor of a “funnel” to describe how these translations ‘catch’ and ‘redirect’ a broad range of concerns like a funnel catches water and streams it towards a single exit point. Our aim is to apply this concept of “funnel of interests” to the study of organizational change. We argue that for organizational change to be successful, it must try to ensure that the interests of a diverse set of actors are aligned with - or at least not obstructing - the required change. We now turn to the methodology of our study.

METHODOLOGY

Case Study Site. This paper draws on the empirical data from a qualitative study conducted between October 2005 and February 2006 in a UK public-private partnership organization called Back2Work (all names are pseudonyms). Back2Work delivers employment services in areas of high unemployment (known as “Employment Zones”) across the United Kingdom contracted from the UK government Department for Work and Pensions (hereafter DWP). In the first six years since the company was founded in 2000, it helped more than 70,000 people gain and maintain paid employment.

Focus of Study. The study focused on the implementation of a new information system called “Quality Framework” (hereafter QF) that was designed by Back2Work to improve the quality of the data about jobseekers supplied to the DWP (including information such as the number who

have secured work and how long they maintain employment), in response to new contractual requirements established by the DWP in 2005. Failure to meet the data quality targets would have incurred significant financial penalties and could ultimately have resulted in losing the contract. As noted by the senior business sponsor of the Quality Framework project at Back2Work:

“... there was a wake-up call to us to take a look at quality from a contract-compliant perspective... against the backcloth of increasing contractor requirements, very much around the detail of the delivery. It meant that we run the risk of losing contracts if we didn’t act and didn’t act fast.”

(Interview with Bob, Quality Framework Project Sponsor)

Given the strong forces of coercive isomorphism in our case, we expected to find evidence of top-down imposition of the quality template, given the rigid constraints on actors and action on the receiving end. Yet, as our analysis below shows, our study found that the quality template was re-interpreted and re-constructed as a result of the translation mechanisms used by the change agents.

Data Collection. The study included thirty semi-structured interviews, eighteen non-participant observation of day-to-day work activities, such as meetings, training sessions, client consultations and general ‘shadowing’ of work activities, in addition to the collection of documents and emails relating to the roll-out phase of the new Quality Framework information system. In this paper, we deliberately chose to analyze observational data from a naturally-occurring event as opposed to relying on “texts” or interviews. While interviews are valuable sources of insight, they tend to elicit the reproduction of taken-for-granted ‘scripts’ without investigating how they affect practice (Mueller and Carter 2005, p.241; Bergström and Knights

2006, p.355). In fact, interviews often say more about the participants' methods for 'doing' interviews – such as how the interviewer and interviewee handle issues of footing and stake in their interaction – than anything 'outside' the interview context (Potter and Hepburn, 2005), such as attitudes, emotions or behaviour relating to the experience of organizational change. Similarly, texts such as company documents, memos, manuals may be quite distanced from what “actually happens” in the field. Our aim was to try to “understand the actual production of meanings and concepts used by social actors in real settings” (Gephart, 2004, p.457). Fieldwork observation was therefore central to our methodology because it enabled us to investigate what happens “on the ground” when organizational changes, such as the new quality system in our case, travel over time and across different locales.

Research Focus

This paper focuses on a single observation of a training session for the staff at one Back2Work office based in Birmingham, UK. The training event provides an ideal site for exploring the change process because it represents a *critical moment* in which the change is first introduced and where its acceptability is established and its meaning is negotiated (e.g., “What is Quality Framework about?”, “What will it mean for me?”). Whilst other observations from the study revealed similar processes, the event chosen *exemplifies* the sort of translation that, we suggest, might accompany change in other cases. The event was also chosen because training sessions are likely to *amplify* these processes of translation, insofar as training sessions are often where organizational members first meet changes, before their meaning becomes established and taken-for-granted (i.e. institutionalised).

While our analysis focuses on the micro-processes of discourse and translation, this focus does not preclude an awareness of the broader power relations in which events such as training sessions are embedded. For example, the ‘change agents’ who run training sessions – or indeed any other event in the implementation process - are caught up in an ambivalent power relationship whereby they are expected to appear as ‘champions’ and ‘experts’ of the change even though they may not be ‘converted’ themselves, while being held to account by their superiors for any ‘failure’ to implement the change effectively. For example, the two trainers Shirley and Catherine in our case knew they had to “get their job done” regardless of what they (or their audience) thought about the change.

This complex power relationship applies not only to trainers but anyone involved in the ‘change business’, such as academics, managers, management consultants and management gurus (Sturdy & Gabriel, 2000; McCabe, 2002; Whittle, 2005). Similarly, the recipients of change are embedded in organizational power relationships that limit their ability to resist certain translations, given the coercive powers available to those higher in the organizational hierarchy. Both change agents and change recipients are expected to say and do certain things in certain ways in training sessions, or any other ‘change’ setting for that matter. Senior management are also subject to particular power relationships arising from the broader organizational and institutional context. For example, in our case the contractor (the DWP) held the power to withdraw the contract or impose financial penalties in our case, with negative consequences for the careers and reputation of senior management. The reader is asked to keep in mind these broader power structures when reading our micro-analysis of translation mechanisms.

Data Analysis

The first stage of data analysis involved transcribing the digital recording of the training session and typing up the accompanying hand-written field notes. Where notes had been written by more than one researcher (two researchers were present), the accounts were cross-checked to produce a single record. The second stage of data analysis involved reading and re-reading the transcript to try to understand how the participants made sense of the change through their “meaning-making in vivo and in situ” (Zilber 2007, p.1051). We coded the transcript using the ‘comment’ function available in MS Word at a broad, general level where we noticed distinct passages of text that framed the change in particular ways, for example: “institutionally-enforced”, “invoking recipients interests” and so on. The third stage involved selecting certain extracts of the interaction for deeper analysis in this paper.

We are of course necessarily selective in the extracts we have chosen to present in the paper, for three main reasons. First, we could not present the entire transcript in this paper because it was too long. Second, we chose to focus on the distinct moments when the meaning of the change and the interests of the recipients was translated. Third, related to this, our choice of what were ‘relevant’ and ‘important’ extracts was influenced by our theoretical interest in the literature on translation, in particular the *translation of interests* (Callon & Law, 1982). Our analysis is therefore not ‘theory free’ (Bryman 1988, Bryman and Burgess 1994, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Latour and Woolgar 1986). We therefore disagree with Latour’s (2005, p.149) summary of the ANT mantra as “describe, write, describe, write.” In our view, pre-theoretical description is an unreachable state. For example, a different theoretical lens would undoubtedly have produced a different analysis, and perhaps also a different data-set, in this study. We therefore offer a necessarily partial analysis rather than a set of “findings” that are amenable to replication. Our aim was to *exploit*, rather than eliminate, the tendency for research

to be conducted through a particular “lens”, which involves “[adopting], either tacitly or explicitly, certain ways of seeing” (Silverman 1993, p.46).

By adopting an exploratory approach to data analysis (Bryman 1988, Silverman 1993), our aim was not to verify the validity, reliability or generality of particular accounts or interpretations. For example, we do not argue that the trainers in our analysis were “correct” and the audience were “wrong” in how they made sense of the change. Rather, we examine how these various accounts played a role in negotiating, establishing and/or challenging the meaning of the change. Thus, our aim was to generate theoretical insight as opposed to establishing empirical generalizability from the data (Bryman 1988). We argue that other cases of organizational change are likely to involve similar processes of translation of interests, albeit in subtly different ways according to their context.

ANALYSIS

Our analysis focuses on a training session we observed at one of the of Back2Work offices in Birmingham, UK. The purpose of the session was to introduce a new information system designed to improve the quality of the data about jobseekers supplied to the contractor, the UK government Department for Work and Pensions. Fourteen participants were present, including two researchers, ten administrative staff, the trainer Shirley, and the IT representative Catherine. The trainer was in charge of explaining the “soft”, human relations side of the change, and the IT representative was responsible for explaining the “hard”, technology side of the initiative. In the analysis that follows, we highlight the series of translations that occurred around the interests of the recipients (i.e. “what do you want?”) as the training session progressed.

Translation 1: “You want it.”

When trainer Shirley began her “sales pitch” at the beginning of the training session, interests were at the heart of her attempt to construct the change as a palatable and desirable idea for the recipients.

Shirley: *You* guys, *I’m* pretty confident, are going to buy into this today because it’s going to make your job a little bit easier, ok? ... It’s going to make you guys, your job, a lot easier with your communication with our consultants. (2 mins)

The interesting point here is that Shirley chose first to appeal to the sectional, local interests of the recipients, rather than begin by explaining the rationale for the change in terms of business interests. From the very start, the change agent actively *translated* the change in ways that would hopefully appeal to the recipients, by suggesting it would make their jobs “easier”. This attempt at “funneling interests” stands out as a deviation from the official, managerially-sanctioned rationale for the change. This finding suggests that organizational change may well depend on the creative use of discourse to find new ‘angles’ through which to translate the interests of change recipients. It would seem reasonable to assume that appeals to interests (“this will benefit you”) are more likely to enroll recipients than instructions, sanctions or obligations alone.

Translation 2: “We all want it.”

In her very next breath, immediately after appealing to the recipients self-interest, Shirley switches to appeal to a sense of collective interest, i.e. shared interest in the survival of the business.

Shirley: We *know* ... as a business that we've made errors. Ok? We're over 5 years old now and unfortunately as a business we've also lost money because our audit has not been 100%. But the Quality Framework has been introduced to try and eliminate all of that.

(2 mins)

The change is presented as the 'obligatory point of passage' in securing the future success of the business. By using the term "we", Shirley seems to be attempting to establish a sense of collective identity and collective interests ("we are all in this together", "we all want the same thing"). According to Callon and Latour (1981, p.279), "Whenever an actor speaks of 'us', s/he is translating other actors into a single will, of which s/he becomes spirit and spokesman". Shirley attempts here to speak on behalf of who "we" are and what "we" want. By doing so, she seems to invoke a sense of obligation and duty to the common organizational goal.

Translation 3: "You think you don't want it but you do really"

Unfortunately for the change agents, their attempts at translating the interests of the recipients were not entirely successful. Within only ten minutes, as the trainers began to explain the processes and practices required by the new system, the recipients began to express skepticism,

cynicism and resistance to the change. A series of re-translations of interests ensued. The recipients reversed the earlier translations by interpreting the change as incongruent with their interests (eg. “this will make our job harder”). This challenged the original translation of the change agents, which presented the change as congruent with the interests of the recipients (eg. “this will make your job easier”). The change agents then responded by translating the concerns of the recipients again, to re-align their interests with the change.

Sue: [Sue describes the problem when Job Centres fail to send the paperwork required by the system]...So that’s gonna be a little bit of a problem for us.

Catherine: You’ll be able to see what Job Centres are getting things in on time and which ones aren’t, and you can use that to negotiate with the Job Centres that aren’t getting it in on time. it helps to keep track of what’s where and how long it’s taking.

(11 mins)

In this first extract, Catherine attempts to translate a *problem* with the new system (i.e. we cannot enter paperwork that we don’t receive) described by employee Sue into a *benefit* of the new system (i.e. the system will help you to get paperwork on time). The change is translated from being *incongruent* with what they want/need, to helping to *further* their interests (the change agent’s translation). This same tactic was observed again later in the training session.

Employee 1 [voice could not be identified]: So we’re gonna have to go into every record and check whether it’s ok? So that’s gonna be extra work.

Employee 2 [voice could not be identified]: So technically this means that we're gonna be doing more work and the consultants are gonna be doing less.

Shirley: But it's all about quality isn't it, and getting things right first time. ... But it's all to do with an ongoing audit isn't it. So when it comes to audit time – you guys aren't sat here doing all the paperwork.

(39 mins)

In this second extract, Shirley attempts to 'reverse translate' the concerns voiced by the recipients (i.e. it will increase our workload) by presenting the change in terms of "short-term pain, long-term gain". By putting more work into checking the data quality of each record at the point of entry ("right first time"), she suggests, the recipients will find their job *easier* when they are audited. These two extracts are significant for highlighting the ongoing nature of the translations required to try to convince the recipients that the change is the best way to further their own interests.

Translation 4: "You don't want it, so we'll change it."

As the resistance from the audience continued, the trainers seemed to recognize that their attempts to emphasize the alignment of interests (between the recipients and the change) had broken down. They resorted to recognizing the divergent interests of the recipients, and conceded that some elements of the change may have to be altered to accommodate them.

Brenda, one of the intended 'recipients', highlights a problem with what happens when clients fail to bring the paperwork required by the new system.

Brenda: But what happens when they [clients] don't bring the paperwork. There's nowhere on the system for that. [Inaudible muffled background conversations]. Maybe we could refuse to see them if they don't bring it?

Catherine: Yeah, I'll jot it down.

Shirley: This is not the first time this has come up. ... You say 'hang on a minute, we don't actually work like that locally'. *We* need to take this back to the Business Quality Team and sort of log it on a national level.

(18 mins)

As further concerns and problems arise, the trainers seem to subtly shift from their original framing of the new system, where it was presented as the best way to further their (individual and collective) interests.

Shirley: Ok, *loads* of things have been coming up and that's what we're trying to encourage because as you know, the input process, little questions like that, make an absolute difference. ... So if something doesn't sit right or you're not sure, do say, because we need to log it and obviously try and get the system right.

Catherine: What's happening is that since everybody's been rolled out, notes like this have been taken at the event and we're sitting down and we'll, we'll get answers

to them all and put a new set of process maps through if needs be or change in IT if it needs be. So it's, sort of, like that, an ongoing development.

(24 mins)

The trainers concede that the new system, in its current form, is potentially mis-aligned with the interests and practical concerns of the recipients. They promise to take this issue to the designers of the new system, the Business Quality Team. As a result, the IT system is now presented as *not completely aligned* with the interests of both the recipients and the business. The IT system needs to be further translated to be a truly faithful ally in the pursuit of their individual and collective interests.

Translation 5: “We don’t want it either”

At the start of the training session, the change agents’ discourse suggested they were passionate advocates of the change, emphasizing the many benefits the change would bring for the employees and the company. As the change agents encountered increasing levels of hostility, however, this ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1959) subtly shifted. The change agents began to present themselves as kind of ‘unwilling victims’ of the change process by distancing themselves from the terminology involved.

Shirley: [reading from screen] ‘Performance Manager interrogates’. We have an issue with that word, Catherine and I.

Catherine: Yeah, we don’t like ‘interrogates’. We didn’t put these together.

[laughter]

Shirley: We're just delivering this. We don't like it.

(12 mins)

This rhetorical tactic of 'distancing' is particularly interesting because it seems to present the change agents as being "one of you" vis-à-vis the recipients, i.e. a common victim of changes imposed by management and external parties. By building a sense of "being in the same boat" as the recipients, the change agents could be seen to come across as more *sympathetic* to the recipients and more *authentic* in their request for the recipients to at least comply with the change (if 'commitment' is out of the question). In addition, the process of distancing from the change could also act to minimize personal responsibility for the resistance they were facing, as suggested in the following extract:

Shirley: We're bound to get resilience, but this isn't a Shirley and Catherine thing, we're just delivering this.

(39 mins)

Shirley here attempts to appeal to the recipients' sense of fairness by asking them not to shoot the messenger. This tactic is significant in the sense that it presents the change as outside the change agents' scope of control and therefore not something that can be avoided or abandoned on their authority. It also helps the change agents to present themselves as a "common victim" of external forces. This theme of being 'compelled' by external forces was also present in the next translation.

Translation 6: “We might not want it but we have to do it”

As the criticisms, concerns and cynicism of the recipients continued, the change agents altered their approach again. The change was no longer presented as something they should actively *want*, both individually and collectively, but instead something they might *not want* but *have* to do. This shift in discursive approach seems to represent an explicit recognition that the original positive framing of the change had failed to ‘work’.

Catherine: You may already be aware, the new quality targets – ... if you have one person overstay for one day on Stage 1, that – you have a black mark against your name for that quarter.

Shirley: It’s like a penalty.

Catherine: In the third quarter, if he’s not rectified, you’re over-staying and ... there’s a possibility of you losing your contract.

Shirley: 98 or 99% is no good. It’s got to be 100% or the contract is under threat.

(45 mins)

Here the change agents instead appealed to the recipients’ sense of *obligation* to comply with the requirements of their contract. The change is no longer presented as personally beneficial but

rather part of their fundamental duty as employees to protect the financial position of the company, as the following extract suggests:

Shirley: 'Quality equals audit equals get paid'. At the end of the day that's what it's all about, isn't it, that we pass the audit.

(73 mins)

The change is presented here as a non-negotiable and essential requirement of the business. The recipients' interests are presented as only furthered by securing the future of their employer, disregarding the personal preferences or attitudes appealed to at the start (see Translation 1).

Translation 7: "I want it, so you should too"

One of the most interesting rhetorical tactics used by the change agents to manage the resistance to change they faced was *personalization*. By personalization we mean the act of presenting their advocacy of the change as motivated by *personal conviction and belief*, as opposed to simply acting as a 'robot' or messenger following the "script" given by management.

Shirley: But eventually, come audit time, you guys aren't gonna have to do the running around that you normally have to do because this is ongoing audit. Now I haven't got that scripted that's just from me. You know, that's just something *I* thought.

(72 mins)

Displaying personal conviction helps to present the change agent as *genuine*, *heartfelt* and *authentic* in their view that the change is a positive move that will further the interests of those involved. This extract resonates with the sort of “honest phrases” (such as “to be honest”, “to tell you the truth” etc.) that act to assert sincerity on the part of the speaker (Edwards & Fasulo, 2006). The desired effect upon the change recipients can be likened to the religious conversion sought by an evangelist preacher – recipients are thought to be more likely to enroll if they witness deep faith on the part of the enroller.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we have explored how interests are “funneled” in the discursive work involved in implementing change. Our case illustrates that what a change “is” and “means” is not fixed but rather is transformed in the translations that accompany the diffusion of new ideas and practices across the organizational landscape. For example, in our case we examine how both (a) what the recipients wanted and (b) whether or not the change helped to further their interests was subject to a series of translations by change agents, as they encountered resistance and skepticism amongst the recipients.

The translations we observed enabled the change agents to transform the meanings-under-construction in order to establish local legitimacy for the quality template and avoid a derailling of the change process. For example, by distancing themselves from the idea that they are merely a ‘mouthpiece’ of management (see Translation 5), they visibly demonstrated their awareness of what the recipients “want” and displayed empathy and solidarity with the audience. This example of identity positioning, i.e. we are “one of you” and “on your side”, is an important finding because such subtle maneuvering is, in our view, crucial to the implementation of

change. This finding links to Fligstein's (1997) thesis that institutionalization is facilitated by the creative social skills required to "imaginatively identify" with others. It also adds empirical support to Creed, Scully and Austin's (2002) argument that effective legitimating accounts are those which enable recipients to identify with the message.

Another key example from our case is how membership categorization devices were used by the change agents. Membership categorization devices are ways actors choose to describe themselves and others (Potter & Wetherell 1987, pp.128-131), which carry with them social and moral implications (i.e. who is a member of what social group and what responsibilities, expectations, rights and obligations does their membership involve). Categories such as "we" are important because they present those labeled as "positioned, interested and accountable" in a particular way (Edwards, 1991, p.523), and should therefore be analyzed for the kinds of "discursive work" (p.518) they achieve. For example, the term 'we' in our case referred to membership of "the business" and inferred a set of shared interests, responsibilities and objectives – namely, tackling the 'problem' of having "lost money" because of failed audits (see Translation 2). We show how membership categorization, such as use of the collective pro-noun "we", was used to try to construct a *common identity* and *collective responsibility* for ensuring the survival of the business – to bind their perceived interests together with the change program.

It is important to note that our analysis does not infer a set of cognitive states in the minds of the audience (Potter, 1996,p.103-5). In other words, simply using the term "we" does not automatically mean that those involved see themselves as a coherent collective with common identities and interests beyond the situation. We are interested in the use of this collective categorization ("we") alongside the sectional categorization described above ("them" versus "us") because it reveals not only the variation in the discourse used (i.e. shifting from "you", to

“we”, to “us” etc.) but also the *deviation* from the institutionally sanctioned “script”. The trainers were almost certainly not expected to distance themselves from (and criticize) the script in order to create a sense of allegiance with the audience (see Translation 1). Indeed, a key finding from our analysis is that the change agents sought to actively *deviate* from the institutionally-sanctioned meaning of the change. For instance, through their discourse around the ‘interests’ of the audience, the trainers emphasized the potential improvements for the working lives of the audience (e.g. reducing their workload) (see Translation 1), thereby potentially undermining the emphasis on protecting the interests of the organization and the coercive institutional pressures it faced from its contractor.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Edwards (2006, p.41) describes discourse as the “rich surface” of action and emphasizes the need to study interaction as a place where things get done. The term ‘surface’ should not be misunderstood as implying that interaction is less ‘real’ or less ‘important’ than other things, such as ‘deep’ underlying attitudes, cognitions, emotions etc (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This view is typically invoked when people refer to the ‘rhetoric versus reality’ dichotomy. These things (attitudes, cognitions, emotions) are not simply *reflected* in discourse, with language acting as a “mirror” on reality (Marshak et al. 2000, p. 246). On the contrary, “words and the meanings they create and convey matter” (p. 249). We therefore agree with Heracleous and Marshak’s (2004) view of discourse as “situated symbolic action” (p. 1286). In our case, we have shown that discourse (such as the interaction between change agents and change recipients) is a key place where the *action* of implementing change gets done. For example, change agents and their recipients use discourse to negotiate practical questions such as “Will this change benefit

me or will it disadvantage me?”, and “Should I embrace the change or resist it?”. The same change, we suggest, can be received in different ways depending on how successfully the change agents are able to “funnel” the interests of the recipients into their desired path of action. For example, some recipients may embrace a change because they view it as a means to further their own career interests, while others may resist change because they fear it would damage their interest in keeping their job and avoiding redundancy. In both scenarios, managing how the recipients view their interests poses a key challenge for those tasked with implementing change.

This discursive work is not, in our view, simply about “navel-gazing” into the minutia of mundane organizational life. This mundane interaction is the place where broader structures and forces – such as institutional mandates in our case – get interpreted and enacted (or, alternatively, re-interpreted and resisted). For example, our case sheds light on how change is diffused in such tightly-coupled institutional fields, with “clearly legitimated organizational templates and highly articulated mechanisms ... for transmitting those templates to organizations within the sector” (Greenwood and Hinings 1996, p.1029). In spite of the strong coercive isomorphic pressures in our case (enforce by a powerful government actor), change was not a linear process of diffusion. The change was not simply accepted and enacted by the recipients at a local level. Institutionally-imposed change does not simply ‘arrive’ with ready-made legitimacy. According to Czarniawska and Jeorges (1996, p. 39-40), ideas “need to be legitimized by having commonly accepted motives attached to them”. However, as our study shows, these “motives” are not always “commonly accepted”. The recipients in our study, for example, initially viewed the change as *incongruent* with their perceived interests, concerns and local practices. Substantial discursive work was required on the part of the ‘change agents’ to *re-align* the interests of the recipients with the change, even if this meant deviating from (and corrupting) the intended

meaning of the change. We suggest that change needs to be *translated* in such a way that it effectively *funnels* the diverse concerns of its intended recipients into *alignment* with the required change. Our study therefore contributes to moving beyond the “standard” account of diffusion that portrays change as a “frictionless” process. This standard account tends to “gloss over... substantial institutional work on the part of organizational actors who must persuade others in their organizations of the merits of the innovation, experiment with the innovation in an effort to understand it and how it might apply to their own situations, modify it in order to gain internal legitimacy, and forge practical connections for the new structure or practice” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p.247). The funneling of interests, we suggest, is a key component of “institutional work” (ibid).

Organization change, then, is not about simply ‘changing’ then ‘re-freezing’ a fixed set of ideas, routines or practices. Rather, it requires the diverse groups involved to see the change as helping them to achieve their interests (or at least not damage their interests); to view the change as “what I/we want”. As a result, what the change “is” and “means” may well be different according to different groups. For example, in our study we found that the nature of the change (i.e. “what does the change involve?”, “how will it affect me?”) shifted during a training session, as the change agents and recipients engaged in a series of *translations*. “In such processes of translation, new meanings are created and ascribed to activities and experiences” (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996, p. 70) – including, we suggest, to how actors view their interests. The translations we observed transformed the change from something that would/should be wanted by the recipients because it would further their interests, to something that would hinder their interests, to something that would help the recipients in the longer term, to something that would require modification to avoid hindering their interests, to something that is not wanted but

required, to something that is genuinely wanted and welcome. It was precisely these translations, we suggest, that helped the change agents to “funnel” the broad range of concerns expressed by the recipients into the direction of the required change. Our findings therefore suggest that change agency requires being an active *mediator* (Latour, 2005, p.39) of the change rather than a passive *intermediary* that simply “transports, transfers and transmits” (p.77), letting ideas pass through them without modification or distortion. For ideas to travel they need to be edited, not simply recited (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996).

Discourse is important in this funneling process precisely because of its *elasticity* and *variability*: that is, the ability of agents to change their ‘framing’ (Goffman, 1974) of the situation to align it with their context. In our case, the change agents changed the way they framed the nature of the change and the interests of their audience in ways that would (hopefully) smooth its implementation. These translations are necessary to make the change more “socially acceptable and credible” (Weick 1995, p.61) to the recipients. If the change agents had remained wedded to the original framing of the change (as mandated by powerful external actors), the recipients would have been unlikely to “buy in” to the change process. We know this because our data shows that the original framing failed to align the interests of the recipients with the change. Thanks to the creative use of discourse in a series of translations, the meaning of the change (in our case a new IT system) was itself changed. Institutionally-enforced change, therefore, is not a fixed entity - a so-called “immutable mobile” (Latour 1987) - that is simply diffused in a predictable manner. Our micro-discursive perspective therefore helps to address Galaskiewicz’s (1991) warning that research should not “underestimate the interpretative and creative capacities of actors” (p.295). Our study also supports Czarniawska and Jeorges (1996) assertion that ideas do not travel because of how their inherent attributes ‘match’ an

organizational problem, but rather because of how those attributes and problems are “created, negotiated or imposed during the collective translation process” (p.25). Future research is therefore best directed at “the process of translation ... not the property of ideas” (ibid, p.25).

The findings of this study also support Creed, Sully and Austin’s (2002) argument that change is more likely to involve “reinterpretations than recitations” (p.476) as a result of “locally adaptive discursive strategies” (p.477), making it a fundamentally idiosyncratic and unpredictable process (Sewell 1992). Moreover, these skills of translation are not reserved for training sessions only – the focus of our analysis – but lie at the heart of the movement of ideas more generally (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). We argue that these translation skills are essential for managing change if, as Buchanan and Badham (1999) argue, change involves diverse groups with potentially divergent sets of perceived goals, agendas and interests. Moreover, our findings go further by showing that “interests” are not a fixed, essential entity that drives social action. Rather, interests are *negotiated* and *transformed* in interaction. We therefore agree with Woolgar’s (1981) argument that interests should not enter the analysis as a causal explanation for social action, but rather we should study how “interests are invoked, constructed and utilized” within discourse (p.372). This study opens up a new research agenda that seeks to examine how interests and interest-groups are *constructed through* discourse, rather than viewing them as pre-existing entities that are simply *expressed in* discourse. Our study shows how the creative use of discourse plays an important role in attempting to “funnel” the perceived interests of different groups and thereby facilitate the implementation of change.

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