

Organization Development: What's Actually Happening?

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ABSTRACT *A great deal of commentary and controversy about the state of organization development (OD) has to do with a lack of clarity regarding what it is about organizations that can be affected by an OD effort. Recent initiatives suggest that a new set of OD practices are emerging, based on a social constructionist orientation. With this in mind, this article aims to contribute to a theoretical understanding of what it is about organizations that can change, based on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social constructionist framework. It describes three distinct change processes that take place as a consequence of OD interventions. The article ends with a discussion of some of the implications for OD practice, specifically with regard to 'programming' dialogue as the main vehicle for change.*

KEY WORDS: Organization development, social constructionism, dialogue, organizational change

Introduction

As a field as well as a profession, organization development (OD) has spawned a diversity of approaches and methods (Mirvis, 2006; Marshak and Grant, 2008). Multiple stakeholder methods based on dialogue and whole-systems approaches such as strategic scenario planning, whole-scale change and appreciative inquiry show that OD has expanded beyond individual and small-group dynamics (Van Nistelrooij and De Wilde, 2008). These new OD practices are taken to be applicable not only to interpersonal matters, but also to more strategic issues (Sminia and Van Nistelrooij, 2006). Regardless of the possible applications and underlying assumptions, OD interventions, in general, have always been accompanied by a normative perspective on human behavior and by high

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ambitions of achieving enhanced performance and human fulfillment (Burke, 1987; Jamieson and Worley, 2008). However, as pointed out earlier by Pettigrew *et al.* (2001), Wirttemberg *et al.* (2004) and Marshak (2006), and maybe with the exception of Bartunek and Moch (1987), Weisbord (1976) and Golembiewski *et al.* (1976), little thought has gone into specifying more precisely what it is about organizations that can be affected by an OD effort and what kind of problems are being addressed with OD.

Therefore, the main question that this article tries to answer is – what is it about organizations that will be affected by an OD intervention and what particular problems are being tackled? By answering this question, this article is basically an experiment of thought, using a specific framework to propose a better understanding of what is being changed as a consequence of an OD effort. To do this, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal work on the social construction of reality will be utilized.

From its inception more than 50 years ago, OD has promoted democratic and humanistic values by developing leaders and combining individual development processes with organization development efforts (Pasmore and Fagans, 1992; Beckhard, 2006; Burke, 2008). However, basic philosophical assumptions with regard to the organizational reality that is the subject of OD interventions are less clear. Marshak and Grant (2008) and Bushe and Marshak (2009) recently contrasted 'classical OD' with 'new OD' (see also the recent reflections and commentary on this distinction by Oswick, 2009 and Wolfram Cox, 2009). 'Classical OD' is characterized as inherently modern, assuming there is a knowledgeable reality out there that has to be approached using rational and analytical methods. 'New OD' is more postmodern and takes the truth as being contextual and socially constructed. However, traces of social constructionist thought were apparent in the early days as well. For example, Chin and Benne (1976) assume that 'human intelligence is social rather than individual and that human growth arises in a process of shaping organism–environmental relations toward a more adequate fit' (p. 31). Another early assumption is that individuals are believed to be guided in their actions by socially founded and communicated meanings, norms, and institutions in which the total social setting is nothing more than the whole system of which we perceive ourselves and others to be part. Lewin and Grabbe's (1948, p. 57) premise 'that what exists as a reality for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as a reality within the total social setting' is believed to have influenced the founding fathers of OD (Marrow, 1969; French and Bell, 1999; Coghlan and Jacobs, 2005). It makes clear that only by anchoring a person's own conduct in something as large, substantial, and super-individual as the whole social system can individuals stabilize new beliefs sufficiently to keep them immune from the day-by-day fluctuations of moods and influences to which they are subjected. These general assumptions and premises stress the importance of participation, trust, emergent processes, dialogue, and win–win negotiations (Quinn and Sonenshein, 2008), and have served as a foundation or departing point for traditional OD practices.

Social construction as a scholarly way of looking at organizations and change processes has gained more prominence over time (Burr, 1995; Campbell, 2000; Van Nistelrooij, 2004; Jackson and Carter, 2007). Worley and Feyerherm

(2003) and Cummings and Worley (2009), as well as Marshak and Grant (2008), have put social constructionism forward as a promising theoretical approach by which to develop OD further as a field and provide it with a more coherent theoretical underpinning. Marshak and Grant (2008) argue that, in many cases, the application of new OD practices involves adopting a constructionist orientation, which places the ongoing social creation of reality and sensemaking at the center. What any particular group believes is 'reality,' 'truth,' or 'the ways things are' – according to this view an at least partially social construct is created, conveyed and reinforced through dialogue or, as both authors have labeled it, discourse. According to these authors, what seems to be more important is that change agents who apply new OD practices should pay more attention to ways to help the parties involved negotiate and socially construct new shared agreements and mindsets about the reality of a situation. Moreover, change agents who apply new OD practices are believed to be more skilled in organizing dialogue between multiple stakeholders and facilitating change in (social) perceptions, identities, and conversations between them. Furthermore, by applying these OD practices, change agents require more practical and theoretical insight into what it is that can actually be affected by these kind of interventions (Van Nistelrooij and Sminia, 2009).

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) social constructionist framework allows a distinction to be made between three types of change processes, all of which may occur during the course of an OD trajectory. The aim of this article is to contribute to a more general 'theory of change', indicating what types of change exist, and to propose a 'theory of changing', indicating how change processes can take shape (Porras and Robertson, 1992; Austin and Bartunek, 2006). This will be done by examining Berger and Luckmann's basic social constructionist notions to find out how they apply to OD. This will give rise to two intriguing insights. First, both social constructionism and OD recognize the importance of shared perception to understanding behavior and change, amplifying the idea that shared perception is one of the main desired outcomes of any OD intervention. Second, shared perception can be established by dialogue, defined as an interpersonal process to exchange individual frames. The article ends with a discussion of some implications for OD practice, specifically with regard to 'programming' dialogue as main vehicle for change.

Berger and Luckmann's Social Constructionist Perspective on Change

Within organizational change research, Berger and Luckmann (1966) has been utilized in several, though rather limited, ways: as an 'anchor' reference to indicate that the author has adopted an interpretative approach (Heracleous, 2001), as a basis for the statement that organizations are social constructions (Gray *et al.*, 1985), or just to indicate the relevance of language and discourse in the change process (Barrett *et al.*, 1995; Ford and Ford, 1995; Ford, 1999; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Heracleous and Marshak, 2004; Marshak and Grant, 2009). Only a few take on board some of the more specific ideas about how Berger and Luckmann propose social construction takes place and adapt these to

provide an understanding of organizational change processes (O'Neill and Jabri, 2007; Dopson *et al.*, 2008; Di Virgilio and Ludema, 2009).

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) project was to deal with the question of where social order in society comes from (see also the later reflection of Berger, 2000). In that sense, it is more a theory of continuity than it is about change, but we will see that a more particular understanding of organizational change can be derived from their approach. Their answer centers on the proposition that social order is a human product, a consequence of continuous social interaction; hence their title: 'The Social Construction of Reality'. Berger and Luckmann make a distinction between 'objective reality' and 'subjective reality'. To them, objective reality is what is being constructed as a consequence of a process of institutionalization. Reality has taken on a meaning and significance that transcends an individual member of society. Subjective reality, then, is how each individual understands society. To Berger and Luckmann, the emergence and maintenance of social order is a matter of the three social construction activities of institutionalization, legitimation, and internalization.

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) answer to the question of where social order comes from provides us with a theory of institutionalization. Their basic premise is that human activity is subject to habitualization. 'Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actions' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 72). Such institutionalized interaction patterns provide stocks of knowledge about how roles and activities can be both performed and interpreted. To the individual member of a society, these roles and activities appear to be the 'objective reality' of the social world. Legitimation is Berger and Luckmann's (1966) answer to the question of how a social order is maintained. 'Legitimation "explains" the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings [and it] justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives' (p. 111). Legitimation draws on what Berger and Luckmann have dubbed 'symbolic universes': these are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality (p. 113). The symbolic universes are the backbones of stocks of knowledge about how roles and activities can be performed and interpreted. Legitimation contributes to the self-perpetuating character of the social order.

A third question dealt with by Berger and Luckmann (1966) is how the individual is made aware of the 'objective reality' that has been institutionalized and is being legitimized around this person. Their answer is through socialization. They distinguish between primary socialization, referring to the learning process that takes place when an individual encounters a society for the first time, and secondary socialization, taking place when an individual becomes part of a subgroup within a larger society that has its own particular social order. An individual may become aware of a number of different institutionalized orders relating to either specific parts of society or society as a whole, and consequently being able to function in each of these different environments. An individual is considered perfectly socialized when there is symmetry between objective reality and that individual's own subjective reality. However, Berger and Luckmann expect that no individual is ever perfectly socialized.

Berger and Luckmann's Work Re-interpreted

Berger and Luckmann (1966) indicate that three distinct change processes can take place within a social constructed reality. They refer to these as 'change in the scope of institutionalization', 'change in the symbolic universe', and 'alteration of subjective reality'. The first step to adopting their approach within the realm of OD, of course, is to assume that organizations are socially constructed realities. In one way, many of the early statements on OD and planned change anticipated this view of organizational life (Burnes, 2004) and this also applies to a Berger and Luckmann-inspired approach. For example, changes in patterns of action are believed to be the consequence of alterations in normative structures and in institutionalized roles and relationships, as well as in perceptual orientations (Chin and Benne, 1976). Or as Lewin and Grabbe (1948, p. 61) originally postulated: 'social action no less than physical action is steered by social perception'. This was reformulated by one of Lewin's PhD students Albert Pepitone (1950, p. 57) as 'the primary significance of social perception lies in the fact that more overt forms of social behavior are thought to be "steered" by the perception of the social environment.' This indicates that changes in knowledge or changes in beliefs and value orientations will not result in new behavioral patterns unless changed perceptions of the self and the situation are achieved (Benne, 1976). More recently, the idea that an organization is taken to be a social construction has become more commonplace and explicit (Marshak and Grant, 2008).

Organizational Change as a Change in the Scope of Institutionalization

With regard to 'change in the scope of institutionalization', Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that institutionalization in a society can be total, meaning that one institutional order embraces the totality of social life. By contrast, although there can (and must) be an absolute minimum of a shared order, the bulk of the institutional arrangements can be found at the level of subgroups. The scope of institutionalization, then, refers to the generality of the relevant structures. The scope is wide if all or most of these structures are shared generally; approaching total institutionalization. If only a few structures are shared, the scope is narrow. Consequently, change in the scope of institutionalization refers to movement from narrow to wide and vice versa. With regard to organizations, there can be movement in the scope of institutionalization as well (Hatch, 1997). The organization can be conceived of as highly centralized; with institutionalization approaching a state of totality, with every part being geared towards a central organizational goal. By contrast, an organization can be highly decentralized, with a minimal common goal, and with the subunits governed more by their own institutional arrangements. A movement broadening or narrowing the scope of institutionalization within an organization then is a very specific form of organizational change.

Initially, there was a very particular way in which 'change in the scope of institutionalization' was found in the earlier OD literature. The notion of 're-education' and the advocacy of OD almost as a management ideology that needs to be adopted to achieve increased performance and engaged employees hints at a form of 'total institutionalization' that is considered to be beneficial

for everyone (Benne, 1976; Chin and Benne, 1976; Pasmore and Fagans, 1992; French and Bell, 1999). It is a state of affairs that has often been described in terms of 'organizational health' (see, for example, Katz and Kahn, 1978). This coincided with the ready adoption of ideas about 'winning' and 'successful' organization cultures (Peters and Waterman, 1982) by OD proponents (Sashkin and Burke, 1987). This probably somewhat over-optimistic view of OD has often been criticized (Pettigrew, 1985; Beer and Walton, 1987; Stace, 1996) but there is a core idea here that the cultures within an organization are linked with its successful operation and that change efforts can be directed at trying to narrow or broaden the scope of institutionalization.

Organizational Change as a Change in the Symbolic Universe

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) explanation of 'change in the symbolic universe' starts with an acknowledgement that all societies are problematic to a certain degree. As a consequence, alternative points of view do emerge for various reasons, which in turn can have the effect that some theorizations become contested and changed; possibly altering the symbolic universe to some or a larger degree, along with the accompanying institutional order (Gray *et al.*, 1985; Hatch, 1997). Berger and Luckmann single out two intrinsic developments within a society that contribute to disturbing the self-perpetuating nature of the social order. Both start with the tendency that theorization becomes the domain of so-called experts. Over time, experts become detached from what Berger and Luckmann labeled practitioners. Comparisons between expert knowledge and the manner in which roles and activities are actually performed will eventually lead to social conflict. Alternatively, theorization can lead to what Berger and Luckmann dubbed rival coteries of experts with competing definitions of the situation. In the latter case, rival theories become attached to groups whose interests are best served by a particular definition of reality. In this case, a power struggle eventually decides which definition gains supremacy. In the case of an expert-practitioner conflict, there will be a showdown of pragmatic superiority.

This type of change process has been documented extensively in various case studies of strategic change (Pettigrew, 1985; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Sminia, 1994), and the two intrinsic developments that Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe resemble ideas about strategic drift (Johnson, 1987). However, the argument can be made that this type of change is somewhat neglected within OD, especially with regard to the political nature of change and the power struggles that often accompany it (Marshak and Grant, 2008). Strategic change is found to be a highly problematic and far from orderly process. For this type of change to occur, the overall interpretative scheme characterizing the organization needs to be modified while, at the same time, people in the organization are so bound up in it that the interpretative scheme also acts as an impediment to change (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). As a common denominator, 'real' strategic change came to be seen as a process of 'punctuated equilibrium' (Romaneli and Tushman, 1994) with longer periods of slow incremental change, during which the overall organization-level interpretative scheme remains intact, alternated by short but radical shifts when the organization's more fundamental core

assumptions become subject to change (Johnson, 1987; Dunphy and Stace, 1988; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988). To Berger and Luckmann (1966), this is an example of 'change in the symbolic universe': a change of the institutionalized social order itself.

Organizational Change as an Alteration in the Subjective Reality

Berger and Luckmann's (1966) third type of change process refers to the level of the individual. 'Alteration of subjective reality' refers to an individual's socialization and increasing or decreasing levels of symmetry between subjective and objective reality. Berger and Luckmann reserve the term 'alteration' for those instances when an individual unlearns one social order and replaces it with knowledge about another. When they are functioning members of an organization, individuals can be considered to be socialized into the organization's objective reality. They will also be confronted with distinct social orders at the subgroup level, for example, departments, business units and teams, depending, of course, on the scope of institutionalization within the organization. Individuals will also have been pre-socialized to some degree if, for example, they are a member of a certain profession, have received some form of preliminary training or have previous work experience in another organization. When moving from organization to organization, or within an organization as a consequence of a career move or an internal reorganization they will experience 'alteration' of their subjective reality to some degree (Trice and Beyer, 1984).

As stated in the Introduction, the early proponents of OD emphasized change at the level of the individual. In terms of Berger and Luckmann (1966), this amounts to being socialized into a particular (sub)culture of a team, department, subsidiary, or the whole social system. Berger and Luckmann use the term 'symmetry' to indicate how much of an individuals' subjective reality matches the socially constructed objective reality of a social unit. In the same way, Schein (1991) argues that the socialization process is the medium for passing on meanings and assumptions between people, and that the level of socialization can be seen as a test of sharedness – do we really share the same assumptions and perceptions? It can also be seen as a test of taken-for-grantedness – are we really conscious of our habitualized actions and the fact that we have more choices than we think?

As such, socialization can be seen as a learning process that promotes the establishment and legitimation of shared patterns and cultures among organization members (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). People's meanings and assumptions will influence perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, as well as overt behavior. As mentioned earlier, Berger and Luckmann (1966) do not expect individuals to be fully socialized and differences between individuals will occur either because of different levels of asymmetry between an individual's subjective reality and the institutionalized objective reality, or because individuals are socialized into different institutional orders (see also Crossan *et al.*, 1999). The realization of a growing collective conscientiousness that one's own 'subjective reality' is only one among many has been one of the main purposes of organizing a dialogue. As Schein (1996, p. 31) put it: 'The most basic mechanism of acquiring new information that leads to cognitive restructuring is to discover in a conversational process

that the interpretation that someone else puts on a concept is different from one's own'. In the words of Benne (1976, p. 321): 'In the process, our own perceptual frames may be modified or at least recognized as belonging to us and operating as one among many other constructions of social reality'.

The OD Process as a Dialogue

The most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation, which to Berger and Luckmann (1966) is the prototypical case of social interaction. Their point of departure is the phenomenological perspective advanced by Schutz who, in turn, built on Weber's postulate of subjective interpretation. From this point of view, to understand organizations it is necessary to understand the individual perceptions of organization members, as well as the interactions by which these perceptions are made to coincide, are reaffirmed and result in organized action (Gray *et al.*, 1985). Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's notions of social construction, several theorists consider social interaction as an element of change (Austin and Bartunek, 2006). They argue that organizations consist of a plurality of perspectives that are revealed through conversation, while change is recognized and generated through conversation and other forms of communication. In this view, social interaction, and dialogue in particular, is the primary vehicle by which coincident interpretations are created, transmitted, and sustained, and as such 'dialogue' is a vehicle for organizational change processes.

A new organizational reality becomes 'the reality' if enough people in the immediate surroundings are convinced that this image reflects 'their reality'. Such a shared construction of reality produces the idea that the world actually is like this image and that with this image absolute certainty has been achieved (Watzlawick, 1990). It also indicates where people's interests lie and what sources of power are available to protect them. This image of 'reality' that people construct is strongly bound by the context in which the interactions take place. As suggested by Berger and Luckmann (1966), although people in the same situation are inclined to construct their own 'subjective reality', these constructions seem to converge into a shared 'objective reality' due to day-to-day interaction (Van Nistelrooij, 2004). In short, people who cooperate closely with each other in a specific social-cultural context develop a social constructed reality that mainly exists for them and not for others who do not work in the same context. Departing from this social constructionist premise, bringing about change starts with a realization by organization members that it is possible to see 'reality' differently. Consequently, a change strategy that incorporates the social constructionist perspective has to incorporate a deliberate effort to share people's individual perceptual frames by way of interaction if it is to eventually arrive at new and more widely shared insights or a shared perception that could initiate new or adapted behavior (Van Nistelrooij, 1999).

Following communication scientist Martin Buber, Matson and Montagu (1967) speak about dialogue in terms of an open exchange of social perceptions or individual frames, during which contributors accept mutual differences and look for the proper synthesis. Senge (1990), Schein (1993), and Dixon (1998) base their definitions of dialogue on the work of quantum physicist David Bohm, who

believed that people connect their actions to the way they perceive the things around them. In Bohm's opinion, the context in which actions take place determines their meaning. In addition, Bohm emphasizes the collective nature of dialogue, the importance of the flow of meanings (*dia* and *logos*), and its open, equal, and mutual character. Gergen (1999) writes about dialogue as a transformational medium, whereas Barrett *et al.* (1995) and Heracleous and Barrett (2001) see dialogue as a medium through which stakeholders gradually gain consciousness of each other's organizational realities. Dialogue can be compared with a collective consciousness-raising process during which change gradually occurs in human speech: understanding change means understanding alterations in discourse patterns that may suggest different ways of constituting action. These suggestions, in turn, are capable of generating new action possibilities. Change, then, occurs when 'a new way of talking replaces the old way of talking' (Barrett *et al.*, 1995, p. 366).

One method to organize such a dialogue is through 'perspective taking' or 'role taking' (Matson and Montagu, 1967) by way of adopting the point of view of the other in communication and assimilating this alternative perspective in order to apprehend the alternative meanings and anticipate alternative actions. In essence, it is the ability to comprehend and voice how the situation appears from another's point of view. When one voices the perspective of somebody else, it inclines the other to disclose information more fully than when this is not done. According to Dixon (1998), the additional information and the fuller comprehension of an alternative perspective both work to increase the development of new knowledge, especially in complex and socially ambiguous situations which continuously emerge in change processes. What is expected to take place during a typical dialogue is that participants first explicate their own individual frame, subsequently compare this with the perspectives from other stakeholders in the change process, and finally arrive at another, more widely shared, perception which is more enriched and better equipped than the original one in doing justice to practical facts.

Discussion

A central ambition of OD is the realization of planned organizational change in whole social systems (Marshak, 2006). This means that the bodies of knowledge that help explain how individuals, groups, organizations, communities, and even societies change are all pertinent to the field. Following on from Berger and Luckmann (1966), there are three things about organizations that can change, which leads us to distinguish between three types of change process that can take place. Each can be associated with a distinct type of problem, allowing us to suggest whether and which OD intervention is suitable for a particular purpose. It also allows monitoring of the course of the change process by assessing what type of change is actually occurring. To take advantage of these more practical implications, specific examples of OD interventions with each of the three change types will be given.

One type of problem is associated with the level of symmetry between an individual's 'subjective' perceived social reality and the 'objective' institutionalized

social reality at the level of the team, subunit, or organization as a whole. This asymmetry can be the root cause of a range of problems involving the functioning of individuals in the organization and solutions need to be aimed at socializing the individual better in the symbolic universe. This type of change is typical of training situations and can also happen in collective gatherings as part of large group interventions and other whole-systems interventions in which the individual perspective is exchanged with the 'whole system' (Bunker *et al.*, 2005; Purser and Griffin, 2008).

The second type of problem is associated with intergroup conflict. The root cause of this can be associated with the scope of institutionalization. Because an organization almost always consists of subunits of some sort, one can expect that subcultures will emerge as a consequence of a subunit's specialization in a particular range of tasks, but also that some commonality needs to exist among these subcultures to maintain the organization as a whole. Particular problems can be associated with either the scope of institutionalization among subgroups, which is either too broad, resulting in a lack of cooperation and increasing difficulties coordinating among the various subunits, or too narrow, with the organization focusing on too limited a range of issues that need to be dealt with, or maybe one subunit dominates the others at the expense of the organization's overall effectiveness. Consequently, solutions need to be aimed at adapting the scope of institutionalization to the appropriate level. This type of change is typical for interventions like Appreciative Inquiry, Confrontation Meeting, Search Conference or Open Space in which a well-organized dialogue takes place (Cummings and Worley, 2009).

Finally, a third type of problem can be associated with a mismatch between the institutionalized social order of a subunit or the organization as a whole and the demand put upon this entity by the relevant environment. In such a situation, a change of the symbolic universe is called for. This is a type of change that typically occurs in socio-technical systems redesign interventions concerning, for example, the quality of working life (Van Eijnatten *et al.*, 2008), and large group interventions in which a shift in the power balance in an organization usually takes place. But these are specific examples, more generally, what is the case here is a process of full-blown strategic change. These processes have been found to be highly problematic, politically charged and far from orderly (Pettigrew, 1985; Johnson, 1987; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988; Sminia, 2009). OD has not yet fully come to grips with this area.

Many of the OD interventions, techniques, and methods incorporate some form of dialogue or other and, therefore, can be interpreted as fitting the social constructionist approach to organizational change. In terms of Berger and Luckmann (1966), dialogue involves sharing subjective realities. When there is a problem that can be associated with the level of symmetry between an organizational member's subjective realities and the institutionalized objective reality, the dialogue should be aimed at lessening the existing asymmetry by socializing the organization's members more in the required objective reality. Likewise, when a problem can be associated with the scope of institutionalization, the dialogue should be aimed at changing that. When there is a problem with the symbolic universe as a whole, then the dialogue should deal with that. Basically, the

proposition here is to vary OD efforts in accordance with the problem that has been diagnosed.

Distinguishing between types of change and linking them with distinct problems not only allows an OD practitioner to make a better targeted intervention, it also allows the practitioner to monitor the change process by keeping tabs on what the problem is and how it is being dealt with. Several trajectories can be imagined. For example, an attempt to socialize members of organizational subunits into each other's realities to make them work together better can digress into a process that decreases the scope of institutionalization within the organization as a whole when one subunit starts to dominate with a detrimental effect on the ability to cooperate. Another trajectory could involve an informed attempt to decrease the scope of institutionalization, but while this is taking place, the realization is made that the symbolic order as a whole is inadequate and the process needs to be redirected towards a full strategic change.

Conclusion

Essentially, what has been done in this article is to take a more general 'theory of change', derived from Berger and Luckmann (1966), to propose a 'theory of changing' which allows us to assess how a change process takes shape (Porras and Robertson, 1992; Austin and Bartunek, 2006). This strengthens OD's basic idea that shared perception is one of the main desired outcomes of any intervention. It is also argued that shared perception can be established by dialogue. Being able to distinguish between three types of change allows us to suggest that an OD practitioner can do two things. First, it is possible to target an OD intervention to a particular problem by diagnosing what type of change is required to alleviate this problem. Second, an OD practitioner can monitor the course of the process and assess what type of change is taking place.

The argument that is offered in this article is still at the proposition stage. Further research of actual OD interventions is needed to see whether the three change types can be observed and linked with the organizational problems that have been associated with them, and whether OD interventions targeted to deal with these problems, by designing dialogue in such a way that the required type of change occurs, actually alleviate these problems. This would require longitudinal case studies using a process methodology (see, for example, Sminia and van Nistelrooij, 2006; Sminia, 2009), which track the course of the process and try to explain the outcome in terms of how the process progresses over time.

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