

The Politics of Meaning-making / Meaning-breaking – Call for Papers

Abstract – The Meaning of Systems Thinking and the Management of Change: An Ethnographic Enquiry

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Introduction

The challenge for more research to address the gaps in the literature on sustainable change is taken up in this paper and stems from a rare opportunity to study a systems thinking approach to change by an in-depth, longitudinal case study in the UK social housing sector. The aim of the research is to track and examine the implementation and impact of a series of systems thinking-led change initiatives over a period of four years. By exploring the 'sensemaking' (Weick 1995), motives and actions ('logic of action' Buchanan 1999) of key personnel and the impact of the interventions on policies, practice and service performance outcomes, the research identifies the key factors and conditions affecting the implementation and sustainability of new services at a major social housing business.

Research Methods

The 'process research' orientation employed in this study has been described by Pettigrew (1997) as the dynamic study of behaviour within organisations, focusing on organisational context, activity and actions that unfold over time. The research method is based on the belief that real-time process research (sustained observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and archival documents), inspired by ethnographic scholarship leads to more precise temporal data and richer understanding of changes taking place, and reveal the patterns and mechanisms that influence the sustainability of change.

Ethnographic research reveals the interest politics, power, role relations, interpersonal interaction, sensemaking, resistance and status influences in organisational change. Capturing these phenomena and the influence on the impact and sustainability of organisational changes show that ethnographic enquiry can achieve this, where other methods may not.

The processual nature of ethnographic study provides data on the blurred boundaries on both 'means and ends' of change in organisations (Fine et al 2009). An ethnographic study reveals the chronology of events of the change interventions (how) and the questions (why) of 'what has led to what' (Sminia 2009), with the course of events providing the explanation. Ethnography allows researchers to witness how planned changes, like those taking place at the case organisation, unfold over time.

The need to collect data on the different and competing perceptions, beliefs and behaviours of those most closely involved with the interventions is not simply to explore their sensemaking or social construction of the events taking place. The experiences and actions reported of these research participants over time do present their sense of reality of events, but also indicate the extent of their beliefs, motivation and actions to support or otherwise, systems thinking and changes to services.

Findings

From the outset the study sought to report on and analyse different individual and group narratives of change, and produce a polysemous account (Collins 2003) over time in relation to the sense-giving and sensemaking of change that helps shape change processes (Buchanan and Dawson 2007). Capturing the sensemaking, logic of action and behaviour of participants during the processes of the change interventions using sustained observation indicates the depth and strength of participant motives of those both directly and indirectly involved but affected, by the changes taking place.

The findings challenge a number of under-theorised unitarist models of change i.e. readiness, recipient engagement and beliefs, leadership and sensemaking of change. The evidence shows that the advocates of change, as 'experts' and authors of formal reports, carefully selected and used data to influence directors on the interim progress and benefits of the changes to operations and services. However they were unable to penetrate the social and political systems of senior managers and directors. Achieving legitimacy and meaning for systems thinking led change and its advocates is evident across different levels of staff. The powerful discourse of systems thinking employed by consultants and internal change champions was clearly seen to help change cognitions of many staff but not the personal priorities of those with most formal power and authority at the top.

The study findings reveal the 'delegitimising' of systems thinking and an effort to revise or even erase its 'meaning' by the language and actions of senior managers and directors, witnessed publicly (annual reports, company documents, staff briefings) and privately. Retaking control of meaning from the advocates of systems thinking and reasserting senior leadership's control and influence in managing processes is seen as the major inhibitor to lasting change at the case organisation. The conclusion from the research is that there is not an inherent change drive in a change methodology like systems thinking. Its effects rise and fall with the legitimisation and delegitimisation of the methodology around which a change initiative is organised.

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