Change agents and change recipients: Identity narratives, organizational change and soft resistance within the Amsterdam Social Services

Martha Horvers, Sierk Ybema & Gepke Joosten

VU University Amsterdam
Dept. of Organizational Sciences
m.m.horvers@vu.nl; s.b.ybema@vu.nl; gepkejoosten@gmail.com

Frans (income consultant): I’m never opposed. One can always try new things. As long as it has advantages...
Fieldworker: Are you going to participate in the ‘process improvement teams’?
Frans: No!
Fieldworker, sounding surprised: Excuse me?
Fieldworker: Not anymore? Why?
Frans: Not voluntarily. I might, if I’d think that it would be useful, but the way things turned out last time... Then I think: if you have no say, then ehm... if my opinion doesn’t count, then why don’t they just decide for themselves?

The management of the Amsterdam Social Services (ASS), formally called the Department of Work and Income (DWI) of the Amsterdam Municipality, claimed to actively involve staff members in developing the organizational change processes. This staff member was nonetheless convinced that he had ‘no say’ at all. Casting management as top-down oriented change agents and staff members as passive and powerless ‘change recipients’, he refuses to ‘voluntarily’ participate in change-related activities. His passive and silent act of resistance hides behind reluctant acceptance of the change process.

A dualist division of roles in terms of change agents and change recipients is prevalent in the popular change management literature (Ford, Ford & D’Amelio, 2008; Thomas & Hardy, 2011). Recently, critical scholars took issue with such a simplistic view (e.g., Thomas & Hardy, 2011; Dent & Goldberg, 1999; Mumby, 2005). They argued that assigning actors to fixed and dichotomous categories does not take into account the multiplicity and variability of participants’ positionings in a change process. It frames complex social dynamics in a simplistic sender-receiver model. As Thomas and Hardy (2011) point out, studies of organizational identities throw doubt on such “neat categorizing”. Middle managers, for instance, can be both change agents leading the change effort, and change recipients resisting change initiatives at the same time. Hence, identities are not prescribed and fixed but ‘fluid’ and ‘socially constructed’ (Thomas & Hardy, 2011).

Following up on this critique, we asked, how do organizational actors narratively make sense of a change process and how do they talk about themselves and others within these narratives? Existing studies of change and resistance to change do not systematically analyse the various ways in which organizational actors author different versions of the stakeholders involved in the process. An at-home ethnographic research into an organizational change process at the Amsterdam Social Services (at the time of research the employer of the first author) allowed us to examine how organizational actors tell different stories or narratives about the changes, and have different ways of positioning self and other
within these narratives. The narratives that we present as being told by the research participants are products of our own interpretations and influenced by the role of the researcher as ‘observing participant’ (Alvesson, 2009). This ambiguous position requires reflection on one’s own positioning in the field, personal involvement with the research participants and personal experiences with the organizational context.

Sympathetic to the critiques of the bifurcation of organizational actors in change agents and change recipients in change management literature, we expected to find a variety of identifications. However, our findings show that organizational actors engaged in identity talk which recurrently reproduced rather straightforward and essentially fixed distinctions between themselves and other stakeholders involved in the change process. They abstracted and reified themselves and others as ‘change agent’ and ‘change recipient’ or proponents and opponents of change Whilst critical scholars want to move away from clear-cut dichotomies between change agents and change recipients, we show that organizational actors engaged in essentialist talk that cast themselves and others in pre-set roles and relations in relation to each other. Yet, at the same time they also switched from one identity template or fixed essence to the other, thus re-affirming critical scholars’ notion of more fluid and fragmented identities.

Interestingly, despite management’s persistent talk of resistance to change, the majority of staff members engaged in narratives of resigned or reluctant acceptance of organizational changes. While being indifferent and dispirited or sceptical and disgruntled in backstage conversations (‘my opinion doesn’t count’), they did not engage in outright resistance and instead had an appearance of friendliness and cooperativeness (‘I’m never opposed’). This is where our paper makes a second contribution. While existing literatures focus analytic attention on the management of, and resistance to change, we extend insights into more subtle forms of resistance by analysing what might be seen as the apparent absence of resistance or ‘soft resistance’: a combination of apparent compliance and indifference; inaction and covert critique.

References