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# Conceptualizing and Engaging in Organizational Change as an Embodied Experience within a Practical Reflexivity Community of Practice: Gender Performance at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy

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## Abstract

In this article, we outline our organizational change initiative, our “small experiment,” and our attempt to understand how organizational change is actually accomplished. It is our desire to first change our selves and how we perform gender and through this local initiative, to eventually change how our organization as a whole performs gender. In our effort to accomplish this goal, we began by attempting to understand the issue, our experience, and the performance of gender within our organization. Based upon these understandings and because of this understanding, we will identify initiatives that change our organization's performance of gender. Finally, in an attempt to understand the micro-processes of change, of how organizational change is accomplished - “its dynamic, unfolding, emergent qualities (in short its potential) (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 568),” we will document and attempt to understand our experience of change from within.

*THE BREATHLESS RHETORIC of planned transformational change, complete with talk of revolution, discontinuity, and upheaval, presents a distorted view of how successful change works...[has led people] to underestimate the value of innovative sensemaking on the front line, the ability of small experiments to travel, and the extent to which change is continuous.*

(Weick, 2000, 223)

In the article, first we provide background on the organizational change initiative that we will undertake at the Coast Guard Academy. Then we will describe the change process we will engage in and our assumptions about organizations and organizational change. Finally, we will describe what efforts we will take to understand organizational change from within a continuous and ongoing process.

## Background

This project developed out of a Leadership and Organizational Development course taught in the spring semester of 2004. As one of their assignments, based on their experience, students were asked to develop and inquire into a personal leadership question to conundrum (i.e., puzzle, paradox, or question for which there is no self-evident answer) (Eriksen, 2007). A large percentage of the female students' questions concerned issues of gender. When the instructor recognized this pattern and learned from the female students that they were hesitant to talk among themselves about their gender questions/ issues, he connected these women with one another so that they might learn from one another and together as a group. When they began to talk to each other, it fueled their interest and frustration about these gender issues. Although for many this community offered temporary relief,

it also led to more questions and, in some cases more confusion and uncertainty. Many students experienced a lack of closure concerning their understandings of their particular conundrum. Seeing the students' curiosity and frustration, the instructor proposed that these students join to create a directed study on gender and leadership. Five of these students demonstrated an interest and commitment to such an endeavor. Thus, the instructor and these students collaboratively developed the directed study.

We decided not only did we want to develop and grow as a group; we also wanted to change the organization in a way that would help other female cadets make sense of and improve the quality of their experience at the Academy. The professor had become frustrated with his participation on organizational committees due to their inability to create meaningful change. It seemed to him the greatest value of these committees was their symbolic value. For example, if a university had a formal diversity initiative task force, it was perceived as legitimately addressing diversity issue on its campus. But these committees produced no meaningful change, the type of change that positively affects one's day-to-day organizational experience.

Although planned transformational change may be effective in crisis situations - situations in which the organization's survival is questionable (i.e., when all organizational members interests are threatened), it is believed that this is not an effective approach when trying to change an organization with respect to an issue that will only improve the organization, especially when the improvement is most beneficial and meaningful to an organizational minority that is not in power. As in the case of improving the experience of female cadets at the Academy, such an initiative might be seen at best disruptive and at worst threatening to those in power. There is no felt immediacy for change. The irony is that even minority organizational members that may benefit from the change initiative may feel threatened by it.

They may be comfortable with the status quo, feel things might actually get worse, fear the pain they will suffer through the process, and actually have to change their self-concept based on their belief that this change is needed (e.g., in this case, female cadets must admit that they are not treated equals to the male cadets). Also, like racism in our society, sexism at the Academy is no longer overt and explicit. It exists below the level of consciousness; it is often felt but hard to grasp, identify and articulate, since it has no material existence. We can only reify it through concepts, ideas, and narratives. To meaningfully change the organization, members, both the minority and majority members, have to admit their role in sustaining the present organizational reality. But this is difficult because people do not want to admit they are sexist, racist, homophobic, etc. Thus, change has to do with identity, one's self-perception.

It is our belief that with issues that are immaterial and which affect only a minority of organizational members, planned change is most likely to be ineffective. To change the organization, sexism must be reified and legitimacy of why the organization must change must be established. First, it must be seen as real and legitimate by those in the minority whose organizational experience is in some way inferior or inequitable to the dominant majority's experience. Then the organizational majority must be convinced that it is real and must be changed. To accomplish this we must move to the micro-level of organizational change.

Rather than a top-down, predetermined change initiative - driven by senior level administrators that are divorced from the day-to-day performance of the organization - this is a self-initiated change initiative by a professor and female cadets directly effected by the existing gender discourse, policies, and issues. Also, the change that will result is not predetermined, but rather it will emerge from our interactions with each other and other organizational members. This approach will allow the change to emerge and adapt to

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organizational conditions as they unfold and to accommodate new experiences and thus, to seize a priori unimaginable possibilities.

### **The Change Process**

To change our organization requires that we change our selves, actions, and beliefs, including our self-understanding. It is our belief that if we first change our gender discourse, through our personal and strategic interactions with other organizational members, we will eventually change the organization's gender discourse. We hope that this will eventually lead to cultural and policy changes at the Coast Guard Academy that will improve the experience of female cadets.

Organizational change often occurs when a certain group of individuals reflects on its circumstances and experiences and decides to intervene to attempt to change organizational systems and policies (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). We believe that if we hope to change the Coast Guard Academy, we should first follow the advice of Gandhi and "...become the change we seek." Also, organizational learning takes place within the relationships that make up the organization (Bushe, 2001). Thus to change our selves and our organization, we decided to create a space within which this change could occur. This space is the directed study and we are calling this space a practical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002) community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) focusing on gender. In this space, through our readings on and dialogue about language and gender (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003), sociological psychology and microsociology (Cahill, 2001), social construction (Gergen, 1994), identity, and other literature, we are developing a discourse through which we reflect and reflex upon our life experience, identify our implicit assumptions and beliefs that drove our gender performance, and uncover our initial interpretations of these experiences. When we speak of dialogue, we do so consistent with David Bohm's (2000) conceptualization of dialogue as a process that deeply explores

human experience in all its complexity and richness: recognizing experience is value-laden, emotional, cognitive, and biological determined. Also, we believe that thought is generated and sustained on a collective level. Our dialogue will allow us to question our deeply held assumptions about the Coast Guard Academy's culture, meaning and our identities. We realize both the organizational experiences we analyze and the change we implement are embodied experiences; as well as our minds, our bodies and all of their feelings and emotions are always present and are a large part of what determines our experience. Through these new discourses and self-reflexion (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), we will reinterpret our experience and communicate to one another these re-interpretations, or new tentative understandings, as antenarratives (Boje, 2001).

As a group, from these antenarratives we will create narratives that we will use to question the gender hegemonies at the Coast Guard Academy. Through these narratives, we focus in on what Sherry Ortner (1990) is quoted in (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 44) as calling "[t]he loose ends, the contradictory bits [of a hegemony]." We will point to these loose ends, these contradictory bits to uncover and understand the gender ideology at the Coast Guard Academy, highlighting anomalies in the dominant organizational framework. Once we agree on narratives of gender, we will offer them up to the organization to help them see and understand the present gender ideologies at the Academy. For example, through the narrative we developed about uniforms from the cadets' experience (i.e., equality with respect to uniforms means everyone should wear the same uniform and that this uniform is the men's uniform) it became evident that the Coast Guard Academy operates under the assumption that all cadets are equal and should be treated the same. Although this might be based on good intentions, it is our belief that this falls short in practice. We conceive of this assumption as hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) because it has come to pass

as “knowledge,” “fact,” or “common sense (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 43).” Female cadets have come to accept the gender differences as reality or “just the way things are.” This hegemony is acted out in organizational participants' day-to-day lives. It is experienced as natural, “as the way things are...people's sense of what needs no explanation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 43).” Thus, it was our hope not only to change ourselves but also our institution.

With the help of the narratives and our new discourse we hope to put forth new a discursive template that will enable the organization to establish new ways of talking, thinking, and acting with respect to gender (Barrett, Thomas, & Hocevar, 1995). Ultimately, this new discursive template would become institutionalized. Presently, both in the fleet and at the Coast Guard Academy, gender issues are not spoken of except at a superficially categorical level.

If members of a community of practice within an organization change, so does the organization. Of course, communities of practice are never self-contained. In other words, the boundaries of our community of practice are porous and thus, it inevitably effects the organization of which it is part. In this case, our community of practice is part of the Coast Guard Academy, and the larger Coast Guard. In a male dominated environment, our community has become a visible object which others attempt to define and make sense of. Observers begin to question what it is we are doing and when they find out, they are confronted with the topic of gender at the Coast Guard Academy. In other words, the simple existence of our group that discusses gender issues has caused the institution to begin to discuss gender. We have experienced this when we, as a group, eat every Monday in the Officers Club. Also, because of their knowledge of our community, we have already been invited to discuss what we are doing with a Vice Admiral of the Coast Guard, the President, Commandant of Cadets, and Dean of the Coast Guard Academy, the Gender Policy

Advisor for the Coast Guard, the Department of Defense Task Force and a representative of the Chilean government interested in incorporating women into their Navy. These interactions have created a network around the Academy and the Coast Guard that has already led to a community more conscious of gender issues and its gender discourse.

### **Our Assumptions about Organizations and Organizational Change**

We draw our assumptions of organizational change from Tsoukas and Chia (2002). Rather than conceiving organizations as fixed entities that periodically change, they conceive of change as “a normal condition of organizational life (567).” They attempt to provide a vocabulary to allow meaningful talk about change; they provide a process or performative account of change. “[P]erformative accounts,..., through their focus on situated human agency unfolding in time, offer us insights into the actual emergence and accomplishment of change...performative accounts are more directly connected to practitioners' lived experiences and actions (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 572).” Organizational change is conceived as “reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action to accommodate new experiences obtained through interaction (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 567).” In other words, to change an organization, we must change organizational members' beliefs and habits of action, their habits of performance. Under this view, organizations are imagined as emergent accomplishments, flows of connected ideas, actions, and outcomes that perpetually interact and change in action. They are attempts to structure and organize the intrinsic flux of human action to channel it towards certain ends. “Change must not be thought of as a property of organizations. Rather, organizations must be understood as an emergent property of change. Change is ontologically prior to organization - it is the condition of possibility for organization (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 570).”

The traditional and predominate view in the

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management literature of organizational change is based upon a synoptic account of organizational change. This may be best exemplified in Kurt Lewin's model (1951). These synoptic models privilege stability, routine, and order and view change as episodic events. They explore organizational change from the outside. They most often take the form of a stage model. In a stage model, an organization undergoing change enters distinct states at different points in time. The problem with such models is that they have difficulty providing insight into "open-ended micro-processes that underlay the trajectories" of change and it cannot explain change's "fluidity, pervasiveness, open-endedness, and indivisibility (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 570)."

In contrast to traditional synoptic accounts of change, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) propose that organizational change should be imagined as continuous process, an ongoing stream of interactions and a flow of situated initiatives. Their understanding is built upon William James' (1909/1996) and Henri Bergson's (1946) belief that change is pervasive and indivisible, change is not something that is produced by certain people under specific situations. As James says, "the essence of life is its continuously changing character (James, 1909/1996, 253 in Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 569)."

When change is conceptualized in stages, as a series of static positions, as William James (1909/1996) articulates, "the stages into which you analyze change are states; the change itself goes on between them. It lies along their intervals, inhabits what your definitions fails to gather up, and thus eludes conceptual explanation altogether (236) (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 569)." In other words, change takes place between the static positions that represent change. Thus, since they deal with change as a series of static positions, synoptic concepts of change cannot capture the nature of change.

The problem with conceptualizing a process like change is that when we conceptualize it,

it becomes fixed; we understand it as a series of states or positions. Thus, it becomes impossible to understand change as a continuous process. We are unable to understand the process of getting from one point to the next. Or as James (1909/1996) remarks, "the stages into which you analyze a change are *states*, the change itself goes on between them. It lies along their intervals, inhabits what your definition fails to gather up, and thus eludes conceptual explanation altogether (236) (in Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 571)."

### **Attempt to Understand Organizational Change**

In addition to initiating the above changes, we also hope to understand how organizational change emerges and is accomplished. To understand change, we take the Bergson's (1946) advice to "Dive back into the flux itself, he says; turn your face toward sensation; bring yourself in touch with reality through intuition; get to know it from within (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, 571)." To know change from within, we must place ourselves at the center of an unfolding phenomenon (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). To understand change, rather than objectifying it from the outside in retrospect - as an abstract concept, we want to subjectively understand change from within as we experience it - as we perceive it. We must understand organizational change as a performance, as an embodied experience that flows and unfolds through time.

Through dialogue, journaling, self-reflection and self-reflexive inquiry throughout our experience, we hope to capture and understand the micro-processes of change from within. We attempt to create spaces within which we are able to view reality more directly by turning our attention away from practical matters towards reflection (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

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