Agency and Change

Can we make a difference by changing the organizations we inhabit? Agency and Change remaps the limits and possibilities of change agency in organizations, clearly shifting the focus from increasingly outmoded debates on agency and structure to new practice-based discourses on agency and change.

The book presents a critical and selective interdisciplinary exploration of discourses on agency and change in organizations using two overarching conceptual continua: centred agency–decentred agency and systems–processes.

This allows the classification of four competing discourses:

- *Rationalist discourses* focus on intentional agency, expert knowledge and the management of organizational change.
- *Contextualist discourses* examine emergent patterns of strategic change and the bounded nature of strategic choice.
- *Dispersalist discourses* address the growing challenges of organizational complexity and chaos as well as providing new models of organizational learning, sensemaking agency and ‘communities of practice’.
- *Constructionist discourses* explore the limits of human agency as discourse while affirming new possibilities for change and transformation.

This book is essential reading for all those interested in the origins, development and future prospects for change agency in an organizational world characterized by ever increasing complexity, risk and uncertainty.

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Understanding Organizational Change

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The management of change is now acknowledged as being one of the most important issues facing management today. By focusing on particular perspectives and approaches to change, particular change situations, and particular types of organization, this series provides a comprehensive overview and an in-depth understanding of the field of organizational change.

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Series editor’s preface

It is an accepted tenet of modern life that change is constant, of greater magnitude and far less predictable than ever before. For this reason, managing change is acknowledged as being one of the most important and difficult issues facing organizations today. This is why both practitioners and academics, in ever-growing numbers, are seeking to understand organizational change. This is why the range of competing theories and advice has never been greater and never more puzzling.

Over the past 100 years, there have been many theories and prescriptions put forward for understanding and managing change. Arguably, the first person to attempt to offer a systematic approach to changing organizations was the originator of Scientific Management – Frederick Taylor. From the 1930s onwards, the Human Relations school attacked Taylor’s one-dimensional view of human nature and his over-emphasis on individuals. In a parallel and connected development in the 1940s, Kurt Lewin created perhaps the most influential approach to managing change. His planned approach to change, encapsulated in his three-step model, became the inspiration for a generation of researchers and practitioners, mainly – though not exclusively – in the USA. Throughout the 1950s, Lewin’s work was expanded beyond his focus on small groups and conflict resolution to create the Organization Development (OD) movement. From the 1960s to the early 1980s, OD established itself as the dominant Western approach to organizational change.

However, by the early 1980s more and more Western organizations found themselves having to change rapidly and dramatically, and sometimes brutally, in the face of the might of corporate Japan. In such circumstances, many judged the consensus-based and incrementally-focused OD approach as having little to offer. Instead a plethora of approaches began to
emerge that, whilst not easy to classify, could best be described as anti-OD. These newer approaches to change were less wary than OD in embracing issues of power and politics in organizations; they did not necessarily see organizational change as clean, linear and finite. Instead they saw change as messy, contentious, context-dependent and open-ended. In addition, unlike OD, which drew its inspiration and insights mainly from psychology, the newer approaches drew on an eclectic mix of sociology, anthropology, economics, psychotherapy and the natural sciences, not to mention the ubiquitous postmodernism. This has produced a range of approaches to change, with suffixes and appellations such as emergent, processual, political, institutional, cultural, contingency, complexity, chaos, and many more.

It is impossible to conceive of an approach which is suitable for all types of change, all types of situation and all types of organization. Some may be too narrow in applicability whilst others may be too general. Some may be complementary to each other whilst others are clearly incompatible. The range of approaches to change, and the confusion over their strengths, weaknesses and suitability, is such that the field of organizational change resembles more an overgrown weed patch than a well-tended garden.

The aim of this series is to provide both a comprehensive overview of the main perspectives on organizational change, and an in-depth guide to key issues and controversies. The series will investigate the main approaches to change, and the various contexts in which change is applied. The underlying rationale for the series is that we cannot understand organizational change sufficiently, nor implement it effectively, unless we can map the range of approaches and evaluate what they seek to achieve, how and where they can be applied, and, crucially, the evidence which underpins them.

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The history of the concept of ‘agency’ in organizational change theory over the past fifty years makes dismal reading. From a position of unbounded optimism that organizational change could be managed as a rational or planned process with a transparent agenda, we now confront restructured workplaces characterized by new forms of flexibility, hypercomplexity and chaos in which the nature, sources and consequences of change interventions have become fundamentally problematic. How did this occur and what implications does it have for our understanding of agency and change in organizations? Should we assume that rationalist concepts of change agency are no longer viable, or should we welcome the plural and promising new forms of ‘decentred agency’ emerging within organizations?

This book presents a selective interdisciplinary exploration of competing disciplinary discourses on agency and change in organizations, classified into rationalist, contextualist, dispersalist and constructionist discourses. Rationalist discourses give priority to intentional agency, concepts of planned change and the possibilities of strategic action. Contextualist discourses focus on processes of ‘emergent’ change and the bounded nature of strategic change and strategic choice in organizations. Dispersalist discourses focus predominantly on non-linear complex systems of self-organization and learning processes in organizations, which allow new forms of ‘sensemaking’ agency, ‘distributed leadership’ and ‘communities of practice’ to emerge. Constructionist discourses decentre human agency within discourses or ‘discursive practices’ over which human actors appear to have little rational or intentional control.

The four discourses will be analytically explored by reference to two overarching conceptual continua: centred agency–decentred agency and
systems–processes. This meta-theoretical schema is designed to help delineate a shift away from the increasingly problematic agency and structure dichotomy and towards a more intensive focus on agency and change. However, this schema must be treated with caution. While the search for synthetic categories helps to map the meta-theoretical terrain of change agency and organizational change, the growing plurality of discourses challenge the social scientific ambitions of the research field to be objective, cumulative or unified. It is concluded that the future for applied research on change agency in organizations is characterized by new opportunities for empirical investigation and intervention, but also mounting threats to the epistemological rationale of research practice.
Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

- Four discourses
- Plan of the book
- A note for readers

What should the unit of analysis of ‘agency’ be in organizational change theory? Is it possible to integrate competing concepts of agency into a coherent theory of organizational change? Can we have theories of organizational change without purposeful or intentional concepts of agency?

Fifty years ago these perplexing questions were often answered positively. Archetypes of agency were identified with models of rational actors and organizational change was conceived as a process that could be effectively planned and managed to achieve instrumental outcomes. A classic exemplification of this rationalist view is Lewin’s concept of the ‘change agent’ as an expert facilitator of group processes of planned change, although his original concept has gone through many reformulations within various traditions of organization development theory and consultancy practice (Schein 1988).

Outside the organizational development tradition, however, over-rationalized models of agency and organizational analysis have been challenged from their very inception, both theoretically and practically. Simon’s (1947) persuasive critique of decision-making processes in complex organizations is still a classic starting point for ‘processual’ and ‘contextualist’ attacks on the rationalism propounded by corporate planners, functional specialists and other experts (Mintzberg 1994; Pettigrew 1997). His work also anticipated later ideas on ‘logical incrementalism’ and ‘emergent’ concepts of strategy and organizational change, although this has rarely been acknowledged (Quinn 1980).

Challenges to rationalism, planned organizational change and expertise have also emerged from far-reaching transformations of the workplace over the past two decades. During the 1980s post-Fordist models of organizational flexibility and new modes of information technology radically undermined the idea that organizational success depended on traditional bureaucratic modes of workplace authority, stability and control (Castells 2000). Managerial agency and leadership was no longer
identified primarily with the traditional roles of instructing, directing and controlling work processes. Instead, managers and leaders were now expected to encourage ‘commitment’ and ‘empower’ employees to be receptive to culture change, technological innovation and enterprise. The new vehicles for this ‘dispersal’ or distribution of change agency were new self-managed teams, quality circles and task groups, which acted as internal agents of transformation and change, as well as sources of distributive knowledge and expertise (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995).

This overall picture of a gradual shift or dispersal of change agency in organizations towards decentred groups or teams has been popularized in concepts of the ‘learning organization’ and more recently in the idea of ‘communities of practice’ (Senge 1990, 2003; Wenger 1998). Although the genealogy of these concepts is complex, they broadly conceive of organizations not as top-down structures of rational control, but as loosely coupled systems, networks or processes of learning and collective knowledge creation that devolve autonomy to agency at all levels (Dierkes et al. 2001). These ideas are, of course, partly a recognition of the fact that central hierarchical control has declined in many organizations and that large-scale organizational change is simply too complex and high-risk for any one group or individual to lead. It is in these terms that proponents of the learning organization have rejected the bureaucratic and mechanistic idea that organizations ‘need change agents’ and leaders who can ‘drive change’ (Senge 1999). Instead, leadership and change agency become identified with the systemic self-organization of learning by broadening leadership theory to encompass participative models of learning across the whole organization.

One finds similar ideas of the dispersal and decentring of agency within complexity theories of organizations. These theories have become increasingly influential over the past decade, as managing change has become synonymous with coping with the challenges of chaos (Anderson 1999; Fitzgerald and Van Eijnatten 2002). Although complexity and chaos theories have their origins in physics, computer science and mathematical biology, they have often been transposed into discussions of organizational change as well as broader ideas of the ‘hyper-complexity’ of network organizations and societies, and concepts of ‘disorganised capitalism’ (Brown and Eisenhardt 1997; Anderson 1999; Urry 2003). In all these theories the central idea is that dynamic systems are in a constant state of self-organizing stability–instability, which allows them to adapt and change. This occurs through ‘dissipative
structures’ or devolved networks of information interchange that allow order and chaos, continuity and transformation to occur simultaneously, and without the hidden hand of purposiveness or central control. Effectively, ‘order is free’ since it appears to emerge from simple bottom-up processes or rules that create non-linear dynamics of bounded instability (Kauffman 1993). Applied to organizational change theory these ideas have encouraged a rejection of conventional rationalist subject–object dichotomies of knowledge creation, concepts of ‘centred agency’ and a reinterpretation of organizational change and change agency as an emergent, self-organizing and temporal process of communication and learning (Stacey 2001; 2003).

While this brief history of the growing diversity and plurality of forms of agency in organizations can be plotted in relation to transformations of the workplace, it can also be delineated in terms of an overall transition from rationalist epistemologies of agency to the increasingly fragmented discourses of ‘social constructionism’ and ‘organizational discourse’ analysis (Gergin 2001a; Grant et al. 2004). Rationalist epistemologies of agency have, of course, a long and complex intellectual genealogy in philosophy, but broadly they are characterized by a belief in human beings as rational subjects or autonomous actors who can act in an intentional, predictable and responsible manner toward predetermined goals or planned outcomes (Davidson 2001; Giddens 1984). These assumptions are essential in creating ‘objective’ ideals of rational scientific knowledge and its application to human action and practice, including universal ideals of ethical behaviour. Rationalist epistemologies are therefore scientific, prescriptive and interventionist. In contrast, the multi-variants of social constructionism invariably undermine science and rationalism and with it ideals of agency and organizational change centred on rationality (Foucault 1994). Not only does knowledge of the natural world not have a predetermined structure or laws discoverable by rational investigation, but also ideas of ‘human action’, ‘personality’, ‘intentionality’ and ‘agency’ are equally problematic. For social constructionists and organizational discourse theorists, all forms of knowledge, understanding and action are culturally and historically relative and must therefore be situated within competing discourses (Hardy 2004).

This brief historical and epistemological overview of the nature of agency and change in organizations charts a profound and increasingly disconcerting transformation. From a position of great optimism regarding the practical efficacy and potential emancipatory role of
rational action, expert knowledge and ‘change agency’, we now confront a plurality of conflicting ideals, paradigms and disciplinary self-images that are increasingly difficult to meld together in any coherent manner. We must ask how this fragmentation occurred, and what epistemological implications it has for understanding the future prospects for modes of agency and change in organizations, as well as concepts of practice. Should we give up the search for an ‘integrated paradigm’ or interdisciplinary ideal of change agency that goes beyond the Babel of increasingly competing discourses and the disparate contingencies of practice? Or, should we accept the plurality of discourses and the eclecticism of practice as itself a positive affirmation of new and more positive ideals of decentred agency?

This book presents a selective, synthetic and critical historical review of some of the literature and empirical research on agency and change in organizations. The review, however, is not strictly chronological and takes the form of a heuristic classification of change agency and organizational change theories using two conceptual continua: centred agency–decentred agency and systems–processes (see Figure 1, p. 5). Centred agency refers to intentional forms of rational and autonomous action, while decentred agency refers to emergent and ‘embodied’ forms of action that are enacted through practice. Systems define the relatively ordered and stable properties of organizations conceived as ‘structures’, while processes encompass emergent aspects of organizational change and instability. The poles of each continuum are conceived generically as analytically useful contrast concepts that reconfigure the familiar, if increasingly problematic, dichotomy between agency and structure (Giddens 1984).

The agency–structure dichotomy invariably reproduces varieties of ontological or epistemological polarity: agency without structure (i.e. voluntarism) or structure without agency (i.e. determinism), as well as many intermediate theoretical variants. The two continua are designed to avoid this polarity, while shifting the analytical focus from agency and structure to agency and change. The theoretical rationale for this shift is briefly outlined in Chapter 2, which begins by examining Giddens’ (1984) classic reformulation of agency and structure as the ‘duality of structure’. While a case is made for a move away from the agency–structure dichotomy, it is argued that we must retain multi-faceted conceptions of agency related to change (Caldwell 2005b).
**Four discourses**

The four discourses can be broadly defined as follows.

**Rationalist discourses** identify intentional action and agency with rationality, expertise, autonomy and reflexivity, and this is amplified in the corresponding idea that human behaviour and organizations are ordered or ‘functional’ systems that can be subject to planned change or expert redesign, even in the face of resistance.

There is a vast range of rationalist discourses of intentional and teleological agency in the social sciences, from rational choice models of economic action to cognitive theories of instrumental behaviour. In the field of organization change theory, however, the most influential rationalist discourses on change agency have their origins in the influential work of Kurt Lewin (1947, 1999), although his ideas have gone through many reformulations within the various traditions of
organizational development (OD) research and practice. Broadly, the four key attributes of an intentional or centred concept of change agency are invariably synonymous with the Lewinian legacy and the OD tradition: rationality and expertise, and to a lesser extent, autonomy and reflexivity.

**Contextualist discourses** conceive human agency as embedded in emergent processes of organizational change that are not predetermined by internal structural contingencies or external environmental factors, but are rather the outcomes of non-linear, multi-level and incremental transition processes open to choice by human agents who operate within contexts of ‘bounded choice’ defined by competing group interests, organizational politics and power.

Broadly conceived contextualist discourses have a long and distinguished academic lineage, crossing a range of disciplinary fields and assuming many sub-varieties. One can find genealogical links between Simon’s (1947) critique of ‘objective rationality’ in complex organizations, Child’s (1972) call for ‘strategic choice’ in understanding organizational contingencies, and the more recent work of Mintzberg (1994) on ‘strategy as craft’. However, the most influential recent exponent of a contextualist approach within the organizational and strategic change fields is undoubtedly Pettigrew (1987, 1997). His programmatic intent is to create ‘theoretically sound and practically useful research on change’, that explores the ‘context, content, and processes of change together with their interconnectedness through time’ (Pettigrew 1987: 268). This was conceived as a direct challenge to ‘ahistorical, aprocessual and acontextual’ approaches to organizational change; especially planned change approaches, managerial ideals of control, and the variable-centred paradigms of organizational contingency theories. Moreover, Pettigrew appeared to create a new strategic change–strategic choice variant of contextual analysis that can be characterized as incrementalism with transitions; an approach that sought to pragmatically accommodate both continuity and discontinuity in organizational change processes.

**Dispersalist discourses** locate agency as a decentred or distributed team or group activity of self-organizing learning, operating outside conventional hierarchical structures or control systems, and this allows organizations as complex systems of learning and knowledge creation to cope with innovation as well as the challenges of increasing organizational complexity, risk and chaos.

There is an enormous and increasing variety of dispersalist discourses, from notions of organizational learning and ‘sensemaking’ agency to
complexity theories of agent-based interactions in ‘complex adaptive systems’ (Anderson 1999; Weick 1995). At the heart of many of these discourses is the idea of leadership and agency, organizational change and development as centred or distributed team processes. These are certainly not new ideas, but their significance has grown enormously over the past two decades (Gronn 2002). There are a number of factors that partly explain this development. The reduction of central hierarchical control in organizations has resulted in a growing emphasis on project and cross-functional teams as mechanisms to achieve greater horizontal coordination across organizational divisions, units and work processes. This is also associated with a shift towards information-intensive and network organizations with ‘distributed intelligence’, creating new opportunities for knowledge creation and innovation at multiple levels (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). In addition, the emergence of flexible forms of manufacturing and supply chain management founded on flexible ‘economies of scope’, rather than Fordist economies of scale has allowed greater potential for decentralized decision-making. It is against this background that Castells (2000) has provided a powerful and often positive overview of the tensions between hierarchies and networks, centralizing and decentralizing control in the emergence of new network organizations and societies. Others have, however, viewed the restructuring of managerial control negatively: ‘the dispersal of management away from managers entails no more than a dispersal of instrumental rationality’ (Grey 1999: 579).

**Constructionist discourses** abandon subject–object distinctions and the corresponding agency–structure dichotomies; there are no objective scientific observers or autonomous actors, but only socially constructed worlds of fragmented cultural discourses, practices and fields of knowledge in which the possibilities for ‘embodied agency’ and organizational change are fundamentally problematic.

Constructionist discourses are enormously diverse, partly because of their embrace of epistemological ‘perspectivism’ and their multiple points of intersection with the various intellectual movements of ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘postmodernism’. This makes it almost impossible to disentangle the various strands of constructionist discourses (Gergin 2001a). There are, however, at least four concerns that help define the programmatic intent of constructionism:

**Anti-rationalism.** Most forms of social constructionism are hostile to the claims of reason and rationalism, both as a foundation for knowledge of
the world of things and as a guide to human conduct. Constructionism argues that rationalism is neither a foundation of truth nor a basis for self-knowledge, moral conduct or political emancipation; it is simply one discourse among many.

Anti-scientism. Constructionism holds that the ‘laws’ or ‘facts’ of the natural and human sciences are constructions within discourse that could be otherwise. Science is not a cumulative or progressive understanding of ‘how the world is’, nor does its knowledge of laws or facts predetermine how the natural or human sciences will evolve (Hacking 1999).

Anti-essentialism. Constructionists hold that there are no essences or inherent structures inside objects or people. Just as nature is not immutably fixed by entities designated as ‘atoms’, ‘cells’ ‘molecules’, so human subjects are not predetermined objects with discoverable properties such as ‘human nature’, ‘intentionality’, ‘free will’ or ‘personality’. These nominalist entities do not have an existence outside of socially constructed discourses.

Anti-realism. Constructionalists deny that the world has a fixed or predetermined reality discoverable by empirical observation, theoretical analysis or experimental hypothesis. There can be no truly objectivist or realist epistemologies founded on the subject–object and appearance–reality dichotomies that have characterized the history of Western rationalist thought.

These statements (minus any hint of invective) represent very broad meta-theoretical characterizations of constructionist positions. As such their implications will vary enormously in relation to the disciplinary fields, research traditions, or theoretical perspectives within which they are developed. Nevertheless, these statements broadly indicate that most constructionist discourses are compatible with the long tradition of relativism and nominalism in Western philosophy (Hacking 1999: 83).

While the four discourses are defined as ‘pure types’, they assume a multiplicity of forms, some of which may overlap with apparently competing discourses. For example, the shift within the OD tradition towards the concept of the learning organization has meant that its parameters overlap with dispersalist discourses; in this sense ideas of planned organizational change and system-wide organizational learning are often reinforcing. Similarly, contextualist discourses can be defined by ‘emergent’ or ‘processual’ perspectives, which may blend into ad hoc appropriations of constructionist ideas, especially if they are identified
with a process ontology of change as becoming and ideas of knowledge as discourse. Ultimately if one pushes contextualism too far from its comforting empirical anchorages it can become constructionist.

Discourses are, of course, by their very nature enormously complex (Alvesson and Karreman 2000). They range from the apparently context-free textual and conversational analysis of meaning to context-specific micro or macro discourses of ‘power/knowledge’ within discursive practices that may be critical or interpretative (Foucault 1994, 2000). It is not possible or necessary to examine all these forms of discourse. Here the primary focus is on disciplinary discourses that address issues of the role of ‘agency’ in organizational change. Disciplinary discourses are broadly defined as forms of language, meaning and interpretation representing and shaping relatively coherent social, cultural or disciplinary fields of academic knowledge creation and practice that embody contextual rules about what can be said, by whom, where, how and why. Disciplinary discourses are therefore forms of ‘rarefaction’ designed to limit or exclude those who cannot speak authoritatively (Foucault 1994).

This definition emphasizes the plurality of disciplinary discourses, but it does not assume that all that exists are discourses about discourses (Foucault 1991). Many ‘scientific’ discourses may be characterized by patterns of self-referential circularity and indeterminism; and constructionists are right when they claim that: ‘there are no claims to truth that can justify themselves’ (Gergin 1999: 227). But this does not mean that ‘truth’ is ‘simply rendered irrelevant’ to discourse. Disciplinary discourses of knowledge and science can be subject to critical self-scrutiny and empirical interrogation in terms of their own claims to knowledge or objectivity, as well as their related moral and political implications. Because such discourses may ‘refer to’ ideas, concepts, objects or actions that embody human activities, patterns of meaning and knowledge they can take on a real, naturalistic or even a deterministic efficacy in human practices. This matters in terms of what we believe, understand, and how we act in the world: they matter because they have consequences and so ‘truth’ as a fragile criterion of discourse does matter.

Although the review of the four discourses is deliberately interdisciplinary, it cannot hope to encompass all the various paradigms and traditions of research and practice within each set of discourses. For example, the review does not discuss societal, collectivist or broader macro-models of change agency associated with formal institutions or
social and political movements. There is also no discussion of agency versus non-agency differences and the broader issues of naturalism in the social and human sciences (Latour 1987; Barnes 2000). Nor is it possible to explore psychoanalytical concepts of agency within the analyst–patient relationship. Instead, the primary focus is on the exploration of the relationship between change agency and organizational change.

But how do we define the scope of ‘change agency’ in organizations? One possibility in answering this question is to follow discourses of intentional or centred agency and define change agency as the capacity of internal or external human actors within organizations, individually or in groups, to consciously choose to use their knowledge, skills, power, expertise or reflexivity to sponsor, initiate, enact, direct, manage or implement a specific change idea, process, initiative, project or complete programme of change which impacts directly or indirectly on the efficiency or effectiveness, values or culture of an organization and the behaviour or actions of its members. This definition broadly assumes that change agency is a sub-type of rational action and expert intervention. Is this definition adequate? Can it cope with the relationship between agency and change within constructionist discourses of centred agency? No – it cannot.

An adequate theorization of change agency in organizations requires emergent models of ‘agency’ that are not limited to rationalist notions of intentional agency which situate action and meaning within essentially individualist concepts of rationality, expertise, autonomy and reflexivity. It also requires models of agency that go beyond notions of centred agency founded on discourses of power/knowledge, embodiment, and self-reflexivity (see Chapter 2). If change agency is identified primarily with models of centred agency it can become synonymous with the exercise of expert knowledge and power within structures as systems that order, control and potentially dominate human beings. If change agency is identified primarily with non-intentional or ‘embodied action’ it can become diffused within temporal processes of organizing that may have only a marginal impact on practice or outcomes and may limit change to the rhetorical negotiation and renegotiation of meaning within discourses of power (Gergin 1999, 2001a). One form of change agency is authorized by knowledge, expertise and power and a belief in the legitimacy of its moral and political ends, while the other seeks to transgress, redefine or de-rail the relationship between knowledge, expertise and power in the search for new innovative forms of organizing or new patterns of social
transformation. An adequate account of change agency must leave room for both: for rational intervention in ‘managing change’ and for the freedom to question, challenge and repudiate the meaning and goals of organizational change as well as the intervention techniques and expert tools used to achieve it. Ultimately, change agency is a synthetic category of creative human action. Its true ontological and epistemological centre of gravity lies in the enactments of practice that never fully conform to the intentional action models of rationalism or the purely self-referential limitations of reflexivity and embodiment within constructionist discourses.

Capturing the enormous complexity and potential scope of change agency in organizations is clearly a daunting and perhaps impossible task. The classification of the four discourses is therefore simply an attempt to provide an overarching meta-theoretical framework for exploring the nature of agency and change that straddles different and competing disciplinary discourses. The meta-theoretical task is essentially conceived as an overall attempt to: 1) gain a better understanding of competing disciplinary discourses and the diversity of theories; 2) develop an overall perspective on the nature of agency and change in organizations; 3) explore the difficulties in developing multi-disciplinary theories or models of organizational change (Van de Ven and Poole 1995), and 4) indicate, where appropriate, future avenues for empirical research.

While the four discourses provide a way to explore the meta-theoretical terrain of agency and change in organizations, they do not offer the prospect of a ‘grand theory’, meta-narrative or a new paradigm. A parallel search for synthesis has constantly been reinvented in sociological explorations of agency and structure, but without any success in achieving theoretical integration; and there are lessons here for other disciplines (Bourdieu 1990; Giddens 1984; Archer 2003).

One key theoretical lesson is not to separate organizational change and agency. When Van de Ven (1987) sets out the conditions for a robust theory of organizational change he demonstrates just how difficult it is to achieve this ambition. Such a theory must simultaneously demonstrate:

a) how structure and individual purposive action are linked at micro and macro levels of analysis; b) how change is produced both by the internal functioning of the structure and by the external purposive action of individuals; c) stability and instability; and d) how time can be included as a key historical metric.

(summarized by Chia 1999: 213)
This is an admirably inclusive set of requirements, and it appears to avoid many familiar traps. But what emerges when Van de Ven and Poole (1995) finally formalize these requirements into four ‘process’ models of organizational change (life cycle, teleological, dialectical and evolutionary) is a theorization that virtually excludes agency in the form of purposive or intentional action as a category of analysis, even though this is the very ‘subject’ foundation of their epistemology. Ultimately, it is impossible to have adequate theories of organizational change without including theories of agency.

Paradoxically, similar dangers are apparent in the emerging synthetic ambitions of constructionism and, in particular, various forms of ‘organizational discourse’ analysis (Gergin 2001a; Grant et al. 2004). Organizational discourse analysis often seeks to consolidate the exploration of ‘talk’, ‘text’ and ‘relational dialogue’ as a precursor to change through discourse, even though these discourses invariably sidestep purposeful action and under-theorize models of embodied agency. Taken in a strongly nominalist direction the key assumptions are that discourse and organizational change can apparently be theorized without a concept of agency and that organization/organizing only exists as discourse (Gergin 1992, 1999; Reed 1998). Of course, not all organizational discourse theorists would agree with this view.

Interestingly, the forms of organizational discourse that do seek to re-incorporate agency invariably return to Giddens’ ‘structuration theory’, although this reprise throws up almost as many problems as it appears to resolve (Heracleous and Hendry 2000: 1269). Currently, however, there is not even the remotest prospect of a synthetic ‘recontextualization’ of an overall ‘order of discourse’ that would somehow link micro-discourses on decentred agency to a more grandiose macro-level structural analysis of social order or social change: a move from discourses to Discourse. The strength of organizational discourse as an exploration of organizational change is its enormous plurality (Heracleous and Barrett 2001).

What are the broader implications of this frustrated search for synthesis? Perhaps the most important implication is that the oppositions and relationships between the concepts and dichotomies explored within a cultural or disciplinary field of discourse cannot be stated universally (Abbott 2001). Instead, the formulation and reformulation of concepts of agency and change depend on the specific theoretical discourses or practices within which they occur (Foucault 1994). Moreover, social ‘scientific’ knowledge of agency is itself a socially constructed discourse and practice that may simply reproduce old dichotomies in the
conceptual language of an apparently new paradigm (Hacking 1999). This epistemological dilemma presents a challenge not only to rationalism and purposeful action, but also to many versions of social constructionism which appear to affirm the nominalism of discourse analysis while somehow claiming to ‘critically’ transcend the dichotomies that underpin their often debilitating theorization of agency. In this respect, critical discourse analysis is always in danger of sliding from nominalism to realist reductionism or, worse still, a variant of monistic idealism (Gergin 2001a).

**Plan of the book**

**Chapter 1.** This chapter has given a brief overview of the scope and limitations of this book. It has outlined the four discourses that form the interpretative schema for the exploration of agency and change, and it has tried to indicate the potential multiplicity of theoretical and empirical forms of change agency in organizations.

**Chapter 2.** This chapter begins a sociological dialogue with Giddens’ work that recurs throughout the book. Giddens’ classic examination of ‘agency and structure’ is the natural starting point for an exploration of agency and change. However, the overall critical aim of the chapter is to provide a brief summary of the theoretical rationale for a shift from the debates over agency and structure towards a more intensive exploration of agency and change (Caldwell 2005b). This provides the unifying sociological thematic of the book as well as a programmatic research challenge for the exploration of the four discourses. Some readers, however, who want to go directly to the substantive exploration of the four discourses, may wish to skip this chapter.

The four middle chapters (3 to 6) focus on specific issues related to the four discourses. These chapters are primarily concerned with depth rather than coverage. They drill down into the rich vein of a specific disciplinary discourse or the work of a specific author, rather than surveying the surface terrain. A more comprehensive review of each set of discourses would require a far more ambitious study that this one, and a lot more time and energy.

**Chapter 3.** This chapter begins the substantive task of rethinking the concept of ‘change agency’ by an exploration of Kurt Lewin’s work. There have been virtually no serious attempts to explore the broader meaning and significance of change agency in Lewin’s work, or to trace the genealogy
of its many reinventions within the organizational development and action research traditions. This is a fateful omission. Change agency is central to Lewin’s commitment to rational action and democratic values, his belief in expert knowledge as reflexive feedback, and his overall liberal idealism regarding the self-reflective mediation of theory and practice, knowing and doing, science and action. Change agency is also central to the key ideas of ‘action science’, ‘process consultation’ and ‘reflective practice’ propounded by many of the leading advocates of the OD tradition; most notably Argyris (1982), Schein (1988) and Schöns (1983). But is a Lewinian-inspired idea of change agency still viable within the OD tradition or change management theory? In this chapter the limitations of Lewin’s concept of the change agent and its various reinterpretations are examined through an exploration of the four major conceptual components implicit in rationalist discourses of ‘centred agency’: rationality, expertise, autonomy and reflexivity. It is argued that this disciplinary discourse is no longer sustainable because it is based on an understanding of organizational change that is linear, rational and expert driven. If the action research and OD traditions are to find new models of change agency they must rethink the dualisms of subject–object, research–practice, knowledge–action that have plagued their understanding of agency and change for decades. This requires a far-reaching search for new practice-based and distributive models of decentred agency, rational inquiry, moral discourse and knowledge creation.

Chapter 4. This chapter provides a long-overdue examination of contextualism through a detailed critical examination of the work of Andrew Pettigrew (1987, 1997). Pettigrew is the leading proponent of a contextualist discourse on organizational change and strategic choice. But what is contextualism? Does it offer a coherent challenge to opposing models of organizational change that emphasize rationalism, causal contingencies or the efficacy of structure over agency? Here it will be argued that contextualism as a theory of the ‘embeddedness’ of agency and change in organizations has four major weaknesses. First, contextualism does not provide a coherent understanding of organizational structure–organizational change as a dynamic interplay between systems and process, continuity and change. Instead, contextual analysis highlights the processual nature of organizational change, while underplaying the potentially macro or broader system characteristics of organizational structures. A truly coherent theory must seek to incorporate both. Second, Pettigrew uses the idea of ‘outer and inner’ context to undermine structural/system concepts of
organizations or their environments, effectively turning context into a holistic image of organizational change processes that are primarily incremental, open-ended and indeterminate. Organizational change therefore invariably appears as *incrementalism with transitions*. Third, Pettigrew’s focus on the micro-dynamics of organizational politics and power is designed to emphasize constraint while simultaneously undermining determinism and emphasizing choice. Yet, paradoxically, it also underplays the exploration of leadership and change agency in organizations. In this respect contextualism, despite its emphasis on agency and choice, does not offer a ‘contextual theory of leadership’, or an understanding of the processes of leading change. Fourth, contextualism does not provide a theory of practice, and so its claims to provide ‘practically useful knowledge’ and a liberal model of engaged scholarship are difficult to sustain. Finally, it will be concluded that contextualism needs to be contextualized as the rhetorical discourse of *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu 1988). As such it is not a coherent theoretical challenge to rationalist models of organization and strategic change, but rather a modest reaffirmation of the virtues of scholarship, individual choice and liberal humanism.

**Chapter 5.** This chapter explores complexity theories as just one of the numerous and growing varieties of dispersalist discourses on agency and change in organizations. Complexity theories of organizations have become enormously influential partly because they offer system-based concepts for exploring non-linear change and the ‘hyper-complexity’ of network organizations and societies as well as the growing challenges of simultaneously managing order and chaos within ‘informational capitalism’ (Castells 2000). However, recent attempts to re-work chaos and complexity theories of natural systems as ‘process’, ‘interactional’ or ‘network’ versions of ‘complex adaptive systems’ are partly attempts to reconnect systems theory with the idea of ‘decentred agency’ (Anderson 1999; Stacey 2001). Rather than macro-structural models of system change, complex adaptive systems attempt to theorize agent-based models of decentred agency as modes of self-organization. This requires a shift from the generative rules of systemic entities to the self-organizing ‘schemata’ of interaction between agents: a precarious move from systems as structural entities at the edge of chaos to systems as ‘processes’ of change founded on decentred agency. Is this apparent shift in the organizational focus of complexity theory credible or convincing? Can complexity theories offer a theory of agential dispersal, distributed leadership and change agency in organizations
that keeps at bay the spectre of chaos – the collapse of the virtuous system coupling of chaos–order? To answer these questions two overlapping sets of questions are explored. First, can complexity theories reconcile the concept of ‘system’ as a functional entity with a ‘process’ or evolutionary overview of organizational change? What happens if one takes away the functionalist and evolutionary assumptions of system concepts and replaces them with a processual ontology of change (Chia 1999; Van de Ven and Poole 1995)? Second, is the concept of ‘agency’ in complexity theory simply the outcome of self-organizing rules of micro-interaction? Does this decentering of agency mean that individuals cannot exercise autonomy or reflexivity in the choice of ends? Conversely, if agents are free to follow their own self-organizing rules how is order and change possible? Will self-organization as agential dispersal lead to a reinstatement of chaos as the antithesis of order? After briefly examining these questions it is concluded that complexity theories of agential dispersal in organizations are in serious danger of falling apart as they stray into the territory of constructionist discourses of decentered agency and a processual ontology of change.

Chapter 6. Michel Foucault’s work appears to mark an important break with conventional ontological dualism, epistemological realism and rationalist and intentional notions of individual action and human agency. In these respects his ideas have had an enormous influence on constructionist discourses as well as postmodern organization theory and analysis. In particular, Foucault’s ideas have lead to a rejection of agency–structure dichotomies and a move towards process-based ontologies of ‘organizing/changing’ that create a new problematic of change without agency. While this has often provoked a counter-reaction against the corrosive influence of postmodernism, there have been few attempts to explore how the decentering of the subject within constructionist discourses is related to new, more positive and potentially emancipatory discourses that redefine the relationship between agency and change in organizations and society. Does the fall of the subject also allow for the creative emergence of a multiplicity of new forms of agency? Here it will be argued that Foucault’s legacy can be re-conceptualized as a theorization of the decentering of agency consisting of four key components: discourse, power/knowledge, embodiment and self-reflexivity. Redefined within Foucauldian constructionist discourses, decentered agency can lead to new possibilities for the creation of ‘embodied agency’ and the dispersal of
agency in organizations. It will be concluded, however, that Foucault-inspired constructionist discourses and organizational theory leave us with few answers on how to reconnect decentred agency with change agendas derived from its apparent conceptual opposite: the activist, politically engaged and potentially autonomous epistemological and moral subject of Enlightenment rationalism and humanist discourses. Until Foucauldian organizational theory and constructionist discourses re-engage with rationalist discourses of intentional agency they will remain fundamentally flawed in their theorization of the relationship between agency and change in organizations and societies.

Chapter 7. Finally, the theoretical implications of a temporal, fragmented and non-cumulative understanding of knowledge and action for the future of change agency as a research field are discussed. It is concluded that as organizational theories of change and human agency become more fragmented it is becoming increasingly difficult to construct an ideal of change agency as a basis of knowledge, action or practice.

The plan of the book clearly reflects its scope and limits. But if every act of selection is by definition an act of exclusion this should not be taken as derogative. Many authors deserve a much more extensive treatment, but that would be a very long book. Nor should the selection process be assumed to be purely idiosyncratic – although one cannot completely avoid this criticism. A whole chapter on the work of Andrew Pettigrew and contextualism may seem excessive homage to some readers, while an engagement with complexity theory and organizational change may seem far removed from an exploration of change agency. There is, however, a strong rationale for selection in that chapters 3 to 6 address the core issues of theorizing agency and change central to each of the four sets of discourses. In terms of an overall sequence it is also appropriate that the book essentially begins with Giddens and ends with Foucault, for they provide powerful theoretical counter-images of agency.

A note for readers

As a search for synthesis this book presents particular problems for readers – and for the author. At least four should be noted.

First, the focus is primarily theoretical. The aim is to clear pathways through a confusing terrain and map out new areas for more detailed empirical investigation. In clearing pathways one has had to explore epistemological and ontological issues of ‘agency’ and ‘change’ that may
appear remote from the practice of change agency, and this is likely to be frustrating for some readers. By way of an apology one can only say that the empirical challenge as mapped out here will be taken up in a complementary volume to this study.

Second, the book is a curious mix of intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary ambition, with the result that disciplinary boundaries are often ignored. Change agency as a hybrid subject area is treated as a sub-field of organizational theory, which is in turn a sub-discipline of sociological theory. It is also explored across the conventional domains of organizational development practice, the less conventional arena of strategic change, as well as within the potentially synthetic paradigm of complexity theory. Treating these discourses in a unifying problem-solving manner does not make for easy reading. The ideal reader, however, is one who wishes to engage with these competing discourses and build bridges between them.

Third, the true disciplinary centre of gravity of this book is sociological rather than an extension of management thought, although the overarching commitment is to ‘practice’ above all, rather than the virtues of grand sociological theorizing. Giddens and Foucault figure prominently in this book but they are not the heroes within the narrative; the real heroes are those in search of creative new methods and strategies of change through practice. Some readers may find this judgement disconcerting, others will welcome it.

Fourth, and finally, there is a constant tendency to take a long view of the issues discussed and this introduces an historical note of scepticism with regard to the present. Change agency theory has not come a long way over the past fifty years and this presents an unpalatable message for those who wish to further theory and practice. For those readers looking to the future, however, the challenge is to rethink the subject and reinvent practice.