

***Processes of culture change in organisations - the  
contribution of an external facilitator***

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Submitted to the University of Hertfordshire in partial fulfilment for the  
requirements of the degree of DMan

January 2005

# Abstract

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This thesis explores processes of organisational and culture change as experienced by an external consultant/facilitator. Through a reflexive inquiry into my own experience of how change happens, I have come to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about organisations as 'systems' where change is 'driven' by leadership or project teams. I am suggesting that 'organisations' are *people in conversation* and that change happens because individuals participate actively in organisational conversations and act courageously into unknown and risky situations.

The mainstream systemic perspective on 'organisational culture' is that it is a 'thing' with causal 'power'. I am arguing against this and present a process perspective of organisational culture, where culture is understood as the continuously changing configuration of interweaving themes organising the experience of people who participate in the social processes of being an organisation. Culture change is then changes in organising themes. Change occurs through the actions of individuals with each action having the potential to shift or maintain organising themes.

I carefully explored the difference in the kinds of constraints experienced by internal-permanent and external-temporary members of organisations and came to the conclusion that the 'internal' / 'external' distinction is a false dichotomy. Externals (like internals) are constrained through their interdependence - they are not free to do whatever they want. This leads to a re-consideration of the 'contribution' of an external. I am arguing that externals and internals make a contribution to processes of organisational and cultural change when they participate actively in political processes of inclusion/exclusion. I conclude by suggesting that it might be possible to facilitate cultural and organisational change through processes of persuasion and offer a process perspective on persuasion through sensemaking (as opposed to mainstream perspectives on persuasion that is based on a sender-receiver model of communication).

This thesis is the 'result' of a personal journey of change in practice and identity which leads me to argue that change happens through planned, formal, legitimate 'events' as well as through informal everyday activities (doing, thinking and talking). I am arguing that it is important for practitioners to pay attention to their participation in the organisational processes of 'going on together'.

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# Introduction and Invitation

## Introducing myself and my inquiry

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### Changing places - from external to internal and back again

I want to introduce my inquiry with a story:

A little more than a decade ago, I was working for a 'Big 5' consultancy firm in South Africa, when I was invited to join TrendSet<sup>1</sup> (one of my client organisations) as an internal 'change agent'. The Managing Director (MD) told me that he thought I would be able to make a contribution to their organisation. When I asked him why he thought so, he mentioned things like: my international consulting and project management experience, the fact that I have an MBA, my willingness to speak up about things that others are generally more reluctant to talk about, the different perspective I seem to bring to the party, etc. He told me that he thought I had 'gutspah'<sup>2</sup>, and that he needed someone like me to help him challenge some of the things that were taken-for-granted in their organisation.

I was excited about this new role. Having worked as an external consultant for 7 years before this invitation (and having been quite lonely at times), I thought this new role would give me an opportunity to *belong* to an organisation *and* play a role as change agent. However, it was only a matter of months before I started to feel silenced and constrained in ways that I had never experienced whilst working as an external consultant. I was told that I was too challenging, that I needed to tone down my enthusiasm, that I needed to show more respect for the established ways of doing things and not challenge the directors. It was not long before I felt I had lost my voice. I felt hugely at risk and felt that I was no longer able to make a creative contribution as it felt as if I was 'walking on eggs' all the time - I had to be so careful about not upsetting all these important people (directors and senior managers). After 6 months in the role and much soul-searching I decided to leave the organisation and join another consultancy firm. A few months later, I was invited to meet with the TrendSet Board to share my thoughts about a project I had been working on while still at the organisation (something I had been unable to do for about 2 months before finally leaving).

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym for a large clothing retailer in South Africa

<sup>2</sup> A word used by the South African jewish community that means 'guts' or 'nerve'

I chose this story to introduce my inquiry as I think it encapsulates the essence of the two strands of my inquiry:

- ***Working as an external (rather than internal) consultant***, and
- ***Making a contribution to processes of organisational and cultural change***

I have been grappling with questions such as: *Why does it feel important to work as an external rather than internal consultant? How does the experience of being constrained differ for an internal member of an organisation and for an external consultant? How do I understand 'cultural change' and what are the implications of this way of thinking? To what extent is it possible to help change the organisational culture when you are an internal? How can I make a convincing argument for my contribution to processes of organisational and cultural change?*

Over the last three years, I have been exploring these questions (and many others) in relation to my own practice as external consultant/facilitator. My objective with my research was two-fold:

- To become more confident in my ability to account for my own practice and contribution;
- To make a contribution to ways of thinking and talking about organisational and cultural change, thereby contributing to the development of practice.

Throughout my working career, I have felt more able to make a contribution as an 'external' (ie not on the payroll of a client organisation) as I have felt less constrained in what I am able to do and say. However, through my research I have discovered that the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' is a false dichotomy. All of us (permanent or temporary members of organisations) are always involved in political processes of inclusion/exclusion where our experience of being included/excluded keeps changing in the various groups we find ourselves participating. I have discovered that our sense of identity is inextricably linked to our sense of membership (and experiences of belonging/not belonging), which explains why it sometimes feels so risky to behave in ways that are not conforming with 'the culture'. To 'speak out' or 'challenge the status quo' is to put one's membership at risk, thereby risking one's sense of identity. My research has been around the implications and consequences of these processes.

## **My professional practice**

I work as a consultant/facilitator in the field of Organisational Development (OD). My practice is informed by 20 years of involvement in major change initiatives. For the first 15 years of my career, I was involved in Systems Implementations in various capacities: systems analyst, software developer, project manager and implementation / 'change management' consultant. My work with people in organisations fuelled my interest in Organisational Development (OD) work, which is where I have focused my efforts over the last few years. In the last five years, I have lived and worked in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Europe where I have worked mostly with global organisations and major change programs. During this time, I worked as a member of two consulting organisations (Business Change Consulting<sup>3</sup> and Duneford Organisational Consulting<sup>4</sup>). At the time of writing this, I am working as an independent consultant with a global Pharmaceutical organisation as their cultural change advisor (more about this in my fourth project).

## **The field of 'organisational culture'**

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In this thesis, I will be exploring my own experience of being involved in processes of organisational change, with a particular focus on organisational culture change. Over the last few years, 'organisational culture' has become a field of interest for many scholars and practitioners. It may be useful to briefly consider the history of the field as background to my inquiry.

The current interest in organisational culture stems from the 1970s work on 'organisational climate' which aimed to identify the organisational 'qualities' in the form of attitudes and beliefs that employees hold about their organisation (Wiley & Brooks, 2000). Climate was defined as a 'relatively enduring quality of an organisation that (1) is experienced by employees and (2) influences their behaviour' (Brown, 1998:2). However, what these studies found is that employees often do not agree on what it is like to work for the organisation, and that it was necessary to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the social context in which people worked.

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym for a niche consultancy - specialising in 'change management'

<sup>4</sup> A pseudonym for a Consultancy that is linked to a Business School, specialising in Organisational Development

In the eighties, Peters and Waterman's (1982) popular book *In Search of Excellence* brought 'culture' to the attention of managers and employees in organisations (they claimed that superior firm performance is to be achieved by moving away from a technical, rationalistic approach to a more adaptive, humanistic approach). At the same time, Deal and Kennedy (1982) suggested that organisational performance is enhanced through shared values (as these values inform employees what is expected of them). The Eighties and Nineties followed with an increased interest in Human Resource Management (HRM) as a way of getting the most from the organisation's 'most important resource' (people). Managers, consultants and business school professors became interested to study the link between the organisation's culture (and its people processes) and its profitability (e.g. Collins & Porras, 2000; Cooke & Szumal, 2000; Gratton, 2000; Kotter & Heskett, 1992).

### **Definitions of 'organisational culture'**

There is little consensus between scholars about the definition of culture. Scholars seem to be divided on whether to consider culture as a *state* or as *human processes*. Schein (who is widely regarded as one of the key scholars in the field of organisational culture), describes the different positions as follows:

A chronic issue in conceptualising 'culture' seems to be whether we should think of cultures as a 'state' or static property of a given group / organisation or as a human process of constructing shared meaning that goes on all the time

(Schein in Ashkanasy, Wilderom, Peterson, 2000: xxiv)

In his foreword to the Handbook of Organisational Culture (Ashkany et al., 2000) Schein suggests that it does not matter whether one chooses to focus one's attention on the qualities of the system, or on the nature of the moment-to-moment interactions between people as 'both of these are valid methodologies' (p. xxv). However, I agree with Stacey, Griffin and Shaw (2000) that one's ways of thinking matters greatly as it largely determines what one chooses to pay attention to. I will therefore briefly consider the main arguments of the '**Culture as System**' school of thought, and the implications of this way of thinking. In my research text (Projects two, three and four), I will be considering the implications of a different perspective on culture - '**Culture as Process**' (a continuously changing phenomenon that is shaping and being shaped by the day-to-day interaction of people in organisations). In the synopsis, I will summarise my argument in offering a **process perspective on culture** and how this perspective might lead us to think differently about cultural change and the role of an external facilitator in processes of cultural change.

## **Culture as System**

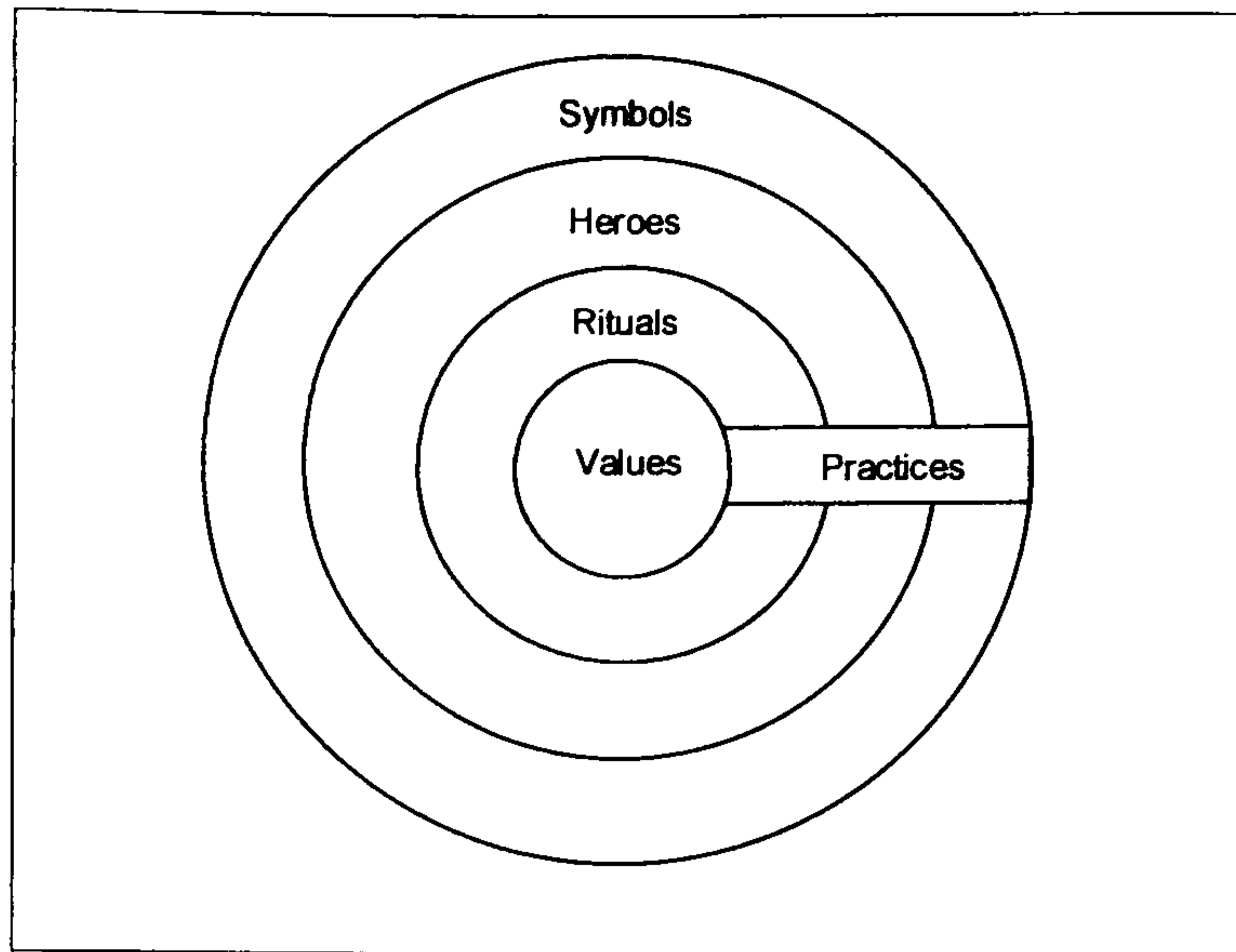
In this school of thought, Culture is viewed as an entity, a 'thing' to be examined and analysed. Schein ([1992] 1997) suggests that culture is 'created, embedded and developed' and can be 'manipulated, managed and changed' (p. 1). He argues that the 'dynamic processes of culture creation and management are the essence of leadership' and that leadership and culture are 'two sides of the same coin'. Schein goes further to suggest that cultures begin with leaders who 'impose their own values and assumptions on a group'. However, the time may come that the culture needs changing. When this happens, leaders need to be able to 'step outside the culture' and to develop a new, more appropriate culture. Schein argues that leaders (and organisational practitioners) need to understand culture, so that they would not be so 'puzzled, irritated, and anxious' when they encounter 'seemingly irrational behaviour' of people in organisations (p. 5). Another reason why Schein argues that we need to understand culture, is that it will help us to change 'it'. For Schein, an important characteristic of culture is that it is 'shared', 'deep' and 'stable'. Where groups do not have a 'shared culture', situations are full of conflict and ambiguity. However, argues he, humans have a need for stability, consistency and meaning and will therefore always strive for '*patterning and integration*' (p. 11, italics mine).

There are many definitions of culture which reflect many different understandings of what 'culture' means. Brown (1998) lists 14 different definitions of culture and mentions that in 1952, the anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified 164 different definitions of culture. Schein ([1992] 1997) offers a definition of culture that is widely used by others and consistent with most definitions from scholars who come from the 'culture as system' school of thought: He defines culture as

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to these problems (p. 12)

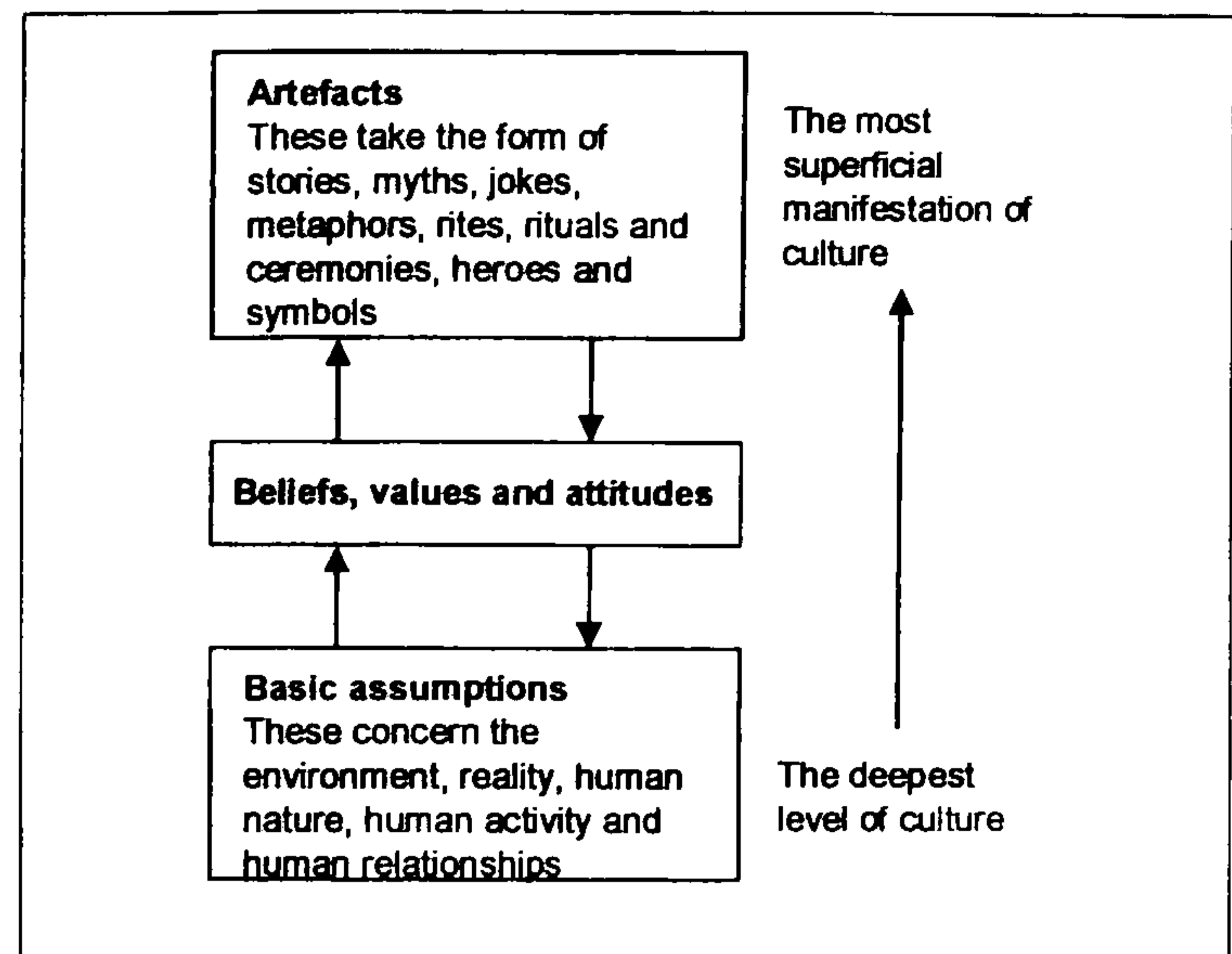
In the ***Culture as Systems*** school of thought, practitioners are focussed on 'diagnosis' and 'intervention'. Theorists have developed different models to enable the diagnostic phase and generally present these in terms of 'levels' of culture (see figure 1 and 2 below for two of the most popular models)





**Figure 1: Manifestations of culture from shallow to deep**

Source: Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D. Sanders, G. (1990)



**Figure 2 : Levels of culture and their interaction**

Source: adapted from Schein ([1992] 1997)

When I first became interested in OD and culture work, I found these kinds of models helpful in that they helped me to know where to focus my attention. For example: Schein's model suggests an interaction between beliefs, values and attitudes, which in turn influences behaviour. I interpreted this to mean that behavioural change can be facilitated by changing people's basic assumptions (as this will have an impact on their beliefs, values and attitudes etc). I studied the work of Schein ([1992] 1997; 1999), Argyris (1990) and Senge ([1990] 1999) and developed various tools and techniques that I thought would enable me to 1) uncover basic assumptions, 2) understand values and beliefs, 3) facilitate change. I also used these models to account for my practice and often used them to explain to clients what I thought I was doing. However, it only took a few assignments to realise how simplistic these models are. What I found most troubling, was the suggestion that it is possible to consider the culture of the 'whole' organisation, which implies that all the people in the organisation have 'shared' assumptions, or 'shared' beliefs and values. When there are hundreds of people in an organisation, it is very difficult to identify anything that is 'shared'. Schein's position on this is that we should then consider 'subcultures' within the larger organisation and identify those beliefs and assumptions that are true across the organisation. Schein's focus is on similarities between people (what is 'shared'). I am arguing that, by focusing on *similarities*, we are likely to ignore conflict & diversity which I have come to understand as important for the emergence of novelty (Stacey, 2003b; Fonseca, 2002).

Another implication of the systems perspective is that an organisation is seen as an 'it', with the culture being seen as 'something' (a system) that is *created* through the

interaction of people, which will then influence further interaction. My discomfort with these kinds of neat systemic models is that the sense of process, fluidity, messiness and movement of organisational life get lost in the reified<sup>5</sup> representations of culture.

My understanding of culture as a system had important implications for how I saw my role as consultant. I understood my role as a 'designer' of the 'system' who would work with a leader or 'management' to 'design' a 'better' culture. I saw myself and the 'design team' I was working with as somehow 'outside' the 'system'. It also influenced my understanding of culture change. Schein draws on the work of Kurt Lewin (1951) and suggests that the appropriate 'methodology' for culture change is to:

- Unfreeze the current culture by providing the 'motivation to change' (p. 298);
- Restructure the culture (through 'cognitive restructuring' ); and
- Refreeze the new culture

Most culture change models (see Brown (1998) for a detailed exploration of five of these models) are, like Schein's model, mostly based on a systems understanding of organisations and are concerned with large-scale changes of the 'whole system' through planned processes of intervention which is heavily dependent on the leader (as designer and implementer of a new culture)

Through the process of my research, I have come to realise that it is never possible to be *outside* any process of interaction, and that it makes little sense to talk about culture as something that can be 'designed' or 'restructured' or 'implemented'. As I engaged with the literature around culture change, I started to 'hear' the many questions that were being raised about the idea of culture change as a *planned process* (e.g. Brown, 1998; Stacey, 2003b ; Shaw, 2002). I also became aware of how many others were struggling with the practical applications of concepts such as 'shared assumptions and beliefs' (e.g. Cooke & Szumal, 2000; Hatch, 2000) in large organisations and suggestions that it is possible to change the culture of the 'whole system' (eg. Ashkany et al., 2000; Sathe & Davidson, 2002). Brown (1998) suggests that much of the current interest in organisational culture stems from an interest to understand the political and social processes in organisation. However, I have not found the systemic models useful in developing my understanding of the complex social processes amongst people in organisations. As a practitioner, I needed a different way of understanding organisations and 'culture' in particular. In Projects

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<sup>5</sup> New Oxford Dictionary of English (Pearsall, 2001): **Reify**: make (something abstract) more concrete or real

two, three and four, I will be exploring the implications of a theory of **organisations as complex responsive processes** for my practice as facilitator and I will be returning to offer a process perspective on culture in the Synopsis.

## **An invitation to organisational change practitioners and scholars**

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Lincoln (1997) suggests that our imagined readers have an impact on our writing: 'The choice of audience, the conscious imagining of those who might read our work, will have some influence on who are in text' (p. 41). I am imagining that this thesis will be read by other organisational change practitioners and scholars in the field - people who are interested in organisational change and the potential role of change agents in this process. In my experience, these people come in many guises: they work as advisors, consultants, academics, facilitators, project leaders, researchers and managers in organisations.

I work mostly as an external consultant / facilitator. However, I spent a large part of 2003 grappling with the experience of joining a new organisation which made me realise how misleading these 'labels' are - suggesting **states** of '*internal*' or '*external*', when we are actually always in-process (joining and leaving groups). One of the discoveries I made through my research is how language acts as a constraint - making it difficult to hold on to the sense of 'process' when we write about our experiences. Mary Follett (1924) argues that we need to focus on the *continuing activity* of our experience in the world, and suggests that we should use *verbs* rather than *nouns* when talking about our experiences and the development of knowledge: 'I think it is better when practicable to keep to verbs; *the value of nouns is chiefly for post mortems*' (p. 88, italics added). In paper three, I explore my experience of *becoming* more of an internal (having joined a new organisation from the outside) without ever feeling that my 'state' has changed from external to internal. My exploration covered the political processes and the insider/outsider dynamics associated with processes of joining and I hope that this exploration will encourage my readers to re-think their assumptions about the joining process and the role of newcomers to organisations.

My research text is not presented as a traditional social science report in 'academic prose' (Tierny, 1997). Instead, I am writing in a way that will hopefully be accessible and interesting to other practitioners (Gergen, 2003) (even those who do not usually

read academic texts). I am hoping that my readers will recognise their own experience in my stories and that this will lead them think and reflect with me on our various endeavours in organisations. For the large part of my portfolio (specifically papers one to four), I am inviting you to join me on an exploratory journey as I reflect on the stories of my own experience and the sense I made of these experiences (Weick, 1995). Having gone through this joint inquiry and exploration, I will not attempt to offer any 'objective truths'. Instead, I will conclude my thesis by offering the 'practical theory' (Shotter, [1993] 2000; Cunliffe, 2003) that has emerged through my research. I will argue for a different perspective on cultural change and the 'contribution' of permanent/temporary members of organisations. I will suggest that culture is not a stable 'thing', but that it may be more useful to think of culture as a configuration of continuously-evolving *themes* that organise processes of interaction in organisations. I will argue that it is impossible to 'change the culture of an organisation' outside of these processes of interaction, but that it is possible to influence the cultural themes through active participation in the formal/informal and legitimate/shadow organisational processes. I will also suggest that all of us (permanent-internal/temporary-external members of organisations) are always involved in political processes of inclusion/exclusion that are inextricably linked with experience of membership and identity. This means that we are constrained in what we can or cannot do because of our interdependence on each other. I am arguing that it is important for external consultants to acknowledge the nature of their involvement in these political processes and the constraints arising from these processes, rather than holding on to an illusion of being 'unaffected by the internal politics'.

# Methodology

My methodology is quite different from the 'usual' PhD process of hypothesis → literature studies → research → thesis. It is therefore important to say something about my research methodology before sharing my research text.

## Researching organisations - a complex responsive process

My purpose with doing this Doctoral programme of research was to develop a better understanding of the experience of people in organisations. My starting point was the provocations offered by members of the Complexity and Management Centre at the Business School of the University of Hertfordshire who developed a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes and published a book series called *Complexity and Emergence in Organisations* (Stacey *et al*, 2000; Stacey, 2001; Griffin, 2002; Streatfield 2001; Fonseca, 2002; Shaw, 2002). In this series, Stacey and his colleagues argue for a different perspective on organisations - as complex **processes** of relating rather than **systems**. According to this perspective, interactions do not produce a 'thing' (or system) outside of interactions. Patterns of interaction just lead to further patterns of interaction. This perspective gives rise to questions about research and method: How are we to study organisations as *processes* of interaction? If there is no 'system' to study, what should we study?

In the introduction, I shared some of my discomforts with the 'systems' view of organisations. I saw this particular doctoral programme as an opportunity to take these discomforts seriously, but it also required me to re-think my assumptions about research. When one considers organisations as complex processes of interaction, it does not make sense to want to study 'it' from outside of these processes of interaction, to take up the position of 'detached observer' (Lincoln, 1997). The only 'valid' method of study is to study these processes from within - as a participant in the processes of organising (Stacey & Griffin, *Forthcoming*). It is therefore necessary (and important) for me to study own experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as a practitioner (Polkinghorne, 1988). In their exploration of various forms of personal narrative, Ellis & Bochner (2000) argue for the importance of making the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right. They point to the extent to which this kind of research is valuable for the researcher (as he/she comes to understand him/herself in deeper ways which leads to understanding of others) and readers of their stories (who might find new insights

from reading the researcher's stories). In choosing my own experience as the focus of my research, I am *taking my own experience seriously*. But what does this mean in practice? What is an appropriate 'method' for researching personal experience?

### **Locating my method of inquiry in the history of Qualitative Research**

Researching experience is clearly not something that lends itself to a *Quantitative* research methodology, so I turned to the body of *Qualitative* Research. In their *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Denzin & Lincoln (2000) set out to explore the field of Qualitative Inquiry; the state of play at the beginning of the new millennium. Most of Qualitative Research, with its roots in Sociology and Anthropology, is concerned with understanding 'the other' (Vidich & Lyman, 2000:38). For many years, researchers have worked on an assumption that it is possible for the researcher to remain as an 'objective observer' to the research process - while researching 'the other', they could remain 'outside' of the research process. However, from the mid 1980's, different groups of social researchers have been challenging this assumption, arguing that it is impossible for the researcher to remain 'outside' the research process. There is a call for 'reflexivity' - researchers are urged to reflect critically on themselves as researcher, and how they are contributing to the research process (Reed-Danahy, 1997). Constructivists in particular, argued that the researcher, as 'gendered, multiculturally situated researcher is actively involved in the process of research – co-creating the results with his/her 'subjects'. The interest moves from a positivist interest in 'what is real', to social processes of sense-making and meaning-making (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It is also during this time that small groups of researchers turned to researching themselves and their own experience. Researcher became 'subject' in various forms of autoethnography and personal experience methods (e.g. Reed-Danahy, 1997; Ellis, 1997; Ellis, 2004) – making it possible for researchers to overcome abstractions and generalisations and, instead 'capture those elements that make life conflictual, moving, problematic' (Lincoln & Guba, 2000:179).

### **Researching experience – the method I developed for my research**

I did not use a ready-made off-the-shelf methodology for my research, but have been developing a methodology that seems to be appropriate for my task and consistent with my developing understanding of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating. Lincoln & Denzin (2000) borrow Levi-Straus' term 'bricoleur' to describe this aspect of the researcher's task – to use the tools and

strategies available to create a method that is appropriate for the specific inquiry. They describe research as 'improvisation', a process of creating something new where the various aspects of the process shape and define each other.

I have come to see my own research as a social process where I am engaged in a process of responding to others and to myself in my public and private conversations. In this thesis, I will be following Stacey and his colleagues (2000) in arguing that all social processes are self-organising and emergent processes. I have experienced the emergent and social nature of this process in that my inquiry has taken me down various paths in ways that I could never have predicted or imagined but I always found myself returning to the core question of ***the contribution of an external facilitator to processes of organisational and cultural change***.

Although it was *my* research, I could not control or predict the outcome of this self-organising emergent process. My inquiry and my method were paradoxically forming and being formed by the research process. This means that I could only describe my method in retrospect (Vidich & Lyman, 2000) by telling the story of how I went about the research process, by telling my *writing story* (Richardson, 2000).

### **Writing *reflective narrative* – evocative stories about my experience**

There is no absolute beginning to my research process. I am always continuing from where I was before. As an embodied human being, I am not able to split thought and action. I am acting and thinking *simultaneously*, making sense of my experience whilst taking the next step. As Denzin & Lincoln (2000) point out, it is impossible to research *experience itself* – the best we can do is to consider the stories we tell about these experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Cunliffe, 2003). We make sense (Weick, 1995) of our experiences through our narratives about our experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bolton, 2001, Søderberg, 2003). During my research, when I have felt particularly challenged or intrigued about an encounter with clients or colleagues – I wrote a reflective narrative about the 'micro detail' (Stacey & Griffin, forthcoming) of this experience. I did not write to share something I knew. Through writing about an experience, I *discovered* what I thought about it (Ellis, 1997). As Richardson says, 'I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something I did not know before I wrote it' (p. 924). I do not do research and then 'write-up' the results of my research. My writing is in itself a method of inquiry (Ellis, 1997; Richardson, 2000), a form of 'meaning-making' (Polkinghorne, 1988) that 'can lead to unexpected insights and new ways of knowing' (Bolton, 2001)

Over time I realised that I learnt more from exploring experiences where my sense of identity felt at risk than writing about experiences or aspects of my practice that I felt confident about. For example, when I joined Duneford Organisational Consulting (see Project three), I initially resisted writing about my experience of *joining* as it felt too emotionally challenging to use this experience as research material. My attempts to write about 'design' (something I feel quite comfortable with) turned out to be dull and uninteresting for myself and others. It required me to take a deep breath and confront the challenging situation I was grappling with before the inquiry came to life. When asked about her autoethnographic work, Ellis (2004) speaks to this experience:

I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself... I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so (p. 33)

My research is more than a *reflective* process. It is also a *reflexive* process. There are many different definitions for reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2003) but when I refer to my research as reflexive, I am thinking of the reflexive process that Mead ([1934] 1967) describes as 'turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself' (p. 134), where the individual re-interpret his/her own experience and practice from a new vantage point (Hatch, 1997), in a process that transforms identity and understanding of the present. Steier (1991) reminds us that the 'self' to which the bending back refers is socially constructed. We are therefore talking about a 'circular process, in which reflexivity is the guiding relationship allowing for the circularity' (p. 2). As I reflect on my narratives, I also reflect on my own life history and how previous experiences have shaped my participation and the assumptions and values that influence the ways in which I reflect and make sense of 'ordinary everyday' experience (Bolton, 2001; Cunliffe, 2003; Stacey & Griffin, forthcoming). It is impossible to separate who I am and who we are (my 'I'-identity and our 'we'-identity)) and what I and we do. My narratives express something of my and our identities and the iterative process of reflecting and rethinking the assumptions underpinning my stories and the sense I make of these stories has the potential to shift my sense of who I am and what I do (Ellis, 1997; Bolton, 2001; Ellis, 2004). These circular processes of reflexive reflection and sense-making (Steier, 1991) also affect my professional practice. I will illustrate both the movement of my thought, changes to my sense of identity and the changes in my practice through my papers.



## **Research as a complex responsive process – conversations with others about my stories**

I understand research as a complex *social* process from which knowledge emerges (Stacey, 2001). The DMAN programme design embodied this perspective by bringing together a community of researchers to reflect together on the sense that we were all making of our experience. I have always found that I achieve more in conversation with others than I would on my own. When I spend too much time thinking about something, I get stuck in repetitive patterns. However, when I talk with others about my work, these conversations lead to new ideas and insights. In my thesis, I will be showing how I have come to see conversation as an organising process through which change emerge (Shaw, 2002).

The practical implication of this approach for my Doctoral research was that I would write a narrative about my experience, spend many hours thinking and writing until I got to a point where I felt I needed to talk with others about it. I would then share it with other people in my research community – always with the three members of my learning set and my supervisor and often with other people in my community of practice (colleagues, clients and other interested people). I asked them to read my story and to share their responses with me. I preferred to discuss their reaction to my writing in face-to-face conversation with them but it was not always possible. Sometimes I had to be content with a short telephone conversation or comments by email. My friends and colleagues offered their thoughts on my story – which aspects of my story they found interesting or meaningful – which aspects ‘said something’ to them, which aspects connected with their reality (Vidich & Lyman, 2000:39). In their responses, they often asked more questions, like *‘when I read this ..., I was wondering about ...?’* or *‘what do you mean by...?’* or *‘are you really suggesting that...? I don’t agree with you. I think we should talk about this a bit more’* or *‘You really made me think here...I would like to talk to you about the work I am doing...’*. My conversations with others often led me to re-think some of the assumptions I made, or to re-consider or strengthen my argument. Most of my new insights came when I disagreed with others and felt the need to justify my perspective. Stacey & Griffin (forthcoming) argues that conflict and disagreement is essential for the movement of thought.

Sometimes, the comments from others were more along the lines of the kinds of comments that a good editor would make – offering suggestions on how to make it easier for the reader to remain engaged in my story *‘I think you need to explain*

*why...*. or suggesting that I tighten a specific section. I came to see 'writing as a social process' (Ellis, 2004:170), as I revised and rewrote in response to the reactions of my readers (Ellis, 1997). For the next 4-12 months of my life (depending on how long it took to complete the project in question), this inquiry became an inextricable part of my life. In Judy Marshall's words: 'I lived life as inquiry' (Marshall, 1999). I incorporated the comments from others in my writings and re-wrote parts of the story in response to further conversations and experiences. I began to *recognise* the theme of my inquiry in encounters with others and found myself 'high-jacking' conversations to talk about processes of belonging and power relating.

Throughout this process, I continuously went back to my earlier writing – sending later iterations to my colleagues for their responses. As I re-read my earlier writings, new questions were opened up and new insights emerged. My experience with each iteration was that it became more and more challenging – requiring me to reflect critically on my earlier reflections and interpretations of events. This was often not easy for me. As Carolyn Ellis (2000) explains to one of her prospective students:

The self-questioning autoethnography is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering...honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain (p. 738).

### **Engaging with literature and other sources – another kind of conversation**

Whilst engaged in conversations with others, I turned to the literature – to read what others have to say about the themes emerging from my inquiry. In the process of reading, I found myself engaged in a dialectic process of '*bumping up*' against things which I disagreed with, and other times agreeing passionately with what I was reading. All of these readings influenced my writing, and in some cases, I chose to bring the voices of these authors into my text. Richardson (2000) calls this way of locating one's text 'into the literatures and traditions of social science' (p. 942) a *layered text*.

## Writing 'layered texts' – representing many voices

The 'crisis of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) led to the postmodern textual representations where researchers attempt to use their text to break the boundaries between science and literature, to

portray the contradiction and truth of human experience, to break the rules in the service of showing, even partially, how real human beings cope with both the external verities of human existence and the daily irritations and tragedies of living that existence. Postmodern representations search out and experiment with narratives that expand the range of understanding, voice, and the storied variations in human experience (Lincoln & Guba, 2000:184).

This is exactly what I attempted to do in my writing – to offer different voices and different perspectives (Lincoln, 1997): I shared my story of 'what happened', my reflections on the story and how I made sense of it. I sometimes included the responses of others to my stories and reflections and often included the voices of other authors who had said similar and different things about issues I am grappling with.

However, there is a catch. As Denzin & Lincoln point out, these kinds of texts (incorporating different voices, different perspectives, different 'angles of vision') are *dialogical* texts. 'They presume an active audience. They create spaces for give-and-take between reader and writer' (p. 5). In Bochner's words:

the accessibility and readability of the text repositions the reader as a coparticipant in the dialogue and thus rejects the orthodox view of the reader as passive receiver of knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2000:744).

I expect my readers to join me in my inquiry – to ask themselves what my story means for them, what the implications are for their own practice. This is at the heart of the methodology of autoethnography - an expectation that readers will engage actively with the text:

Readers, too, take a more active role as they are invited into the author's world, aroused to a feeling level about the events being described, and stimulated to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives. The goal is to write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience and to write from an ethic of care and concern (Ellis, 2004: 46)

## **The final product (the research text)**

When I started an inquiry, I started with my reflections on my own experience (my 'field work'). Many iterations later, I 'completed' the inquiry with the final product of my research (the research text). This is similar to the methods described by Richardson (2000) and Ellis & Bochner (2000) where 'Fieldwork and writing blur into one other', and there is 'no difference between writing and fieldwork' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:17). I knew when I was finished with a project, when I no longer felt excited about the inquiry – when it felt as if it had 'run its course' and I found myself thinking about the next project. At this point, I began the 'tidying up' process – cutting unnecessary words, sorting out grammar, punctuation and format, getting the text ready to be 'presented' as a product (Vidich & Lyman, 2000).

## **Validity and generalisability**

'Validity' is a tricky concept in the social sciences today. Tierney & Lincoln (1997) talks about a 'culture of doubt' in the social sciences where 'words such as "reliability", "validity" and "trustworthiness" have become contested terms in a postmodern world' (p. vii). I am arguing for a perspective on knowing as social process that emerges from conversational processes between people (Stacey, 2001), and 'knowledge' as 'an agreement reached by a community of practitioners' (p. 7). How then, are we to think about 'validity'? Stacey and Griffin (forthcoming) point out that there can be no objective validity in this kind of research as the research method is subjective reflection and interpretation of personal experience (Ellis, 1997). However, it is not just an arbitrary account. My account must make sense to others and resonate with them. I often gave my writing to people who were 'there' with me, who were in the same meeting or involved with the same project that I wrote about. I wanted to know whether my account was 'truthful', whether they recognised their experience in my interpretation and, thankfully, they always responded positively to these questions.

Ellis (2004) suggests that, in autoethnographic work, we should consider validity in terms of what happens to the readers as well as the researchers. She sees 'evocation' as a goal of social science and therefore, validity means that the work seeks 'verisimilitude'<sup>6</sup>:

it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with

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<sup>6</sup> New Oxford Dictionary of English (Pearsall, 2001): **Verisimilitude**: the appearance of being true or real

others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of ... readers (p. 124)

She suggests that a story's '*generalisability*' can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience' (Ellis, 1997:133). In my writing, I tell the story from within my experience. I do not just offer a neatly-packaged 'end-product' but attempt to show how I struggled to make sense of my experience as I went along. Cunliffe (2003) refers to these sense-making processes as the 'provisional, contextualised, in-the-moment ways of making sense' which allows me to illustrate how my 'practical theory' emerged over the course of my studies. I am hoping that my struggles to make sense of these questions would resonate with my readers, thereby helping them to make different sense of their own experience (Weick, 1995). I am also hoping that sharing my 'research-in-process' (Steier, 1991:166) will open opportunities for different conversations and provoking my readers to consider their work afresh. I take care to locate my thinking in the wider tradition of Organisational Development and Organisational Cultural work - showing how I differ and agree with others in our field (as well as related fields of sociology and psychology).

Following Mead ([1934] 1967), I am suggesting that the meaning of my writing (and therefore the validity) is in the response from my readers (Ellis, 2004). I have been surprised and grateful for the responses that I have received from those who have read my work so far as they all indicated that they recognised some of the things that they were grappling with in my work and that my writing 'made them think differently' about their own practice. I am hoping that my readers will find my argument persuasive and worth taking up in their further conversations and would like to argue that this response will render my methodology as valid and useful.

# Project one: Making sense of past experiences and realising how they continue to shape my practice

## Introduction to Project one

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I grappled with this project during the first six months of the DMAN programme (February - July 2002). The invitation was to write a reflective narrative 'weaving together the influences and experiences that inform my current practice in organisations'. As I wrote my story, I discovered how certain experiences (some from 20 years ago) are still influencing my practice. I re-discovered texts and authors that have excited me along my journey and found it challenging to narrow all of these influences and experiences down to (only) 8,000 words.

The process of writing this paper led to the following insights:

- That my practice as group facilitator and organisational change consultant has been shaped by many early experiences from my time as systems implementation consultant;
- How important it is for me to feel that I am making a *contribution* through the work I do;
- How my wish to *belong* influence my practice.

Reading this project now (almost three years after writing it) makes me realise how my thinking has changed. I am tempted to change the paper - to try to make it 'better' before offering it for public consumption. However, an important purpose of this portfolio is to show the 'movement of thought' - how my thinking has developed through my research. I have therefore decided to leave it largely untouched - thereby offering an un-sanitised account of where I was when I wrote Project one. I am also intrigued to note how all of the work I have done in subsequent projects developed the themes highlighted above. In all of my projects I kept returning to the theme of *contribution* - with each iteration bringing new insights about the potential contribution of an external/outsider. The *belonging* theme developed into an inquiry into the cultural and political processes in organisations and the insider/outsider dynamics associated with these processes.

## **Early experiences of Systems Implementations**

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### **My journey from Psychology to Computer Science and beyond**

My journey to organisational consulting started with a dream to become a Psychologist which led me to doing a degree course with Psychology and Computer Science as core subjects. I was one of the few in my Computer Science class who thoroughly enjoyed the subject. We were the first students that were able to use Personal Computers which meant working without the constraints of punch cards. Previously, students had to develop a perfect algorithm before creating the punch cards that were fed into the mainframe computer. The introduction of PCs meant that we were able to use creative processes of trial-and-error in our work. Contrary to the days of punch cards, there was no longer a single 'right answer' for any assignment – we knew that many answers would emerge through processes of experimentation. Our challenge was to discover what might be possible by continuously pushing the boundaries and endeavouring to go just a little further from where we had been before. I loved the creative freedom that Computer Sciences offered, and decided to make this a career.

In this paper, I will offer a glimpse into the experiences and insights that have shaped my current practice as an organisational change consultant. I will start by telling a few stories about my early experiences of systems implementation projects, and will share some of my ongoing attempts to make sense of these experiences. This leads to an exploration of my current understanding of my role as consultant and facilitator, and I conclude the paper by highlighting the themes that emerged at this stage of my inquiry.

### **My first system implementation and a training session in Pietersburg**

My first *real* job as an analyst programmer in the early eighties involved the development and implementation of a new bookkeeping system for a semi-government organisation in South Africa. This was exciting! We were designing a new way of working for hundreds of people and could not wait to complete development so that we could start the implementation of the system. We realised that implementation was going to be more difficult than the development as this was going to require interaction with 'real people' (as opposed to obedient computers), but in our naivety, we were not too concerned about what this might mean.

Thinking about it today, I am appalled by the ignorance and arrogance of our approach and thinking. We were so confident that we had the answers. We were, after all, part of a small in-crowd of 'Pick'<sup>7</sup> programmers. ('Pick' had an almost cult-like following in the computer world at that time). We were a bunch of bright-eyed *techies*, fresh out of university with no worries about getting a few hundred people to change their ways of working. I guess some of this arrogance came from the fact that we had been very successful at programming **computers**, and that may have led us to think that it would be just as easy to change **people**.

Having completed the system development, we embarked on a tour to train all the employees around the country. If I had to choose a 'beginning' for the journey that led me to where I am today, I would point to my experiences on this trip. There is one particular story about a meeting in Pietersburg (a small town in Northern South Africa) that I have been carrying with me, as a reminder to why I am working as a 'change' consultant.

I received a warm welcome on my arrival. It was not often that people from Head office visited the far-flung offices and the three people in the office seemed to be delighted to see me. The objective of my visit was to train the manager of the office (an elderly lady). I noticed a little bit of her anxiety when the niceties over coffee were taking a little bit longer than she had anticipated – it appeared as if she was keen to get down to business. Our training course was going to be conducted around her computer (the only one in the office). I started the session with a bit of background about the system, and how it was going to allow the organisation to have more control over finances, etc. I quickly realised that I had lost her, but could not really understand why, so I just rambled on about controls and benefits, whilst noticing my own discomfort with the situation without being able to understand *why* I felt so uncomfortable. The next part of the training course required me to be logged onto the system so I quickly switched on the computer and pressed the required buttons. After a few minutes, I was ready to start the formal part of the course so I stopped to look at her. This was when it hit me: she was absolutely terrified! I had absolutely no idea what to do. Her eyes were brimming with tears, her hands were clutched around the armrests of her chair and she was desperately trying to regain her composure, but completely unable to do so.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Pick' is a programming language



As I write about the experience, I remember some of the emotions of that day, and it is still painful. I remember being totally unprepared for her reactions, and feeling angry at my lecturers for not having warned us that this kind of thing might happen on a training course. I did not know how to deal with my own emotions and feelings, so I deliberately tried to push them aside and focused on her instead. I stopped talking, touched her hand and said '*I am sorry. I was going too quickly. Please forgive me*'. We took a break and started again. Having received a metaphorical kick in the gut, I started to pay attention. I told stories and anecdotes about others who found this whole computer thing daunting. I laughed with her, we cried a little, we gave the computer a silly name, I told a few jokes (not my strong point) and, most importantly, I listened. I heard how she had been working in that office for 25 years and how her identity was defined by her competence as a manager of the Pietersburg office. I heard about the manual systems that she had devised around the finances and heard the pride in her voice when she showed me her red ringbinder with all the invoices neatly numbered. And I started to realise what a threat this new system was to her security and her sense of self-worth.

Luckily, this particular story has a happy ending. This was the Eighties. None of us were brave enough to create a project plan with tight deadlines – there were just too many uncertainties. Not having a deadline meant that I did not feel pressured to get the training done within the day that I had allocated for it. I thought it was more important to do whatever it took to get people to feel comfortable with the new system than to be concerned about a day here or there. This is very different from my recent experiences of projects that are tightly managed and controlled by teams of project controllers. All activities are carefully measured and managed, which means that it would be very difficult to have the kind of flexibility I had in those days.

But let us return to the story: I managed to re-schedule my appointments and sat with her for a few days whilst we got acquainted with the computer and the new system. We found ways to adapt her manual systems to accommodate the new system and even found a way to file the invoices so that she would be able to find them easily. I left the office with a list of changes to be incorporated in the next release of the software, and she became one of the strongest supporters of the system.

I realised at the time that this was a significant experience. I remember feeling deeply troubled by the thought that so many of my class mates would be out there,

implementing systems and technology without paying attention to the people who were expected to change their ways of working to accommodate the new systems. When I got back to the office, I tried to talk to my colleagues about this and was even more troubled when they laughed and brushed my concerns aside. They were frustrated about my 'inability to identify resistance to change' and my 'willingness to be affected by it'.

In many ways, this was the start of my journey as a change consultant, and the story encapsulates many of the principles that guided my practice since that day: A recognition and awareness that all systems and process are used by people with hopes, dreams, fears and anxieties and that the least I could do was to engage with the people affected by these systems and processes. I realised that the only way that I could facilitate successful change and an acceptance of the system, was to keep my façade as 'expert' for my clients (usually managers). When working with the end users, it felt more important to roll up my sleeves and work with them until we found a way forward that they felt comfortable with. My colleagues did not agree with my approach. The expectations were that consultants (especially systems consultants) should focus on the task, not on relationships. Clients saw 'expert knowledge' as the main contribution from consultants and the primary reason for using them which made it difficult to argue for a focus on people and relationships. We were expected to *know* and have the *answers*.

### **Novelty emerging – in the Intensive Care Laboratory in Bloemfontein**

However, 'knowing' was another façade. We did not know. There were no methodologies for system implementations in the early Eighties. We were literally feeling our ways through the process – through trial and error and working closely with our users during the implementation. We knew more or less what we were trying to achieve, but had no idea how we would get there. Our journey was determined by our day-to-day interaction and explorations of possible ways in which we could achieve our objectives.

A story that describes this way of working is from a project I did in Bloemfontein (South Africa): I was project manager for the implementation of a new patient administration system in a large teaching hospital. I was totally immersed in the assignment, and spent most of my time with hospital staff to prepare for implementation. We were busy implementing the laboratory modules and I had to write the interfaces for a series of laboratory machines to be connected to the new

computer system. These interfaces would eliminate the need for staff members to manually enter the test results into the system and were seen as a major step forward. One night, at about two in the morning, I was sitting in the Intensive Care Laboratory (ICL), talking with the laboratory manager. This was the only time of day that we could test the software as they were not that busy. We had just finished testing one of the interfaces and were celebrating our success with a cup of coffee. We talked about the difficulties of having to single-handedly run the laboratory in the middle of the night whilst having to answer all the calls of ward staff looking for results. I said I wonder whether we could use the new technology to help. He responded: *'Just imagine what it would mean if the results could be printed in the patient's ward when the test is finished. The ward staff would then know that the test is done and they would have the results, so they won't need to phone me'*. That was the wrong thing to say to a workaholic techie (always keen to push the limits of the technology). Needless to say, I spent the rest of the night in the lab and developed the first solution of its kind.

When I think about what has become possible over the last few decades I can imagine that people hearing this story may ask: *'What is so special about printing the lab results in the patient's ward?'* At the time, this was seen as a novel development. I remember the feeling of exhilaration when the printer in the ICU ward started printing, seconds after the machine completed the full blood count. This new 'feature' was not on a project plan or specified in a user specification. I would not have been able to design it because I would never have thought about it. Our intention to explore the possibility emerged from the conversations we were having. It would not have happened if the lab manager and I did not have such a strong sense of collaboration. Our solution for laboratory results was a first in the world, and it was still seen as a novel solution when I left the world of health care systems a few years later.

### **Making sense of these experiences: Questions raised**

These early implementation projects had a significant impact on my practice as a consultant. In the years following these experiences, I was often astounded by the extent to which systems implementations had become de-humanised. Project plans and Gantt charts ruled the world. It became difficult to argue for time to meet and talk with people. The motto seemed to be: 'If it is not on the plan, it is not going to happen'. In both of the stories that I told earlier, I was both analyst/programmer *and*

project manager. I was therefore able to pursue my interest (to do whatever it took to ensure that people would use the system and that it would meet their requirements), without having to be too concerned about 'the plan'.

My experiences in recent years have often led me to ask: 'How do we define success?' I sometimes think that project managers think they have been successful because they have met all the milestones and deliverables on the plan (ie the machines and the software were installed by D-date). The fact that people did not feel comfortable using the system seemed to be immaterial. In my early days of being involved with implementation projects, my team and I had a lot of 'success'. We implemented the systems on time within budget and our users felt comfortable and reasonably happy. However, I found it difficult to explain to others why our approach worked. I had a strong sense that our 'success' had to do with the objectives that we had defined for ourselves. Our focus was not on the *plan*, it was on the *people* we were working with. As project leader, I was often challenged on my 'unconventional' approach and it did not require many challenges for me to develop a sense of unease about my inability to describe and justify the approach we were using. It did not feel legitimate to say that we were doing things because it 'felt right'. I felt that I needed to have academic justification and backing for this approach. My 'search for the answer' led me to MBA studies, various training courses, conferences, much reading, and now to the DMan. Through my studies and readings, I have added many theories, methodologies, techniques, tools and ideas to my toolkit but I felt I needed to develop a coherent argument for dealing with change in a way that focuses more on people and relationships and 'getting things done' and less on 'things that need to be controlled'.

I work in an industry driven by project plans and activities on a schedule, with very little regard for any activity that does not lead to a tangible deliverable. My challenge is to develop a cogent argument for different ways to think about change. I do not know what this will look like, but I am arguing for a more improvisational approach (Weick, 2001) to 'change' work - with opportunities for conversation and sense-making, for 'next steps' to emerge in the interaction, as opposed to being planned months in advance.

## **My evolving practice as external consultant and facilitator**

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### **The nature of my current practice**

For the last ten years, I have been 'practicing' as an organisational change consultant and facilitator. What does this mean? I wish I had an easy answer to this question. I am increasingly being confronted with the fact that these terms have so many different meanings, and that the meanings of these kinds of generic terms are always open for negotiation. I see these terms as little more than a useful 'job title', useful in that most people have a vague notion of what consultants and facilitators do, and the adjectives 'organisational change' allude to the fact that most of the work I do tend to be in the organisational setting, and that it has mostly to do with dealing with change. For me, the meaning comes from the specific endeavour I am involved in. I am usually called in to help an individual or a group to do something, a task of some description. The task usually has something to do with change – managing, coping, dealing, getting to grips with change. The request for help comes in many guises. I am asked to help the client to 'solve a problem', 'address an issue', 'develop a strategy', 'raise awareness', 'achieve an objective', 'facilitate a workshop', 'join a project team', 'deal with change' or to 'make change happen'

### **My evolving understanding of my role as organisational change consultant and facilitator**

As systems implementation consultant, I was considered to be an 'expert' in what I was doing. Schein (1999), calls this the 'selling and telling model of consultation' where it is assumed that 'the client purchases from the consultant some information or an expert service that she is unable to provide for herself' (p.7). Many of my early projects were 'Business Process Reengineering' (Obeng & Crainer, 1994; Hammer, 1996) or 'Systems Implementation' Projects – projects that were focused on changing technology, systems and processes, with an assumption that once these are changed, the people will fall in line. I felt uneasy with this assumption. My experience of people (and myself) was that people are not rational rule-following entities (Stacey *et al*, 2000). They do not just 'fall in line'. They are complex and emotional, and will rarely just 'do as they are told'. I felt that we needed to give more attention to the 'people aspects' of organisational change although I was not entirely sure what I meant by this. I was not alone with this sense of unease. Over the last few years, many organisational scholars and consultants have been pointing to the need to pay attention to *people* in organisations (e.g. Collins & Porras, 2000; Gratton, 2000; Senge, [1990] 1999). Michael Hammer, Business Process

Reengineering (BPR) guru in the early 90's, famously commented on the fact that the biggest mistake with reengineering was that they 'forgot people'. Thomas Davenport (one of the 'creators' of BPR), writes about the 'Fad that Forgot People' and explains why, by 1995, reengineering was considered to be 'over': 'The rock that reengineering has floundered on is simple: People. Reengineering treated the people inside companies as if they were just so many bits and bytes, interchangeable parts to be reengineered. But no one wants to "be reengineered"' (Davenport, 1995)

My first few systems implementation projects had a very different feel to them. We *did* give attention to the people – *they were the reason why we were doing the work*. Most of our time was spent engaging and connecting with the people in the organisations we worked with. We emotionally and physically 'joined' the organisations we were working in. We often changed our approach because our users were not comfortable with our proposed 'next step'. We were not constrained by any 'implementation methodology' – we were not aware that these existed. We developed friendships and relationships with the people we worked with. We did not keep our distance or remain objective (we did not know about these kinds of prescriptions for consulting practice). We laughed and cried with our project colleagues, we rejoiced when things were good and drowned our sorrows in the local pub when they were not.

I became quite uncomfortable with the difference between our approach and what appeared to be the more mainstream approach to systems implementation. This discomfort led to an MBA course where I found more of the same: lots of attention to strategy, planning, financial models, management accounting, quantitative analysis, technology, project management and very little interest in people or relationships. It was during my MBA course that I was introduced to the work of Peter Senge and 'Systems Thinking'. I understood Systems Thinking to be about the interconnectedness of the universe – that it is necessary to look at the 'whole' and 'relationships between the parts' in order to understand what is going on. 'Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static "snapshots"' (Senge, [1990] 1999:68). I remember being very excited about Senge's focus on people and relationships, but at the same time feeling that I could not engage with the 'tools and techniques' originating in "'feedback" concepts of cybernetics' (p.68), and the idea that everything can be described by 'system

archetypes'. It felt as if this was a reductionist way of explaining a much more complex world.

Over the last few months, I have come to understand that most of my business school training was from a 'systems thinking' perspective, where consultants and managers are seen as experts who solve problems from outside the 'system', by 'looking into the system' and 'pulling levers to change'. Before starting the DMAN and reading the work of Stacey and his colleagues (2000), I had not thought about this influence. In my mind, systems thinking encompassed ideas around relationships and connections, and I did not see or understand the implicit assumptions about 'objective observer' that is so pervasive in mainstream teaching.

Before I did my MBA, I knew that I did not know and that I did not have the answers. Having completed my MBA, I left business school in the early nineties with a sense of certainty that I did know and that I did have some answers. My intention was to use all my newly-acquired knowledge in a consulting role, so I joined a 'Big 5' consultancy firm. Although I was not even conscious of this, I fully subscribed to the 'consultant as expert' model and felt particularly able to give advice and guidance to clients who needed to implement a new computer system. I felt I had a lot of experience with complex system implementations, and this experience, coupled with an MBA, gave me a lot of confidence in my ability to add value through expert advice. I joined the consulting firm right in the middle of the reengineering 'feeding frenzy' (Davenport, 1995). Consulting firms were reaping the financial benefits of a worldwide drive to reengineered processes and systems, and the focus was on efficiency and 'repackaging of experience', on the writing of methodologies and 'Best Practice' guides. In the consulting world, the objectives of most of these activities were to ensure that new graduates could pick up a manual and be 'fully-equipped' for a reengineering or systems implementation project. By that time, most consultancy firms had woken up to the importance of giving attention to the people issues of change. This led to the development of 'change management'.

Consultants from the 'change management' practice gave attention to people issues, the 'process' guys developed new processes and the techies implemented the new systems and the technology supporting the systems. It all came together in an integrated implementation plan with 'people', 'processes' and 'technology' workstreams. I was fascinated by the belief that it was possible to develop a 24-month project plan with thousands of activities, fully resource-loaded and costed to

'manage change'. My experience of dealing with change did not resonate with any of the methodologies or approaches that I was being introduced to.

Only a few years post MBA, I was back at a point where I felt the need to challenge the 'consultant as expert' model. I felt uncomfortable with the arrogance (as I saw it) of consultants who go into client organisations with the objective to tell others how to do things, or to 'fix' things. Schein (1999) calls this the 'Doctor-Patient model', where the 'consultant is brought into the organisation to find out what is wrong with which part of the organisation and then, like the physician, is expected to recommend a program of therapy or prescribe a remedial measure' (p. 11). I did not want to work as 'expert' or 'doctor'. I wanted to join projects with the intention to bring another perspective, to share learnings from previous projects, to work shoulder-to-shoulder with client staff to determine what we should do next. It did not take me long to realise that these ideas did not fit comfortably with the 'Big Five' consultancy world. I was sold into client organisations as an expert, and I was expected to behave like an expert. My experience was often that clients would wait for the consultants to come and tell them how to do things, and I found this deeply uncomfortable, as I knew that I could never have the answers. In our private conversations (with those we trusted), my colleagues and I talked about how uncomfortable we were with all the promises made on our behalf. (At the time, most assignments were sold by partners and managers who appeared to be quite happy to sell solutions based on assumptions of control and predictability). Those of us who were trying to do the work 'on the ground' were left to 'deliver' the promised outcomes and yet we knew that all these promises were based on a flimsy foundation.

Consulting firms generally deal with the anxiety of their consultants by providing rooms full of methodologies, plans, approaches and recipes for dealing with issues. The idea is that the consultant, who is presented with a specific problem, should be able to take a manual and follow the recipe, which may say something like 'Resistance to change should be managed by the following steps', and then it would list steps 1-23, the *recipe* for 'dealing with resistance to change'. I do not believe human beings work like this. I do not accept the idea that a generic set of implementation steps can be 'applied' to changes where people are involved. I needed a different way of thinking about my work and my role as consultant. Block (2000), develops Schein's definition of different consulting roles and suggests the 'collaborative role' as an alternative to 'expert' and 'doctor':



The consultant who assumes a collaborative role enters the relationship with the notion that management issues can be dealt with effectively only by joining his or her specialised knowledge with the manager's knowledge of the organisation. Problem solving becomes a joint undertaking, with equal attention to both the technical issues and the human interactions involved in dealing with the technical issues (p. 25).

I started to see my role more as a 'collaborative role' than 'expert' or 'doctor'. However, there are some differences between the way I work and Block's description above: I do not just work with 'managers', I work with people at all levels of the organisation. And I do not just deal with 'management issues', I tend to give attention to aspects of human relating and communicating, and I usually do this in context of a specific task or project. I am called in to help clients achieve something or deal with a specific issue and my role is to help the client achieve what he or she is trying to achieve. I never know what we will be doing and how we will do it prior to starting the engagement, but I enter engagements with a belief that we will know where to go next, once we have started the journey together.

### **A recent 'culture change' project**

About a year ago, I was asked to lead an assignment around 'culture change' – to develop 'collaborative working' across a global organisation (in 132 countries). This was a typical example of a client expecting the 'expert' consultant to arrive on site with a methodology and project plan to 'implement cultural change'. It took me a while to convince the client (and some of my project colleagues) that I do not work this way, and that it may be more useful for us to engage a number of people from the organisation in a conversation around collaborative working and what this may mean for them. My proposition was to talk with people and then see what emerged from these conversations. I said that I could not promise a specific outcome from the conversations, but that I would feel more comfortable to suggest a next step after I have had a chance to talk with people about this.

Following the end of the assignment (nine months after we started), I attended the 'handover lunch', and had the opportunity to reflect with others on our work. We discovered that we were all a bit surprised at where we had got to, and we realised that we would never have been able to predict the outcome. Each of the initial conversations led to 'unpredictable and unexpected outcomes' (Shotter, [1993] 2000:39). It made me realise how valid Schein's assertion is that 'every interaction has consequences' (1999:17) but it also made me challenge the underlying assumption about 'consultants' making interventions. In this instance, change

happened because of shifts in conversations, initially between a consultant and various people in the organisation. Following these conversations, people subsequently told us how these conversations led them to act on new insights and more conversations, which led to further insights and more change. In my experience, this is what organisational life is all about – local interactions and conversations that may lead to shifts in thinking and talking leading to new insights and more changes in private and public conversations.

## Emerging themes

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### **Improvisatory practice - a heightened awareness in the face of not knowing**

For me, the most appealing aspect of being an external consultant, is the variety of projects and clients and the extent to which each new assignment is different from anything I have ever done before. I may be able to draw on previous experiences or similar types of work, but the assignment with all its variables will be different, and there is no way of knowing what the outcome of the assignment will be. I am challenged and energised by this 'not knowing' aspect of my work. Having been exposed to some of the thinking around improvisation<sup>8</sup> (Johnstone, [1981] 1989), I see a lot of what I do as **improvisation**, as 'acting into the unknown'. However, the notion of 'consulting as improvisation' would be a foreign concept in the environment I work in. A few of my recent assignments got off to a rocky start because the client expected me to arrive with a solution to their problem, whilst I arrived with an intention to be part of a collaborative endeavour where we would jointly explore the situation and the steps we would take in response to whatever our exploration uncovers. Shaw (2002), describes this as a

shifting from one rationale to another... from a thought before action, design before implementation, systematic, instrumental logic of organising, towards a paradoxical kind of logic in which we see ourselves as participating in the self-organising emergence of meaningful activity from within our disorderly open-ended responsiveness to one another (p. 30)

Shotter ([1993] 2000) refers to 'joint action' when he describes the activity that emerges from people who respond to each other:

As people coordinate their activity in with the activity of others, and "respond" to them in what they do, what they as individuals desire and what actually results in

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<sup>8</sup> At the second residential, through working with Da Capo Theatre

their exchanges are often two very different things. In short, joint action produces *unintended* and unpredictable outcomes (p.39).

I may be attracted to the idea of 'consulting as improvisation', because it offers an illusion of 'freedom', of not being constrained by a methodology and a pre-defined 'next step'. Kegan (1982) writes about the 'yearning to be independent or autonomous... the self-chosenness of one's directions' as one of the 'two greatest yearnings in human experience' (p. 107). Do I want to consider 'consulting as improvisation' because I am yearning for autonomy? Maybe. However, I would not see this yearning as the primary motivation. I am intrigued by 'consulting as improvisation' because it is congruent with my understanding of human interaction. I agree that it is impossible to manage or control conversations, and I want to work with the 'unintended and unpredictable outcomes' emerging from conversations, without being constrained by a predefined methodology or project plan. I want to develop my capacity to 'live creatively' with uncertainty (Stacey, et al, 2000:123). My challenge is to develop my thinking so that I am able to argue convincingly for 'consulting as improvisation' as an alternative to mainstream approaches that are focused on 'knowing' and 'control'. I would like to be able to account for my contribution without having to make promises I know I will not be able to keep, without promising control when I know it is impossible to control human behaviour, and without having to suggest that I have the answers or that I 'know'. I want to account for the contribution that I feel I am making and I want to learn to speak about my practice in ways that would evoke interest from others as I continue my inquiry into the experiences of people in organisations.

### **Being an 'outsider'**

I have always thought that my ability to make a contribution to organisational change is linked to being an 'external'. In my mind, being external meant that I am not so constrained by the internal politics and power structures, which makes it possible for me to challenge a bit more than they may feel comfortable to do. It also seemed to be more acceptable for an outsider to surface some of the 'undiscussables' and to point attention to organising themes that may not be so noticeable to those who are deeply immersed in the communicative processes.

However, although it feels important not to become enmeshed in the 'culture', I struggle with the experience of being excluded or on the outside (a theme that I will explore more fully in project three). I deal with this discomfort by actively trying to

'join' the client organisation I am working with. I 'physically' join by spending as much time as possible in the offices of my client organisations, by joining conversations at coffee machines and the canteen, by getting onto the internal email system and getting my name on internal distribution lists. I 'emotionally' join by getting interested and engaged in the client's issues. I participate actively 'as if' I am a member of the organisation, and use words such as 'us' and 'we' to strengthen the story. As facilitator, I 'participate' in the conversations, and choose to ignore the fact that I am supposed to be an 'outsider'. Although I have been taught how facilitators are 'supposed to' behave (e.g. Bentley, 2000; Heron, 2000; Kiser, 1998), I no longer see the value in (what I regard as) superficial prescriptions for behaviour. I feel it is much more useful for me to be an active participant in the conversation. Although this is my preferred way of working, I realise that I am challenging taken-for-granted ideas about what facilitation has come to mean (Shaw, 2002). I have often been surprised at some clients' reaction to my immersion in their issues – where I was expecting them to be pleased about my engagement and commitment, I have had stern reminders from clients that I am '*an outsider*' and that I am there to '*bring process, not get involved in the content*'.

Kegan (1982) identifies the 'yearning to be included, to be a part of, close to, joined with' as another of the 'two greatest yearnings in human experience' (p.107). In the moments that I feel I am pushing the boundaries of what 'good practice' has come to mean, I find myself wondering to what extent my yearning to 'join in' and 'engage' could just be a personal yearning and to what extent it is useful for me to participate in this way ?

# Project two: Contributing to the process of team development

## Introduction to Project two

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Having completed Project one, I was unsure about where to go next. At the time, most of the work I did had something to do with 'event facilitation' and I thought it might be interesting to explore what an 'improvisational approach to practice' would mean in relation to this aspect of my practice. However, I also wanted to consider what it would mean to work in a more improvisational way when I do team development work. Initially, I attempted to handle both of these inquiries in the same project but both of these turned out to warrant more attention, so I decided to drop the latter and focus my attention on the first of these inquiries (event facilitation). For two years, I remained uneasy about this decision - it felt like I chose the easy option and missed the opportunity to develop an argument for an improvisational approach to team and organisational development. Having written Projects three and four, I decided to return to this project and re-engage with an inquiry that still felt as if it had a lot of 'life' in it.

The invitation for Project two was to *'explore the themes of my inquiry drawing on actual illustrative material in my practice and linking this to the key perspectives of the program: a complexity approach, relationship psychology and participative inquiry'*

In this (revised) paper, I focused on two main themes of inquiry:

- **Implications of a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes:** What are the implications of a process theory for my practice and how am I to think and act differently when informed by this theory (as opposed to a theory of organisations as 'systems')?
- **Emergent, improvisational practice:** What would it mean in practice to focus my attention on the informal/shadow conversational processes of organising in addition to the formal/legitimate organising processes that have become such a major part of my practice?

Reading this project now, almost two years after doing the work, I am surprised to recognise the questions that I continued to grapple with in Projects three and four.

The themes that emerged from this project (and continued to shape my overall inquiry) are linked to the two main strands of my inquiry:

- **Cultural themes that organise experience:** In this project, I focused on power relations and insider/outsider dynamics of interaction
- **How an external facilitator can contribute to shifts in cultural themes**

As with Project one, I am tempted to improve the paper, tidy up the loose ends, strengthen my arguments, illuminate the narrative by pointing to things that I now recognise as significant (but did not see at the time of writing the project), present it as a more 'scholarly' piece of research work. However, by doing that, I will violate a core principle of my methodology: that I will present research-in-process and in doing so, invite you (my readers) to think with me and to critically consider whether you agree with my interpretation of events and the propositional themes that emerged from my research. Project two is my research story about an engagement with a group of directors in Ireland.

## Introducing my inquiry for this project

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### **An intervention-based approach to team development**

'Team Development' is an important part of the field of 'Organisational Development' (OD). In their 1960's series on the development of the field of OD, both Richard Beckhard (1969) and Warren Bennis (1969) cite team development as an example of OD. They define 'Organisation Development' as the process of bringing about organisational change in a 'planned' way. In 1994, Burke reviewed the field of OD and suggests that little has changed in the field of OD: team building interventions (usually in the form of facilitating off-site meetings) remains the most common practice of OD consultants. These authors all reiterate the 'mainstream' perspective on the role of OD consultants: to *diagnose* the situation in an organisation or team and then *design* or propose an intervention to address the issues that have been uncovered.

I used to understand my role in the same way. I used different mechanisms to 'collect data' about the current situation - I interviewed people, used questionnaires and surveys, facilitated discussion groups, surfed the net, read in-house publications, attended meetings and spent time with people to get a 'feel' for the team and the organisational context they worked in. At the same time as doing the 'diagnostic' work, I started to develop some thoughts about an intervention that would allow the team to tackle the issues that they appeared to be struggling with. I saw all the 'preparatory' work as background activity (Shaw, 2002) to the planned intervention whilst thinking of *the event* seen as the main activity that would lead to change. I saw this as my core skill - my ability to design events that allowed groups of people to tackle issues and to become 'unstuck'. I enjoyed designing interesting and creative events where participants felt able to participate with a sense of 'voice'. There was a time where I thought that I would focus all my effort on developing my practice as event facilitator.

### **'Event facilitator' and 'organisational consultant'. What is the difference?**

Through the process of writing Project two, I realised why I enjoy event facilitation so much: I relish the power associated with the role of event facilitator, the enjoyment of being in the spotlight and being seen and recognised for the 'good work' I do. I was not consciously aware of all the 'traps' of my practice - it required me to inquire reflexively into my own practice to realise that much of my sense of competence and

contribution came from my 'performance' as workshop facilitator (a job I had learned to do well). Through many conversations with colleagues and my learning set members, I started to wonder whether my competence and comfort in one area could make it more difficult for me to work more broadly as an organisational consultant in areas where I would not get the opportunity to play such a prominent leading role. Philips and Shaw (1998) argue that there are certain aspects of these kinds of in-the-spotlight-roles that are best 'left behind because they are inappropriate for the different challenges of consulting work' (p. 31). They specifically mention 'trainers' but I think a lot of what they are pointing to is equally applicable to workshop facilitators. They suggest that it is often difficult for people who are used to these kinds of roles to 'let go' of:

- 'performing, being the centre of attention and expecting "applause";
- 'a clear-cut power position and control of events' and
- 'predictability and being well prepared for what comes next' (p. 32)

Although it felt painful to admit how much I enjoyed all of the things they mentioned, I recognised the challenge that I was facing: If I had to let go of the power and performance, how would I account for my contribution? My clients often engaged me specifically because of my ability to design and facilitate enjoyable events that feels like a 'good investment of time'. How would I function without 'events' and opportunities to 'shine'?

Philips and Shaw (1998) point to another difference between my task as event facilitator and the work that consultants need to engage in: Event facilitators and trainers generally work 'one step removed from the cauldron of organisational politics' (p. 39). As event facilitators, we go into an organisation, do neatly-packaged pieces of work (design, facilitate, output) and then we leave the political environment (Scott, 2000) - often basking in the glory of another successful event which was enjoyed by all. We like to believe that people will remember the event as a turning point in the history of the team or the organisation - a moment when things changed for *the better*. However, over the last few years, I have come to see the events we do as merely 'moments' in the ongoing process (Follett, 1924) of organisational life. Follett argues for a process view on experience and points out that there is 'no result of process but only a moment *in process*' (p. 60). I am not discounting the value of interventions or events (much of my work is still event- and intervention-based). However, I am suggesting that we would do well to pay more attention to the conversational and political processes *around* our interventions (Shaw, 1998). The



question then becomes: how to make this happen? As an external consultant, I am usually paid on a day-rate basis to do a specific piece of work (usually with some time constraints associated with it) which makes it difficult for me to just 'hang around' the organisation. It is therefore often difficult to join the conversations in the canteen, around the water cooler and in the corridors of our client organisations as I am rarely there. In this project, I want to explore my contribution to the experience of a group of Directors of a pharmaceutical plant in Ireland where I did get the opportunity to spend time with members of the team without all the traps and constraints of event-based work.

## **Working with a group of Directors in Ireland**

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### **Introducing the work**

Paul<sup>9</sup> (the CEO of the plant in Ireland), called to ask whether I would be willing to travel to Ireland to meet with him about a team development assignment. Paul knew me from work that I had done previously with the European Management Team (EMT) of his organisation. My involvement with the EMT centred around leadership development and meant that I had spent quite a bit of time with them (always in the role of external event facilitator).

When I arrived at Paul's office a few weeks later, I noticed that he appeared stressed and a little bit preoccupied. We quickly found ourselves talking about the work he wanted me to do. He referred briefly to wanting to arrange an 'off-site' session with the team and then launched into a description of the team, how they needed to work together as a team but were not, how the team had changed over the previous few months (new people joined, others were recruited from within and quite a few of the directors left the organisation). He told me who the main players and 'culprits' were, and kept highlighting his frustration about the fact that 'they' were always waiting for him to tell them what to do and how to do things – he felt the biggest issue was that the directors (especially those that had been promoted from within), were spending their time 'in the trenches' and that they needed to 'step up' and act like directors, as opposed to children who needed to be told what to do.

Paul concluded his monologue by telling me that he was really busy and needed to urgently attend to an internal issue that required his attention. We agreed that I

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<sup>9</sup> A pseudonym

would talk to the rest of the directors, so that I could gauge how they felt about Paul's idea to give attention to team development. On leaving the office, I remember feeling that it was as if I had been despatched to 'go and sort the team'. From the way Paul talked, it felt to me as if he was convinced that 'they' were the problem – and it was clear that he was looking for help to '*sort them out*'. Paul had asked his secretary to arrange a number of one-to-one meetings with some of the directors, and I saw this as a valuable opportunity to find out more about the individuals I was asked to work with.

### **Reflections on my first day at the plant**

On the way home that evening, I reflected on the various conversations of the day, and the themes that emerged from these conversations. When I left for Ireland that morning, I did not know that I was going to have the chance to talk with people which meant that I was not constrained by any type of preparation – I was able to just participate in the conversations as fully as I could – listening, responding, checking my understanding, asking questions and connecting with these directors on a personal level. I was amazed by the consistency of the themes that emerged from these initial conversations: almost all of them referred in some way to the 'parent-child' relationship between Paul and the rest of the directors. They told me that they tended to be very 'functionally-focused' and that they felt they needed to operate more cross-functionally. They talked about their frustration with the way things were being handled in the director group, the time wasted in meetings that were not well facilitated and how much of their meeting time was being taken up by trivial issues that should have been dealt with off-line (outside the meetings). I heard many stories about directors not following through on actions 'because they were not being held accountable', and heard all of them talk about the requirement to build trust and relationships in the team.

My husband picked me up from the airport that evening and, noticing that I looked a bit perplexed, asked me what this was about. I said something along the lines of '*I guess I am struggling to understand how a group of senior executives can be so frustrated and unhappy with things and yet feel so unable to do anything about the situation. They all seem to have similar frustrations about the issues and yet they don't seem to feel that they can do anything about it*'. In my response to my husband's question, I was also responding to some of the questions that I have been grappling with about my own experience of being internal to organisations – the extent to which one feels constrained and unable to change things. Pfeffer

(1992) suggests that this kind of experience is 'the major problem facing many organisations today' - the 'incapacity of anyone except the highest level managers to take action and get things accomplished' (p. 10).

### **Returning to the plant - more conversations**

I returned to the site a few days later to meet the rest of the directors. Without going into too much detail, it is sufficient to say that many of the same themes mentioned before re-appeared in the conversations. The question raised by my first visit continued to intrigue me, so I asked the directors about their apparent unwillingness or unable-ness to do something about all the things they were so uncomfortable with. They responded with stories about Paul: I heard about Paul '*biting*' people (metaphorically), and how people became frightened of '*going against*' Paul as this may well be the end of one's career. There seemed to be many stories of previous directors who were fired because they had the '*audacity*' to openly disagree with Paul, and when I made any suggestions about possible ways to address some of the issues, it was quickly pointed out to me that Paul would inevitably '*rubbish*' anything they did without his approval, and it was simply not worth trying. I began to notice that some of the directors were much more vocal about their discomfort with Paul and thought it may be useful to explore this.

After these initial conversations, I was very excited about the possible opportunity to work with the group. I felt that I would be able to help them with some of the issues they were facing. I thought that I could help them explore the constraints they were struggling with. From previous experience, I knew that this kind of joint inquiry often lead to shifts and experiences of becoming unstuck. I was looking forward to designing and facilitating an off-site event for them, but felt that I may be able to contribute even more if I was able to join them in their meetings and conversations without being constrained by the norms and rituals of off-site events.

### **A different kind of contract and a different way of working**

Because of all the external pressures that Paul had to deal with, and the fact that his holiday was booked for a few weeks hence, it became apparent that there would be a period of at least eight weeks before it would be possible to arrange an off-site meeting. I felt that this provided a great opportunity for me to work with the team and decided to propose this to Paul under the auspices of working with the team in preparation for the off-site.

*I cringe when I read what I have just written. It sounds so dishonest: doing it 'under the auspices of..'? It was not my intention to be dishonest, but it felt to me as if Paul was already very committed to the idea of an off-site and I did not know how I would enrol him in the idea to do work outside of an off-site event. I felt that, if I was given a chance to 'join' the team, I would be able to make a contribution, but I did not know how to sell this to Paul. So, rightly or wrongly, I made the decision to use the 'in preparation for the off-site' line.*

***Postscript (October 2004):*** *When I look at this decision now (almost two years afterwards), I realise that I unwittingly perpetuated the 'culture' of 'finding ways to work around Paul' instead of engaging Paul in this conversation. I was sanctioning and reinforcing the norm of gossiping **about** Paul rather than talking **with** Paul. But let's return to the story of what happened ...*

Paul and I had a conversation just before I left the plant. He agreed in principle with my suggestion, but asked me to write a proposal for the work, so that he could get the necessary paperwork in place. This needed to be a different proposal than the normal: x days preparation, y days facilitation and z days for output, and I was not entirely sure how to argue for a more improvisational, flexible way of working. In the end, I wrote a 2-page proposal in which I set out my understanding of the requirements and highlighted some of the themes that I heard during my first few days at the site. I referred to the Drexler / Sibbet Team performance™ model (Drexler, Sibbet & Forrester, 1988) that I often used to guide team development interventions and suggested that we use the time in preparation of the off-site to pay attention to the issues that members of the team regarded as 'blockers' to effective team development. I concluded with a high-level timeline and budget for my involvement during a 12-week period, and the commercial arrangement for the engagement. I was reasonably comfortable with my proposal. It was detailed enough to meet all the contractual requirements from both organisations (my own and the client organisation), but it was not so detailed to be constraining. I did not have a plan for the engagement, and my only assumption was that, somewhere towards the back-end of twelve weeks, there would be a facilitated off-site event. I was looking forward to work with the directors one-step-at-a-time (Shaw, 1997). I felt that it would be important to give attention to the various aspects of team development (as covered by the Drexler / Sibbet Team performance™ model), but did not feel the need to pre-design a process to do this. I was hoping that, through my participation in meetings and conversations and working with the directors on the

issues they were grappling with, I would be able to identify ways in which I could make a contribution to the director group.

In suggesting an alternative to the traditional 'off-site', I was venturing into unknown territory and I felt quite vulnerable about it. Although I was not constrained in the same sense as the directors, I was constrained in a different sense: I could not just propose *anything* in this proposal – I had to argue for this way of working as a 'legitimate' and 'credible' consulting intervention. Using the Drexler/Sibbet model was one way in which I attempt to establish my legitimacy (*'I am not just pulling this out of thin air – I do know what I am talking about. Look, I have even got a model'*). If I failed to argue convincingly for this way of working, I would have been 'excluded' in that I would have lost the opportunity to do the work. However, (luckily) Paul accepted the proposal and asked me to commence the work. I do not know whether he did this on the basis of the proposal, or the work that I had previously done for the EMT but I was delighted to be given the chance to work with the team.

## **Continuing the story with new perspectives and insights**

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### **Insights from Complexity Sciences**

I have, over the last few years, become very interested in the non-linear complex nature of human interactions. How is it that a speaker has an intention and then says something which takes on a meaning that is very different from the original intention? I have been interested in the many contributing factors affecting the meaning-making, such as the context of what is said, the specific moment in time, the extent to which listeners are able to engage with what is being said, the vocabulary and terminology that is used, the extent to which the words spoken are in some ways a response to something that was said moments, or weeks ago. My general interest in 'communication' and a specific interest in 'the challenges of virtual communication' led me to want to develop a better understanding of the processes of communication. I became increasingly dissatisfied with the 'sender-receiver' model of communication as it did not explain or offer any insights into the complexity inherent in the interaction between people (Shotter, 1999a). I wondered whether complexity sciences could help me better understand this kind of communicative interaction.

Stacey (2001, 2003a, 2003b) and colleagues (2000) have developed a convincing argument for some of the insights of complexity sciences to be seen as analogous for human interaction. They differentiate between those complexity scientists who have developed theories about the interaction of homogenous entities, and others who have been considering the iterative, nonlinear interaction between heterogeneous entities (e.g. Allen, 1998). It is this latter group that provide insights and analogies that I consider to be a useful perspective from which to consider human interaction. A key insight from the study of interaction between heterogeneous entities, is that the process of interaction appears to have intrinsic capacity to produce coherent patterns. These patterns are not governed or influenced by a causal agency or 'blueprint', but are simply the result of the process of local interaction between entities. I was particularly interested to inquire into this patterning process, specifically when looking at the nonlinear interaction between people in groups in the workplace. I wanted to move my attention from planned change to the "messy" processes of self-organisation that produce unpredictable emergent change' (Shaw, 1998:187).

### **Self-organising patterning of interaction**

Let us return to the Ireland director group: I was particularly struck by the patterning process at work when I attended the directors' weekly meeting for the first time. The meeting was attended by 12 of the directors, and having met them all before the meeting (in private one-to-one conversations, and in small groups), I was looking forward to being part of their meeting. I was also a bit curious: I had heard so much about how awful they found these meetings and I was interested to know what led to these meetings being so unpleasant. I thoroughly enjoyed all the conversations I had had with them outside of the meeting. I enjoyed the banter between us, their openness, honesty and frankness, interest and enthusiasm for the process we were embarking on. I loved the lunchtime conversations in the staff canteen and the thought-provoking and stimulating dinner conversations with Paul and the others and could not imagine how this same group of people could co-create 'an awful meeting'.

As we walked into the meeting room, the picture of easy-going interaction between the group members dissolved. Almost in the same moment as entering the room, I experienced a feeling that I was in a room with a group of very lonely strangers. I attempted to make eye contact with various people, but noticed that they were carefully avoiding me (and it appeared as if they were avoiding each other too). I

saw lots of sullen faces, people looking down at the table, shuffling papers, visibly uncomfortable and uneasy. It felt as if a battle ground had been created, with each person for him/herself. There was none of the sense of community that I had experienced outside the meeting room.

The meeting very quickly fell into a pattern of Paul speaking and a director responding to Paul. All the lines of verbal communication were between Paul and individual directors, with very little interaction between the directors. They appeared to be constrained – as if they were not able to fully participate in the meeting. I found myself wondering what this was about. My initial reaction was to consider the behaviours in the meeting from the perspective of culture and behavioural norms. I wondered whether people thought that the expected meeting behaviour was for all communication to go through Paul (as 'chairman' of the meeting)? I remembered the enjoyable lunchtime conversations with members of the group and the lively and engaging dinner table conversations with Paul and a few of the others (who appeared just as constrained in the meeting).

I wondered about the perspective of complex responsive processes and how I may be able to understand the interaction in the meeting from this perspective. I could sense a patterning process at work, and wondered about the organising themes that have emerged for this group (Stacey, 2001). It appeared as if there were some 'rules' governing their interaction: who could talk to whom and when. Stacey (2001) calls these the 'ideological thematic patterning of turn-taking / turn-making that enables some to take a turn while constraining others from doing so' (p. 148). The 'rules' appeared to be quite flexible, as if they were continuously being negotiated through the conversations and interactions in the meeting. I wanted to pay attention to the continually changing dynamics in the group, without being seduced by the promise of '*reification*' (the idea that dynamic processes can be reduced to static concepts that can be studied and potentially changed). So many of my previous consulting engagements were informed by the idea that, once we understood the cultural norms, or 'the way things were', we could intervene and design a process that would enable the organisation or team to implement more desirable or 'better' behavioural norms (Cooke & Szumal (2000)). I realised that this was a very reductionist way of looking at behaviours in groups and organizations and wanted to explore how I could work differently if I worked from a complex responsive processes perspective.

For me, the most interesting thing about the meeting was the comments from the directors afterwards. They described the meeting as *'one of the best meetings we have ever had'*, and that *'Paul was on his best behaviour'*. Their attempts to explain the difference almost always referred to my presence in the room: *'It must have something to do with you being in the room'*. I was intrigued to understand how it was that we had such different experiences of the same meeting. After a bit of prompting, I learned that it was deemed to have been a good meeting because no one was *'hurt'* or *'scarred'* (emotionally). *'There wasn't a shouting match and no one stormed out of the meeting in anger'*. I worked with the group for a few months, and never experienced a *'really awful'* meeting, nor did I witness a shouting match. But I did attend a few meetings that felt very similar to this first meeting, and I wanted to explore the factors that contributed to the experience in the meeting. How is it that the same group of people, in smaller groupings, have such different experiences of being together?

This reminded me of a recurring theme in the large group sessions at our DMAN residentials: How is it that we have such enjoyable, animated, interesting, light-hearted but thought-provoking conversations over lunch, dinner and drinks, but then settle down into a pattern of constrained *'seriousness'* when we return to the large group? Many of my significant insights at our residentials came from small group conversations where I was able to relax into the conversations (both emotionally and physically), not held back by the conventions of the large group, or the constraints (real or imagined) imposed by the *'academic setting'*. Although I found the large group experiences fascinating, I was very aware of an ongoing *'negotiation'* in the large group – to be recognized, accepted and heard. It sometimes feels like hard work and I often experienced a sense of relief when the sessions came to an end.

### **Power and power differentials**

In the DMAN large group, we explored power as an organising principle in the group, and I found myself becoming more and more interested about the role of power in the self-organising interaction of the director group. Given my interest to explore the implications of a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes, I decided to look at the work of Norbert Elias, as his work is one of the cornerstones of a theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2003a; 2003b). Elias (1998), considers power to be a *'structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships'* (p. 116), and explains it as the extent to which *'we are more dependent on others than they are on us'* ([1991] 2000:93). This



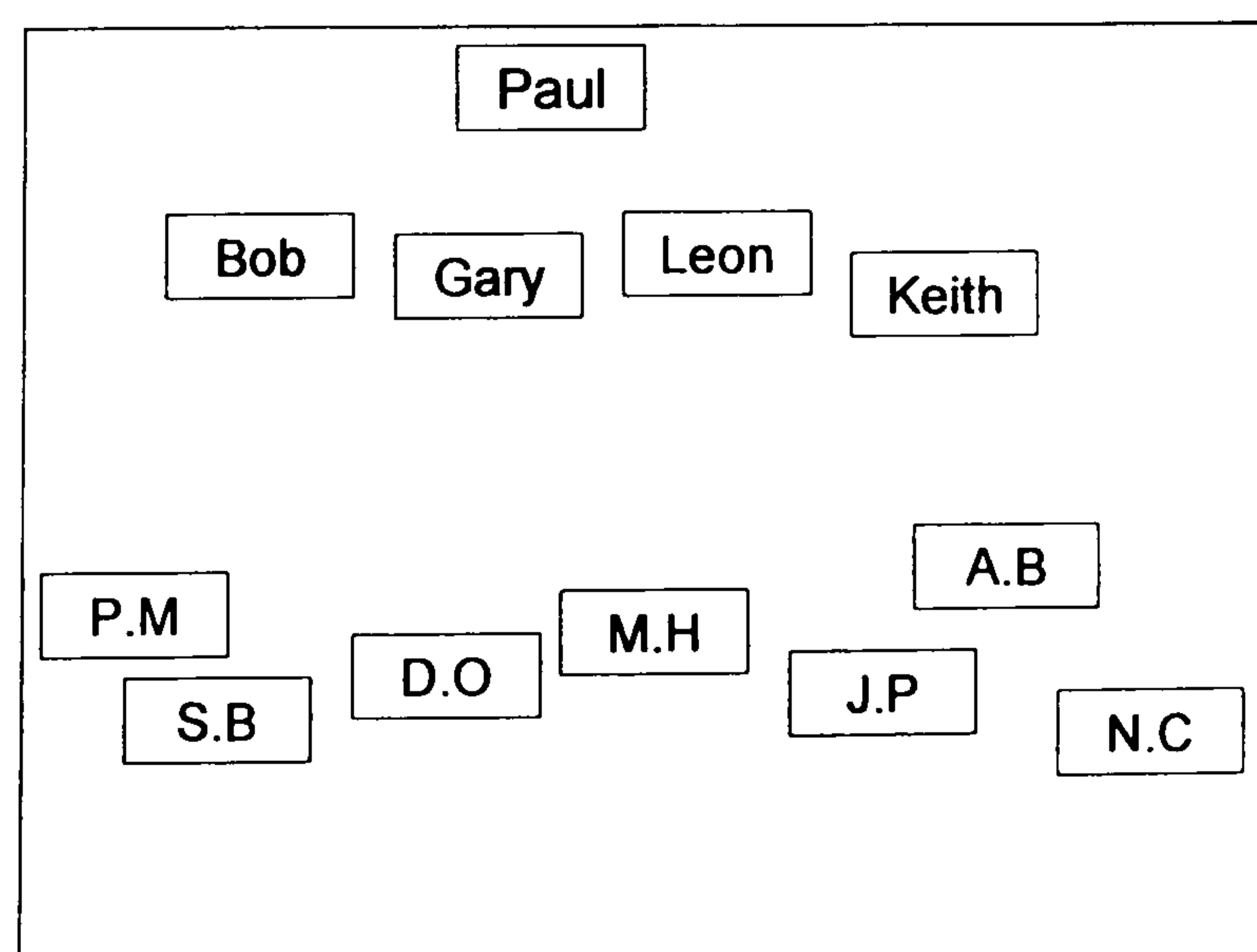
is particularly relevant for the Ireland group, given Paul's role and position, and also the history with directors being fired because *'they had the audacity to challenge Paul'*. When considering social behaviour, Elias (1998) counsels against attending only to the behaviour of individuals in a group:

The figurations of interdependent human beings – cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly. In many cases the opposite procedure is advisable – one can understand many aspects of behaviour or actions of individual people only if one sets out from the study of the pattern of their interdependence (p. 114)

Elias's perspective on power is different from the mainstream perspective on power in organisations where power is seen as something that is 'held' by people because of their position, authority, knowledge, control of and access to resources, etc. (Tjosfold & Poon, 1998). Power is 'used' to influence others in the organisation (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1992), and it is seen as the 'currency in organisations' (Vredenburg & Brender, 1998) as it enables individuals and groups to attain their goals. Elias suggests that power is a social process, whereas most other prominent writers have an individualistic view on power.

At the time of this engagement, I was reading the 1998 collection of Elias' work (*On Civilization, Power and Knowledge*) and I was particularly struck by his work around game models, designed to clarify the subject matter of Sociology. In essence, the game models show the various groupings formed by human beings who are interdependent in different ways. Elias argues that, when considering social behaviour, it is necessary to consider the social needs by which people are bound to each other and to other people. It is also necessary to consider these dependencies and how they may result in an uneven power balance if some people are more dependent than others. If one party or person is perceived to be more powerful than others, it will directly affect the way in which people act and feel toward each other.

I thought it may be useful to specifically talk to the group members about the extent to which they felt constrained and enabled by the power differentials in the group. In the private (one-to-one) conversations I subsequently had with the directors, I asked them how they experienced the



power differentials – where (in the internal ‘pecking order’) they saw themselves in relation to others in the team. In one-to-one conversations, I asked them to explain this to me diagrammatically, by drawing the ‘power hierarchy’ in the group. The diagram shown here is representative of the overall ‘shape’ of their drawings. As I am writing this, I realise that there is a danger for this to be seen as a way of ‘fixing’ power differentials. I understand communicative interaction as the process in which people account for their actions and negotiate their next actions (Stacey, 2003a). This is also the process that sustains power relations (Stacey, 2001) and it follows that power relations are continually changing, as the thematic patterns that sustain them are transformed or sustained in the communicative process.

### **Insider/outsider dynamics**

With their ‘drawings’, the directors confirmed what I had been noticing. Without exception, they drew hierarchies with Paul at the top, then a group of four (Gary, Leon, Keith and Bob) below him, with the rest somewhere below the group of four. In my conversations with them, I wanted to explore the ‘group of four’, and I asked the directors why they thought this group appeared more powerful than the rest of the directors. I will recount one of these conversations as I remember it.

Me: *Why do you think these four people have so much more power than the rest of you?*

Stephen : *Gary spends a lot of time with Paul. They often go out for a meal together. They know each other quite well, and so Gary is able to challenge Paul a lot more than the rest of us.*

Me: *Do you think he has more power because he is willing to challenge Paul?*

Stephen : *Yes, I do. He does not seem to be afraid to challenge Paul*

Me: *Do you think the rest of the directors are afraid?*

Stephen : *Yes, I have told you before. Paul can bite. And it is often safer to just stay quiet*

Me: *Why do you think Leon is more powerful than the rest of you?*

Stephen : *Leon is similar to Gary. Paul and Leon come a long way. They have been in the organisation for many years. Leon knows Paul better than the rest of us. He isn't scared of Paul, and he is not scared to challenge Paul. They often have very big arguments, but Leon just waits until Paul calms down and then they go on.*

Me : *And Keith ?*

Stephen : *Keith is interesting. He is new to the organisation and Paul respects him. He had quite a senior job in his previous company and Paul is a bit more careful about taking him on. Paul and Keith also go out for meals together. They seem to spend quite a bit of time together. I don't think Keith is afraid of Paul*

Me : *Why do you think that is?*

Stephen : *It may be because he has not been here that long and he has not had a lot of experience of Paul in a bad mood. I don't think he knows just how dangerous Paul can be*

Me : *Does Keith challenge Paul?*

Stephen : *Oh yes. He is not scared of telling Paul when he disagrees with him.*

Me : *What does Paul do when Keith challenges him?*

Stephen : *He listens to him. I don't think they have had a big argument. Paul seems to respect Keith*

Me : *Why do you think Bob is more powerful?*

Stephen : *Bob is a special case. Bob is a corporate man. I think he was planted here by head office. He has links to the right people in America, and Paul knows that. So Paul is not going to take chances with Bob because Bob will get him back some way.*

Me : *Is Bob willing to challenge Paul?*

Stephen : *Yes. He challenges him all the time. Bob knows a lot of things that Paul doesn't know, and Paul knows that, so Paul is a bit more careful with Bob*

I found these conversations fascinating, especially as most of my conversations with the directors yielded similar themes. All the directors pointed to the link between power and '*being willing to challenge Paul*'. They also inevitably referred to the 'group of 4' and Paul's long-standing relationships with Leon and Gary and regular dinner dates with Gary and Keith.

The directors appeared to feel incredibly constrained by their expectations of what Paul may or may not do in response to any action from them. I often wondered how 'real' this was. It felt to me as if their expectations were mostly sustained by gossip (Elias, 1998), but there was also the reality that many of them had personal experiences of Paul meddling in a way that did not feel '*respectful*' or '*enabling*' (their words). I saw them grappling with the tension between having to dance to Paul's tune about some things, and having to exercise their freedom and autonomy with regard to others. Stacey *et al* (2000) refers to the tension created by having to work in this type of environment:

[It] leads to the confusing experience of a presumed loss of freedom while still being required to exercise it if the system is to work. It leads to the experienced inability to choose and design in the way that one is supposed to (p. 185).

I saw it with this group – a sense of being completely paralysed. 'Damned if you do and damned if you don't'.

## **Paul's leadership style - forming and being formed by his interactions with the team**

As I reflected on this, I was reminded of an earlier conversation with Paul about his role (this was almost a year before – when I was working with the European Management Team). At the time, Paul explained to me how he saw his role changing – from being a ‘general who is leading the battle’ to a ‘conductor who leads the orchestra’. I was interested to note that in both of these analogies, the leader has total authority, but I realised that *he* saw this transition as moving from being directive and autocratic to being more enabling and supportive. At EMT meetings, Paul spoke eloquently about leaders needing to be coaches and mentors to their people. In my private conversations with Paul, I often tried to channel the conversation in a direction that would allow us to talk about his role as ‘leader’ of the team. I experienced him to be very willing to talk about high-level concepts and principles, but very reluctant to talk about the day-to-day implications of his leadership role. As an example: A few of the directors had talked to me about their need to ‘*bounce ideas off*’ Paul, or to use him as a sounding board whilst talking through their thoughts and ideas. They said that they found this difficult to do, as Paul tended to either ‘*rubbish*’ their ideas within minutes of starting the conversation, or to completely overrule anything they had to say. For them, it felt as if he always thought that he had a better answer or solution. As a result of these experiences, they were very reluctant to expose themselves and their ideas to Paul. A ‘*safer*’ option was to not do anything, or to do as Paul told them to. It should not be surprising that there was such a sense of paralysis. I found it difficult to talk with Paul about his relationship with his team members - it was as if I was speaking a language that he found difficult to hear. When he was able to talk about the requirement for him to be ‘in control’ and ‘in charge’, he was fully engaged. When I tried to talk to him about people’s need to ‘just talk to him’, he responded without hesitation: ‘*I know I need to do more of it, but I just don’t have the time. I want them to just get on with it. If they insist on talking to me about things, I am not going to sit here and listen to ideas that have not been thought through. I don’t have the time*’. I felt very discouraged whenever I had these conversations with Paul. A part of me wanted him to just change his behaviour, to engage with his team, to make time to meet with them one-to-one, to make different choices about how he engaged with them and to stop being such an autocrat.

I was judging Paul and it made me realise afresh how impossible it is for human beings to remain ‘objective’ in their interactions. I used to think that (as consultant) I

needed to learn to be more objective. I now think it is more valuable to admit my human-ness and the subjectivity that is part of being human. It is not possible for me to work closely with people without continuously trying to make sense of their actions, especially when their actions do not seem to make sense (Weick, 1995). When we make sense of things, we develop a plausible account of our experiences. The story I told myself about Paul was that he was being very autocratic, that he was using his positional power inappropriately and that his team was suffering as a result (Fuller, 2004; Vredenburg & Brender, 1998). I thought that they needed a coach and a mentor and not a military general. However, I realised that nothing I could say or do would change his behaviour and the choices he continually made in his interactions. It increasingly felt as if the potential for change was in the relationships *between* the directors, not only in their individual behaviours.

Shotter (1999a) refers to the 'joint or dialogically-structured' activity of bodies responding to each other as the 'third realm of activity, sui genesis, which cannot be explained either as Behaviour or Action'. As 'living, wide-awake human beings', we have no option but to respond to each other – and it would therefore be inappropriate to hold people 'wholly' accountable for their own actions – as 'their activities are partly "shaped" by the activities of others' (p. 3). Follett (1924) says something similar: 'Through circular response we are creating each other all the time' (p. 62). Our actions are always reaction to relating:

I never react to you but you-plus-me; or to be more accurate, it is I-plus-you reacting to you-plus-me. "I" can never influence "you" because you have already influenced me; that is, in the very process of meeting ... we both become something different (pp. 62-63).

It felt to me as if the relating in the director group got stuck as they responded to each other with their expectations that have developed over time. The directors seemed to be so afraid of Paul and how he might respond, that they were not willing to take the risk and expose themselves to Paul's wrath. I did not agree with Paul's way of doing things but I felt that the team members were co-creating the situation. By not challenging Paul, they made it possible for him to continue to behave in a way that they all felt uncomfortable with. I wondered whether I could encourage them to respond differently to each other, thereby shifting the sense of stuck-ness in the group.

## **Shifting patterns of interaction**

Prompted by Elias's (1998) work on game models, I thought it would be worth considering the possibility of changing the power differentials in the group to make it more equal, as it would inevitably shift the extent to which Paul was able to control the group. Elias described how his game models 'show how the web of human relations changes when the distribution of power changes' (p. 121). I was curious to know how things may change for the director group if the distribution of power was to change. I spent quite a bit of time talking about this with the rest of the directors (outside the group of four). We talked about the perceived link between a position of power and a willingness to challenge Paul and I wanted to know from them what it would take for them to feel able to challenge Paul and whether they thought there would be any value in working towards improving their relationships with Paul. We talked about how they could support each other and whether there would be value in strengthening their relationships with the other directors in the group. These conversations did not yield any easy answers, and I did not expect them to. I only spoke to them about power because I had a sense that talking about this may contribute to some kind of change but I did not know exactly what to expect. At the time of these conversations, Paul was largely absent from the site as he was dealing with an emergency issue. Although I felt uncomfortable about not engaging Paul in these conversations I felt that it was more important to continue talking than to wait for Paul to be available.

My next engagement with the group was a few weeks later when I was due to attend another directors meeting. I was surprised to see the difference between this and the first meeting: directors who were visibly disengaged in the previous meeting, were engaged and appeared interested in the conversation and the contribution from the other directors. Some of the directors who appeared afraid to speak at the first meeting, now spoke with confidence and evoked respect for their contribution. Others who told me about their fear of challenging Paul, raised points of disagreement and made a convincing argument for a different course of action. The directors, in talking with each other, were 'evoking and provoking responses in each other' (Stacey *et al*, 2000:172). Where, in the first meeting, most of the communication was between Paul and the individual directors, the directors now talked to each other, argued with, and supported each other and appeared to have a very different experience. I am not presumptuous enough to want to take the credit for any of these changes, but I do think that my conversations with the directors have in some way contributed to the shifts in patterns of behaviour in the group.

## **Introducing the 'corporate governance' theme**

I mentioned earlier how I was struggling to understand their apparent unwillingness or unable-ness to do something about all the things that they were so unhappy with. I was really perplexed by it and could not stop thinking and talking about it. This engagement was at the time when it was difficult to pick up a newspaper or watch the news without being reminded of Enron and Worldcom, the 'demise of ethics' in the corporate world, the need to 'consider what governance is all about' etc. It should therefore be hardly surprising that I found it easy to latch onto 'corporate governance' as a topic for further conversation. I thought it would be highly appropriate to remind them of Enron, given their unwillingness to take any personal responsibility for any of the wrongs in the organisation, and the speed at which they were willing to adopt the organisations' 'coat of arms' (arms crossed over the chest with fingers pointing sideways). I must admit that I started to get a bit irritated by this and felt they needed a 'wake-up call'.

As I am writing this, I realise how arrogant this must seem: The idea that an external consultant is in a position to 'shake up' a group of directors. What gives me the right to want to do this? For me, this goes to the heart of why it is useful to engage external facilitators as 'participant-consultants' in organisational change endeavours. As an external consultant, I would like to see myself as a 'participant with choice'. My fantasy is that, as an external consultant, I have choices about getting sucked in to the organisational politics. It is partly true: I am 'immune to many of the risks of being on the payroll' (Scott, 2000:4). I do not have to protect my bonus, career path or promotion and I am therefore less dependent on senior people in the organisation for my livelihood. If things do not work out with one client, I can always do work for another. However, it is important for me to get repeat-business and referrals, so it is clearly not in my interest to annoy my clients to the extent that they will not want me back. I therefore find myself working in a marginal role (Nevis, 1998). I am generally asked to help because an internal person wants to challenge the status quo or want to facilitate change and they need help with their endeavour. However, they do not want me to challenge things too much or to disrupt things too much so I am always operating within conflicting constraints. I can not just do what I want. I am also constrained in what I can or cannot do (albeit in a different way than the directors).

Let us return to my 'decision' to introduce the corporate governance theme: It was clearly not just 'my' decision - it was my response to a whole range of social processes that I was simultaneously involved in. My 'decision' was evoked by the

directors who did not appear to want to take responsibility for the corporate governance of the organisation, the Enron directors who made such a mockery of ethical behaviour, the journalists who continuously reiterated the Worldcom and Enron stories, etc. I found myself responding to these provocations by introducing the corporate governance theme into my conversations with the directors. I started the exploration around corporate governance with the intention to play my role as 'challenging ally' (a role that clients continually tell me they want me to take up) – to ask a few challenging and difficult questions (all from a perspective of wanting to be helpful). This is another example that invalidates the notion of 'objective consultants'. All of my actions are influenced by my previous experiences of being in the world. I am therefore likely to respond differently to the directors than another consultant. I am told that I am often more challenging than other consultants. Some clients tell me that this is the reason why they want me to work with them whilst others say that this is the reason why they would rather work with one of my colleagues.

To get back to my story: I thought it would be interesting to explore Corporate Governance with the directors, and decided that I would do this within the context of the 'roles and responsibilities' aspect of the team development work. I was particularly interested to know what the *powerful* 'group of four' thought, before discussing it with the rest of the directors. I went to see Bob (the corporate man) and asked him: *'I've been thinking about the team and their roles and I was wondering whether anything has been done around the corporate governance responsibilities you have as directors of the organisation?'* Talk about bodies resonating. I was quite relaxed and in a bit of a mischievous mood when I walked into Bob's office but within moments of asking the question, I could feel my own body respond to Bob's rising stress levels in reaction to my question. He became quite animated and it was obvious that I had pressed a hot button for him. I was very engaged with the conversation, partly because I responded to Bob's apparent passion for the subject, but also because I realised that this may be a way to shift some of the stuck-ness in the group.

A few minutes into the conversation, I asked him a hypothetical 'what if' question. *'What would happen if Paul was run over by the proverbial bus? Who would take over the reins?'* He hmm'ed and aah'ed and found it very difficult to respond to the question. As he was grappling with the question and the fact that there was no easy answer, I suddenly had an image of three men in suits arriving on site and this



prompted my next question: *'And what would happen if the company president arrived on site while Paul was in hospital (recovering from his encounter with the bus)? If the president came to investigate an issue, he would probably want to meet the people in charge of the plant. Who will he meet with?'* This question was partly prompted by the fact that a few issues had been escalated to head office, and that the head office spotlight was firmly focused on the site. I was getting frustrated by the directors who appeared to remain fixed in their belief that Paul was to blame for everything. I thought the directors needed to take responsibility for the fact that they were contributing to the team dynamics and issues on the site. I wondered whether the behaviour patterns in the group would shift if the individual directors were willing to accept responsibility for being co-creators of the situation they found themselves in (instead of blaming Paul for everything). I wanted to know what it would take for the directors to be willing to take action, without having to wait for permission and approval from Paul.

My conversation with Bob, and then later that day with Gary (to talk about corporate governance responsibilities), apparently led to a 'flurry of activity' in the director group. Bob later told me how he could not stop thinking about it all through the weekend (our conversation was on a Friday) and how he realised, after conversations with solicitors and lawyers, that he was legally exposed and needed to take a more active interest in the running of the plant. Gary told me about his meeting with the other directors to discuss their corporate governance responsibilities. This meeting apparently resulted in a lot of discomfort as some of the directors felt that they were being asked to accept responsibility for more than they were willing to take on. During the meeting, at the height of the discomfort, they talked about the reason why they were having the meeting and it emerged that it was because *'Louise is going around asking questions around corporate governance'*. According to Gary, there was an almost unanimous decision that *'Louise was going too far'*, and that *'Louise was challenging too much'*.

At first, I was quite bruised by this feedback, but as I reflected on the difference between the first and later director meetings, I could not help but wonder to what extent the 'flurry of activity' following my inquiry into corporate governance had contributed to the change. I realised that I was probably stepping out of the neatly-crafted 'box' that I had negotiated for myself in an earlier meeting with the group. I had promised to focus on 'behaviours & style' of the individual members, and yet here I was – meddling with 'corporate governance'. I could probably argue that the

lack of clarity around their corporate governance roles and responsibility is a major contributory factor to some of the behaviours in the group, but I am not sure that this would have helped me. As far as they were concerned, I had violated the agreement about how I would work with them and I was acting out of line.

### **Evoking responses and responding to provocation - a circular process**

During my involvement with the group, I often noticed how a (to me) innocuous comment from one person evoked such a strong externally-evident emotional and physical response from others in the group. I realised that many of these responses were involuntary. This is probably what Shotter (1999b) refers to when he highlights the ideas of Bakhtin, Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty that, prior to our interpretations and understanding of events, 'there is a more immediate, unreflective, spontaneous form of understanding given to us in our bodily reaction to events around us' (p. 1). I found that when I explored this with the directors, and asked questions like '*I was really intrigued to see you respond so defensively to Stephen's comment, and I wondered whether it would be useful to explore what that was about?*', we were able to enter into conversations that created opportunities to explore the notion of bodily responses in the living present. These conversations led to many new insights (for them and me) about how their responses were influenced by experiences in the past, expectations of the future, gossip, personal and external pressures, etc. Once these were voiced, we were able to inquire into (for example) their expectations about Paul's behaviour. For example, when I talked about this with two of the directors who were promoted from within, they talked about their fear of Paul and how he might behave. These expectations were influenced by stories that they had heard from their previous managers (directors who were subsequently fired) about Paul's behaviour in the past. I experienced them as being very fearful of how Paul might react to them. In our conversations, we talked about these fears and it appeared as if, simply by acknowledging these fears, they were able to consider what it was about and, in some cases, it led to significant change in their responses to each other and, in particular, to Paul.

As human beings, we have no option but to have a bodily response to events around us. As Shotter (1999b:1) says: 'We are directly and immediately sensitive, bodily, to certain events in our surroundings whether we like it or not. We cannot not respond to them in some way'. I believe that, although we can not choose or control our bodily response, we can choose what we do and say in response to the responses evoked in us. As Bellman (2002) points out: 'Our circumstances have

much to do with how we respond in the moment. Circumstances, though influential, are not controlling; we always have a choice' (p. xxiii). Because of our relationships with other people, our choices are constrained (Stacey, 2003b), but it is still the responsibility of an individual to choose an appropriate response to a particular situation and to the feelings and emotions evoked in that situation. I shared this belief with the directors and talked about the potential value of paying attention to feelings and emotions as they arise in response to others. I have found that people rarely notice their own feelings, they take them for granted (Shotter, 1999b). In my view, the act of noticing allows us to slow down, to take a breath before deliberately choosing how to act and what to say. Mead ([1934] 1967) makes the distinction between *intelligent* behaviour and reflexive, instinctive and habitual behaviour. Intelligent behaviour is only possible when response is delayed - when one purposefully considers the alternatives and then chooses the appropriate response:

Delayed reaction is necessary to intelligent conduct. The organisation, implicit testing, and final selection by the individual of his overt responses or reactions to the social situations which confront him and which present him with problems of adjustment, would be impossible if his overt responses or reactions could not in such situations be delayed until this process of organising, implicitly testing and finally selecting is carried out ... Without delayed reaction ... no conscious or intelligent control over behaviour could be exercised; for it is through this process of selective reaction - which can be selective only because it is delayed - that intelligence operates in the determination of behaviour. Indeed, it is this process which constitutes intelligence (p. 99)

In follow-up conversations, they shared some of their experiences around this – how they had started to notice some of their emotions and feelings and how they have been able to reflect on it and, in some cases, how they have made different choices about the words they spoke in relation to their feelings and emotions evoked by their social participation.

### **Further reflection on the Ireland engagement**

In this engagement I actively participated in the ongoing participations of the Ireland director group. I had no prior intention of what I wanted to do, but as time went by, I developed many different ideas about what I could potentially do to try and shift things. For example, after a few sessions at the site, I became interested to see how things would shift if the power differentials were changed. From what I saw, it appeared as if it would be positive for the group if there had been a more equal distribution of power and so I acted on this idea.

How is this different from a systemic approach to change? One could argue that I was acting as an external 'designer' who 'diagnosed' the problem with the uneven distribution of power and then set out with an intention to facilitate change – to change the distribution of power by encouraging the directors to engage with Paul in a way that would evoke respect from him. My hypothesis was that, if they were willing / felt able to challenge him from a position of strength (as directors of the organisation), he would respond to these gestures and that this had potential to transform the way in which they related to each other. Does this put me in the designer position? Yes and no. Everything I did emerged from my participation with the directors - I did not join them with a pre-conceived plan or methodology about how I was going to change things. My ideas emerged from my day-to-day interaction with the group.

Could I control the outcome of the intervention? Absolutely not. When I started my work with the team, I thought that the aim was to 'help the group to function better'. Having been involved with the team for a while, this changed to 'reduce the power differentials in the group', which developed into a vague sense that the individuals in the group needed to take responsibility for their contribution to the state of affairs. The story about what would be useful and valuable for me to do kept changing in response to my experience in the group. I can not think of any situation where I did not have sense of purpose and intention. What I have discovered, is that this sense of purpose and intention emerged through my interaction with others - it is not 'something' that exists a priori to interaction. This is a new idea for me. Since being introduced to Stephen Covey's (1989) writing, I have found the second habit 'Begin with the End in Mind' (p. 95) very powerful. Over the years, I have tried to be disciplined about practicing this – being clear about what I am trying to achieve with various interventions and client engagements. I have found this to be a very useful way of working, as it enabled me and my clients to remain focused and it also gave us something to measure our success. I am now starting to wonder about this: Is it ever possible to predict the *exact* outcome of what we are going to do together? I am increasingly thinking that we can only ever specify a vague outline of what we are wanting to do (or 'achieve') together, knowing that the 'details' of where we are heading to will continue to change as we move forward.

How does this link to the Ireland project? As facilitator, I noticed aspects of the group's interaction (for example the unequal distribution of power), and then deliberately set out to shift it. I did not have any ideas as to how exactly I would do it,

but I purposefully engaged with the directors in conversations about the power differentials – hoping that, by exploring it together, we would develop a better understanding of the dynamics at work and that this process would lead us to think and engage differently with each other and our colleagues. Was the objective achieved? Yes, I think it was. The directors started to relate and engage differently to each other, thereby shifting the power differentials and the patterning of their interaction. Was this overall a successful consulting engagement? As always, there is no clear cut answer – there are many different aspects to this. I started the engagement with the intention to facilitate an off-site session with the group, hoping (as always with a new client) that it would be the start of a long-term relationship with the group. I did not facilitate the off-site (the external pressures made it very difficult to find a date that worked for all the directors), and the engagement was prematurely terminated when the parent company issued an edict that all consulting engagements had to be terminated with immediate effect. When I heard this, I was hoping that Paul would be willing to make a case to continue the work but he did not, and I will never know whether he had a choice but chose not to continue. This experience raised many questions for me about my role and how I choose to work with clients. My fantasy is that, if I had kept to my brief to ‘sort the team’ without asking difficult and challenging questions and raising issues about power and interdependence, the engagement may not have been terminated. If I had done more to keep Paul sweet and focused on the wrongs of the team as opposed to giving attention to relationships, interdependence and power differentials, he would have felt less threatened and more comfortable. Although I would have preferred it to be different, this assignment shows clearly how externals are just as much part of the web of interdependence and power relating in the group and how it is sometimes only possible to shift things from within the political process. Maister ([1997] 2000) writes from within his own professional practice and his experiences of working with professional services firms around the world when he says: ‘Having to deal with client politics is not an *occasional* part of professional life - it is *central* to it’ (p. 175)

### **Another twist to the tale**

Paul and I subsequently had another opportunity to talk about the team development work and I was pleasantly surprised by the things he had to say. He told me that he had noticed big shifts in the way the team worked. He referred to a specific incident in a meeting when two of the directors had a constructive disagreement – and said that he did not think that they would have been able to do this before my time at the site. He told me that he had asked the directors whether

they thought there was value in my involvement and that they had unanimously agreed that they wanted to continue to work with me. He said that he was waiting for approval to continue this work as part of the Transformation programme, and that I should call him after my holidays to arrange for me to visit the site. He specifically mentioned that he thought it would be useful for me to do what I have done before – attend meetings, spend time with the people, have one-to-one conversations etc. And that we should think about re-arranging the off-site for sometime early in the New Year.

***Postscript:***

*I did eventually facilitate the off-site session in February 2003, and I found it a challenging but rewarding experience as it was noticeable that some things have changed dramatically. It felt as if the power differentials had been reduced and they all participated actively in the session. They appeared far less constrained than in the past and had no problem to state their case if they disagreed with Paul. Instead of a constrained meeting where people appeared fearful of speaking, we had three days filled with conflict, disagreement and collaboration.*

## **Emerging thoughts on 'contribution'**

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As a paid-consultant, I want to feel that I am making a contribution, that I am adding value to my clients. However, people have different ideas about contribution and it is not easy to 'define' value. In this section, I will be looking at the consulting literature and what has been written about the contribution of an external consultant.

### **Clients' perspective on 'contribution' (what the literature tells us)**

Many studies have been done about what clients expect from consultants - how they evaluate the success of the consulting engagement and the value that the consultant brought to the process (eg. Oakley, 1994; Gable, 1996; McLachlin, 2000; Appelbaum, 2004). McLachlin (1999) suggests that a consulting engagement is considered successful if the client feels that the consultant has met his/her expectations. For the purposes of this project, I will highlight a few key points from these studies and I will do so under two headings:

- Expectations that would ***not*** have been met by my work in Ireland;
- Expectations that would have been met by the work I did in Ireland

### ***Expectations that would not have been met***

One of the 'criteria' for engagement success that is often cited is 'reliability' (McLachlin, 2000). For McLachlin and others, reliability means 'meeting agreed-on goals' or 'delivering on promises' (Bergholz, 1999). In order to evaluate engagements based on goals and promises, it is important to be able to agree the 'outcomes' to be achieved through the engagement (Appelbaum, 2004; McLachlin, 1999; Weiss, 2002). There are kinds of consulting work where I think it is entirely appropriate and valid to define goals and outcomes up-front. For example, when the job is to implement a new SAP system, it is possible to clearly define deliverables and outcomes to be achieved. However, when the engagement centres around people and how they work together, I am suggesting that it is much more difficult (if not impossible) to define measurable objectives and outcomes to be achieved (Stacey, 2003b). In these situations, we are working 'live' (Shaw, 1997) without being able to predict what our interactions would lead to. We need to contract differently for these kinds of engagements, from contracting to deliver a 'pre-determined objective or outcome' to contracting 'for an emergent process of complex learning into an evolving and unknowable future' (Shaw, 1998:187). Clients also want to feel that they are able to remain 'in control' of the work we do. They want control of the agenda and want to be able to influence the pace and manner in which work gets done (Stumpf & Longman, 2000). I would suggest that it would have been impossible for me to do anything meaningful if Paul (who was the client that I contracted with) remained 'in control' of the work. This points to one of the main differences between doing event-based work or working in a more emergent, improvisational way. When I facilitate events, my clients and I jointly 'design' the event. I see the design process as an important opportunity to influence change and usually spend a lot of time and energy on arguing for an event where people have a chance to talk freely without artificial agenda or activity-constraints on them. I also argue for an agenda that is flexible and allows us to meander along a pre-designed course (without having to stick rigidly to the path). I find that many clients are quite challenged by the idea of a meeting that they can not control, and much of my energy is spent on attending to their anxiety. However, an event has clear boundaries around it and my role and responsibilities with regard to the event is usually quite clearly defined. In my work with the director group, there was little clarity about boundaries, my role or my responsibilities. I am arguing that, in order to do this kind of work, artificial constraints are not helpful and the fewer constraints put on a consultant, the more able he/she is to join conversations where it may be

possible to influence change (Shaw, 1998). I am suggesting that it is not possible to pre-plan or control these conversations. The question is then: How do we help clients to live with their anxiety of not being able to control the 'hired help'? One way of doing this is to develop the relationships with our clients so that we are not seen as 'hired help' but as 'trusted allies'. Clients often take huge risks in bringing external consultants into the organisation (Bergholz, 1999). Some of them 'know that things will be different and that not all of those differences are predictable' (Bellman, 2002). Through my engagement with the Ireland group, and working in a more emergent, improvisational way, I learnt how important it is to develop trust.

### ***Expectations that would have been met***

Bellman (2002) suggests that 'clients expect us to be better off after we leave than they were before we arrived. The net difference is our contribution' (p. 60). I would like to argue that the Ireland group was better off because of my involvement with them. It is impossible to show causal links between my work and what emerged between them but I am confident that I contributed to shifts and changes by my participation. However, it would be very difficult for me to 'prove' this - the assessment of my contribution (or not) can only ever be a subjective assessment by those of us who were part of the engagement.

As consultants, we bring a 'wide range of professional skills and experiences' to our client engagements. Clients know this, and they 'expect us to contribute these skills unselfishly, proactively' (Bergholz, 1999:30). I have been passionate about my own development throughout my career. I have been involved in a wide range of consulting engagements, many different companies across different industries. I would like to think that my unique history, the skills and knowledge I have accumulated through my studies and the exposure I have had to different business situations enable me to make a contribution simply through joining the team and bringing a different voice to the conversations.

### **My emerging perspective on the 'contribution' of an external consultant**

#### ***Creating opportunities to develop new insights and different perspectives***

My clients often tell me that they value the ways in which I help them 'to see things differently' which lead them to recognise that they have options and choices that they were not able to see on their own. Bellman (2002) suggests that this is an important aspect of the contribution of an external consultant:



In my work, it is important that I bring clients new perspective. I help them see their world in new ways; with their new vision, new alternatives suggest themselves. Their new views suggest actions that were literally inconceivable in their old view (p. 64).

I am not suggesting that I arrive on site with a pre-formed 'different perspective' but that these new perspectives arise in our interactions - being part of their conversations often evoke a response from me that is 'different' from the habitual ways of responding to each other. Because I generally have a very different background and history than my clients, my responses are likely to be different from theirs. I do not have the same history than the people in the group, and do not take the 'culture' for granted in the way they do (Block, 2000). I am detached enough to notice things that insiders have taken for granted (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Fonseca (2002) suggests that when people from different backgrounds come together, their attempts to develop some kind of understanding often provoke new insights as people work with conflict and disagreement. Having studied Weick's (1995) work on sense-making, I have come to see *difference* as an important stimulus for sense-making. When others do not act and behave in ways that we expect them to, we attempt to *make sense* of their behaviours. And this sense-making process (in conversation with oneself and others) leads to new insights<sup>10</sup>. In this project, I wrote about the ways in which people responded to my questions about corporate governance and how that inquiry and the following social processes of sense-making and thinking led to shifts in the relationships between people.

Sometimes, my contribution is simply to create opportunities for people to talk together. These conversations often lead to changes and new insights in ways that none of us could have predicted.

### ***Willingness to challenge the status quo***

Whilst working with the Ireland team I 'stuck my neck out'. I talked about things that others would have preferred not to talk about. I did not know about the unwritten 'rules' that have developed in the group and was therefore not constrained by them. Where I noticed that people were reluctant to talk about things, I attended to their reluctance rather than 'play along' with them. I challenged Paul and the rest of his team members about their behaviour in ways that were uncomfortable for all of us. Cockman, Evans & Reynolds (1999) suggests that this is the task of consultants:

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<sup>10</sup> I will return to this theme in Project four

Often ineffective behaviour patterns do not get challenged by the people working in the department or company. The consultant's function is to challenge ineffective patterns of behaviour which are seen to be inhibiting effectiveness or change... to help the client identify and break out of such damaging cycles of behaviour (p. 8)

According to Block (2000), the rationale for using external consultants is that they have expertise, knowledge and 'are positioned outside' the organisation. This is supposed to lead to 'objectivity' and a 'willingness to confront difficult issues that people inside the system may be unwilling to face' (p. 208). I have been arguing that it is very difficult for consultants (or any human being) to remain 'objective' in interaction but I do recognise aspects of my practice in his description. I do not think it is so much about 'willingness' to confront difficult issues as a sense of purpose: this is what I do; the value I bring is to disrupt and challenge the status quo. When talking with Pierre (one of my colleagues on a project team) about my role and contribution, he said: '*You have shaken the organisation*'. Do I make a contribution when I 'shake' the organisation? I would hope I do. However, I am also acutely aware that I sometimes challenge too much for it to be experienced as helpful, so I am always trying to gauge whether to continue or to stop. I am also aware of how much I feel at risk in constantly challenging things. It can be a very lonely experience at times. It therefore feels important to develop relationships within the client group that would withstand the responses to the challenges I pose. Bellman (2002) summarises the requirement beautifully: 'As consultants, we are usually there to change something. Change requires risk taking. Risk taking requires trust. For there to be trust, there must be a relationship' (p. 74).

## **Living with conflicting demands**

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Clients and consultants often seem to have very different (and often conflicting or contradicting) perspectives on what 'contribution' and 'value' is. All of these perspectives are 'true' and 'valid'. The challenge is to live with the paradox presented by these perspectives, rather than collapsing it to either doing only what my client wants (playing it 'safe' and thereby not shifting anything) or doing what I think needs doing (challenging the status quo in ways that are disruptive and damaging rather than helpful), but to attend to both of these requirements at the same time.

**Another postscript:**

*Having read this paper, one of my reviewers commented on the fact that I seem to argue against 'off-sites' and 'events'. I want to emphatically say 'No. I am not arguing against off-sites and events. I think there is enormous value in 'events' as they offer different kinds of opportunities for sense-making'. Events offer opportunities to take stock, to reflect on what has happened, to decide what to do next etc. (Weick, 1995). I am just not focusing on my practice as event facilitator in this paper as it is not the focus of my inquiry. Event facilitation is part of the mainstream 'accepted' practice of OD consultants – it is what Buchanan & Boddy (1992) describe as the 'public performance' of change consultants. I am interested in exploring the contribution of an external facilitator in normal, everyday activities and conversations (without being constrained to 'only' doing event facilitation). The mainstream OD scholars recognise 'event facilitation' as an important contribution of OD consultants. What is not often recognised, is the possibilities for contribution of OD consultants in 'active opportunistic participation in day-to-day activities' (what Buchanan & Boddy (1992) refers to as 'backstage activities'), and it is this aspect of my practice that I am focusing on in this thesis*

# Project three: On joining a new organisation

## Introduction to Project three

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In this project, I explored my experience of joining Duneford Organisational Consulting (DOC). I made a deliberate effort to focus on an aspect of my experience that was challenging and uncomfortable, where my sense of who I am (*my identity*) was at stake. This was a new experience for me as I had been living in an environment where 'competency' and 'professionalism' equated the ability to 'get on with things'. This meant that I would have been tempted to brush over the uncomfortable and emotional aspects of my own personal experience whilst focusing on the experiences of others. As consultant, my focus had always been on making a contribution to *other people* and their endeavours, with an unstated assumption that I should just 'cope' and 'get on with it'. I often felt as if I did not 'cope' whilst going through the joining process. I experienced it as an emotional and political process that often left me feeling drained and disillusioned.

In focusing on myself as member of a consulting organisation, I paid attention to an experience that really mattered to me. This was not just another experience of me 'in role' (where I had to be concerned about my professional practice as consultant/facilitator) – this was about me (a newcomer) who was attempting to join an established group (with all the associated feelings and emotions). By 'taking my experience seriously', the theory of complex responsive processes came to life for me – I *felt* the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion as I attempted to join some of the established groups. For more than ten months, I *lived* this inquiry – continuously engaging in conversation with my colleagues as I attempted to join and make sense of my own experience. I felt constrained *and* enabled by my engagement with other people in DOC. I experienced 'the organisation' not as a 'thing' but as people in conversation - constantly engaged in conversational activities. I realised that there was no such thing as 'the culture', but that we were continuously recreating the stories about 'the way things are' in DOC through our talking and being together.

Since doing this work, I have realised how many parallels there are between joining an organisation as a *permanent* (internal) member and joining as a *temporary* (external) member of an organisation. This project made me recognise that the 'internal' / 'external' distinction is a false dichotomy – categories that 'edit continuity'

(Weick, 1995), thereby reducing the ongoing nature of processes of joining and being included/excluded to reified states.

This inquiry also enabled me to account for my contribution to processes of cultural and organisational change in DOC. Through my active participation in the conversational processes in DOC, I influenced a number of changes. I would not have been able to plan, predict or control these changes but by looking retrospectively at how things have changed in DOC, I recognise that I influenced (and sometimes initiated) the conversations that led to these changes.

In this project, I realised that the themes of 'belonging', 'voice' and 'power' arising from my earlier work were inextricably linked with the political processes of inclusion/exclusion. I also began to re-think some of my assumptions about the 'contribution of an external', as I realised that 'contribution' and change is a social process and not something that an individual does or brings to the organisation.

When I read this project now, just more than a year after I finished it, I recognise many of the themes that I continued to work with in Project four, specifically around themes that organise experience and how these are shifted by the active participation of permanent and temporary members of the community.

## Framing my inquiry for this project and introducing my story

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### Joining a new organisation – a live inquiry

I recently had lunch with a client I have known for years. He is the founder-owner of a small professional services firm and we often meet to discuss his experiences. On this occasion, he told me about Anton, the new manager who was due to join their group. I asked how he felt about Anton joining – whether he thought Anton's arrival would lead to any changes in the way they worked. His response was unequivocal: *'Anton's style is very different from mine. But I am not concerned about it. He will just have to fit in. We have created a culture and a way of working which work for us. This is the way we want to work and if Anton wants to join us, he will just have to adopt our culture and way of working.'*

His perspective seems to echo a widely-held view amongst Organisational Development and Human Resource practitioners – that newcomers who enter organisations are expected to change in order to be assimilated into the 'culture' (Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001; George & Jones, 2002:344; Bowditch & Buono, 2001:146). 'Socialisation' is the process by which individuals come 'to appreciate the values..., expected behaviours, and social knowledge essential for assuming an organisational role and participating as an organisational member' (Louis, 1980:230). During this process, values and behavioural norms are 'transmitted' from the established members in the organisation to the newcomer (Gibson, Ivancevich, Donnelly & Konopaske, 2003:40), and 'individuals are transformed from outsiders into participating, effective members of organisations' (Greenberg & Baron, 2000:208). This way of understanding the joining process leads to the focus being on *the joiner* as the one that needs to change in order to 'fit in'. Few scholars have studied changes in the organisation in response to the arrival of newcomers as it is difficult to study the influence of newcomers on the 'whole' organisation (Wanous, 1992). This third research project was a study of 'organisational change' in response to the arrival of a newcomer whilst at the same time being a study of how the newcomer changed in response to arriving at a new organisation.

In this paper, I will reflect on my own experience of attempting to join Duneford Organisational Consulting (a consulting organisation that specialises in Organisation Development). I did not conform to *'fit in'*. Neither did I *'adopt a culture and way of working'*. I would, instead, describe my experience of joining as an ongoing process

of 'negotiation' (Søderberg, 2003) between others and myself as we struggled to understand what it would mean for me to be part of the Duneford Organisational Consulting (DOC) community. 'I' (the newcomer) did not change whilst 'they' (the organisation) stayed the same. We all changed in small ways. We all had to work hard to negotiate a way of working together that would accommodate our different requirements and ideas of what it means to be a satisfied member of this community. 'The organisation' changed and so did I.

The process of joining was a social process. I was not in control of the process. I could not autonomously choose how I wanted to join and what I wanted to do. All of my actions were influenced by others. In this paper, I am sharing and reflecting on the story of my joining process and I will show how my contribution to the ongoing conversation between people in this community contributed to shifts in power relations and cultural themes. I will specifically explore the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion arising from the interactions between me and other members of the DOC community and the emotions and feelings that were evoked by these dynamics.

Whilst doing this project, I have simultaneously been attending to two inquiries – an inquiry into what this experience meant for me personally, but also at the same time an inquiry into the sense I made of this experience in the light of my professional practice as organisational development consultant. I have come to ask questions about the ways in which we generally think of the joining process - as one in which newcomers need to be 'socialised' into the organisation. What if we were to consider the joining process as a process that could potentially contribute to organisational evolution? What if we were to acknowledge that a newcomer's entry would inevitably lead to change in the dynamics of interaction between existing members of the organisation? If we were to consider the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion inherent in the joining process, how would this lead us to think differently about processes of 'socialisation'?

I have also come to ask questions about joining in a more general sense. As an external consultant, I am never quite 'in' or 'out'. I am always 'joining' and 'leaving' groups of people and moving between feeling more or less included or excluded. I would suggest that all people in organisations (as temporary and permanent members of groups) are continuously engaged in the political processes of inclusion/exclusion. Louis (1980) calls organisational socialisation a 'pervasive process through adult life' (p. 230). The political processes of inclusion/exclusion is

not covered by most mainstream OD texts and I am suggesting that we, as organisational change practitioners, need to pay attention to these processes. I used to understand 'joining' or 'entry' as one of the necessary phases in the consulting cycle (Block, 2000) - a precursor to doing the 'real' work. Following my reflections on my experience of joining DOC, I have come to see 'joining' as an important part of the work I do, with many possibilities for influencing change.

### **A bit of background – life before Duneford Organisational Consulting**

I am originally from South Africa, but moved to the UK in 1998 to join Business Change Consulting (BCC), a change management consultancy that specialised in the implementation of enterprise-wide computer systems for large companies. Having come from South Africa, I did not know many people outside BCC, and quickly found myself socialising with my colleagues, who became my friends. My sense of *who I am* (identity) in the UK became inextricably linked with my membership of the group of people that called themselves BCC consultants. Although we went through all the typical kinds of trials and tribulations associated with a growing consulting organisation, I had a very strong sense of *belonging* in BCC. I felt *at home* amongst my BCC colleagues and friends.

In 2002, I decided to leave BCC to pursue my interest in OD work. I was not sure where I would go to, but having made the decision to leave, I started looking around at other consultancies. I was quite clear what I wanted from a consulting organisation: I was looking for an organisation that focused on organisational consultancy, where learning is an integral part of the organisation's ways of working, where there is a strong sense of community in the organisation and where the consulting approach is congruent with the collaborative approach to consulting (rather than working from a perspective of 'consultant as expert')<sup>11</sup>. I therefore embarked on a search for an organisation that would meet these criteria. From previous exposure to consultants from Duneford Organisational Consulting, I intuitively felt that this was an organisation that would meet my requirements. To cut a long story short: I finally decided that DOC was the organisation I would like to move to, applied for the job and was offered a job as consultant in December 2002.

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<sup>11</sup> I described the differences between these approaches in previous projects



## **Joining Duneford Organisational Consulting – an ongoing process**

I formally became a DOC employee in January 2003. At the time of writing the final version of this paper (October 2003), I had been through almost ten months of grappling with my responses to the experience of attempting to join the community of DOC consultants. I found the experience interesting, energizing, challenging and exciting as well as confusing, frustrating and lonely.

The *challenging* aspect of this process was linked with having to deal with those dynamics that are an intrinsic part of any transformational process: shame and panic. Aram (2001) suggests that shame and panic can not be avoided when one is engaged in a process in which one's 'sense of being in the world' is challenged (p. 165). She is specifically pointing to the threat to *belonging* that is generated by changes in identity – shame that arise from experiences of exclusion / inclusion. In this paper, I will explore my own feelings and emotions as I reflect on my experience of joining DOC and I will also point to how the dynamics of inclusion / exclusion are socially experienced in a community of practitioners.

The *rewarding* aspect of this process had to do with the extent to which the ongoing process of reflection and sense-making allowed me to develop my reflexive muscles. The experience of attempting to join was a very personal and emotionally challenging experience. It *really mattered* to me to make sense of this experience. It was therefore not difficult to 'take my own experience seriously', because my experience of joining permeated every aspect of my life. Each challenge to my sense of *who I am* (my identity) as a member of DOC evoked questions and reflections about *who I am* as a practitioner, a mother, a partner etc. It also led me to reflect on my sense of *belonging* – on what it would take for me to feel that I *belong* to DOC. However, my inquiry is also an inquiry into practice. I kept asking myself: what are the implications of my experience for my practice as OD consultant?

## **Implications for my practice as Organisational Development consultant**

Stacey (2003a) writes about the anxiety that inevitably arises from feelings of exclusion. Even though individuals may not be consciously aware of the experience of anxiety, he or she may well

elaborate on his or her own actions and those of others in the private role-play / silent conversation of mind... The result can be fantasy and misunderstanding of varying degrees... however, there is a close relationship between fantasy and misunderstanding, on the one hand, and the emergence of novelty, on the other.

Fantasy is close to imaginative elaboration and misunderstanding triggers a search for understanding thereby provoking continued imaginative elaboration and communication. It is in such continued struggles for meaning, and the imaginative elaboration going with it, that the novel emerges and with it the potential for therapeutic change (p. 131).

What he says resonates with my experience of engaging in this inquiry and writing this paper. As I was grappling with the feelings and emotions that were aroused by this experience, and trying to make sense of it all, I had many new insights and understandings that I may never have discovered if I did not engage in this emotionally challenging process. I was specifically interested to note how the process of writing this project has led to changes in my practice, and different kinds of conversations with colleagues and fellow-practitioners. I will say more about this in the final section of this paper (Concluding thoughts).

## **Joining the DOC Community**

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### **The story I told myself about the DOC community**

I remember being very excited about the prospect of joining DOC. I was proud to tell people that I was moving to DOC (a well-known and widely respected OD consultancy) and wanted people to know that DOC is part of Duneford, one of the top three providers of executive education in the UK<sup>12</sup>. People who visit Duneford often talk about the 'Duneford experience' and refer to the magnificent buildings and beautiful gardens. I was as excited about joining DOC as I was about being part of the 'in-group' of people who live and work in such a beautiful environment. When I think about the story I told myself about the DOC community, I realise that much of this was of my own construction. I took bits of information and constructed a story that would enable me to focus on the positive aspects of joining DOC. Where I did not have the information, *I made it up*. Why would I have done that? Surely, an experienced consultant who often joins organisations should know better than to construct stories that would inevitably lead to disappointment?

Making up a good story about DOC was not something that I consciously chose to do. When I think about the time of leaving BCC and preparing to join DOC, I have a strong sense of a major shift in my identity during this time. As I mentioned before, my sense of *who I am* (identity) as a consultant / practitioner in the UK was

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<sup>12</sup> [Duneford] press release : June 2003

inextricably linked to my membership to the BCC community. This was about to change, and the uncertainty associated with this change inevitably led to anxiety (although I was not conscious of anxiety at the time I can recognise it in my coping strategies). Louis (1980) suggests that this kind of uncertainty leads most newcomers to create positive stories about the organisation they are due to enter. In the story I told myself about DOC, I focused on those aspects of DOC that I was excited about, thereby banishing thoughts about the things I felt less positive about. Similarly, in highlighting how this would be different from BCC, I reminded myself of those aspects of BCC that I did not like, thereby discounting the aspects I valued about BCC. In the months following January 2003, I missed my BCC colleagues and grabbed any opportunity to be with them. However, at the time of joining DOC, I seemed to be unable to acknowledge the grief about leaving BCC. It may have been too anxiety-provoking to acknowledge that I was sad about leaving – the only way I could cope with leaving was not to think about it and to rather focus on all the good things associated with DOC. It is interesting that scholars who write about organisational socialisation generally focus on the 'changing to' process of entering a new organisation, and exclude the 'changing from' process (Louis, 1980). I was doing the same - focusing on where I was *going to*, rather than paying any attention to where I was *leaving from*. Although I was not conscious of this at the time, I was constructing a story about a consulting community where I would feel *at home*. I was anticipating (hoping) that I would feel a sense of *belonging* in a community of practitioners who do innovative OD work, where practice development is a key focus and where academic studies are encouraged and supported. I was, in Stacey's (2003a; 2003b) terms, constructing a 'we'-identity that felt congruent with my sense of who I am (or who I would like to be). Having told myself these stories about DOC, I was looking forward to joining.

### **Early days and early responses**

On my first morning at DOC, I met with Mary (my assigned mentor) for a conversation. She explained that in DOC, consultants are expected to be self-sufficient with regards to settling into the organisation (ie there is no formal induction programme for newcomers). Newcomers are encouraged to focus their attention on developing relationships with other members of the organisation with the expectation that these relationships will lead to newcomers settling in and being accepted into the organisation.

During my first week at DOC, I contacted most of the consultants to arrange an introductory chat – an opportunity to learn more about them and also to introduce myself. It was not possible to get time with all the consultants (as many of them spend very little time in the office) but I did manage to arrange 15 conversations for the first week. If I had to describe that first week with one word, I would have to choose ‘indulgent’ or ‘decadent’. DOC’s office is in a beautiful old English mansion house and the buildings are immaculately maintained. The main drawing room (the Wyatt room) is also used as a lounge and it is where most people go for their one-to-one conversations. I spent most of that first week in the Wyatt room – engaged in animated ‘getting to know you’ conversations, where my colleagues and I co-created stories about each other. I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to talk with my new colleagues, to develop more of a sense of who they are and what it would be like to work with them. In a world where time is money, it felt decadent to be *expected* (and encouraged) to engage in *just talk* in such a beautiful environment. Having been rushed off my feet for the previous four years, this was a real treat.

### **Duneford Organisational Consulting (DOC): a group of people in conversation**

Throughout my career, I have been using the term ‘organisation’ as if an organisation is a *thing*. This may have something to do with the origin of the word ‘Organisation’ - the Greek *organon*, meaning a tool or instrument (Morgan, 1998). This way of thinking about organisations is consistent with the Newtonian mechanistic perspective on organisations, where organisations are seen as machines consisting of parts. (I highlighted my discomfort with this perspective of organisations in earlier projects). However, by using the shorthand ‘DOC’, I am in danger of reducing the ongoing process of interaction between people into something that may appear ‘thing’-like. Elias called this ‘process reduction’ – the tendency to reduce observable processes to something static and unchanging (Mennell, [1992] 1998). Stacey (2001) and his colleagues (2000) argues for a process view of organisations, to move away from understanding organisations as ‘systems’, but to think of organisation as ‘continually iterated processes of relating and communicating between people’ (Stacey, 2003b:358).

I described earlier how I developed a story around Duneford Organisational Consulting and what it would mean to be part of this community. I unconsciously envisaged Duneford Organisational Consulting as some kind of unified whole with certain attributes (a ‘culture’). However, as I started to meet with my new colleagues,

I realised afresh that there was no such 'thing' as Duneford Organisational Consulting. 'The organisation' was a group of people engaged in the *process* of being an organisation. Shaw (2002) points to the activity of conversation as the 'key process through which forms of organising are dynamically sustained and changed' (p. 10). I recognise the process of *being* Duneford Organisational Consulting in this description – our sense of who we were, how we practiced and what it meant to be a member of the Duneford Organisational Consulting community was continually being recreated and potentially changed through our conversations with each other (Stacey, 2003b). However, it is very difficult to sustain the sense of *process* in my writing. I feel the need for a shorthand that points to 'Duneford Organisational Consulting: a group of people in conversation'. In the remainder of this project, I will continue to use 'DOC' as shorthand for '*the ongoing process of communicative interaction between people who are part of the community of practitioners that call themselves Duneford Organisational Consulting*'. I realise that this may lead me to fall into the trap of 'process reduction', but I am hoping that I will catch myself when I do this.

### **Who am I in this community? What will my identity be?**

Let's return to the Wyatt room: I knew that these early conversations with my colleagues were important in that they would enable and constrain future relationships and conversations. These conversations shaped my sense of identity in this community. As we responded to each other's gestures, my new colleagues and I were jointly constructing a sense of who we are and *would like to be* in relation to each other. The conversations with my new colleagues influenced the conversations I was having with myself and I kept coming back to questions of membership and belonging: *What does it mean to be a member of this community? Will I belong here? Will I be able to make a contribution? Will I be valued for my contribution?* None of these answers were ever fully answered – every time I felt I had a sense of what it means to belong to DOC, I would have another conversation which would lead to a slightly different formulation of what membership means.

I rebelled against the notion that I have to 'market' myself to my own colleagues, *and* I realised that it was important for me to make a 'good impression' (Goffman, 1959). I wanted to be accepted and was keen to find out what it would take to make a good impression in this community. I often found myself musing on the question: '*What is valued in DOC?*' From my conversations with people prior to joining, I knew that ideas from complexity were accepted as core practice in DOC. Many people

knew that I was doing this Doctoral programme (this was mentioned as one of the reasons that I was employed), and most were interested to know more. I quickly discovered that it may be quite beneficial to be known as '*a student of Ralph Stacey*'.

By the end of that first week, I had a positive sense of myself as a member-to-be of the DOC community. I had enjoyed all the conversations and I was looking forward to working with my new colleagues. Many people told me how much they valued my 'different perspective' because DOC '*was in desperate need of new perspectives*'. The MD described me as a '*breath of fresh air*' to a colleague and I was reminded of how important it is for me to retain a sense of *being different*. This seemed to be a theme throughout my life – wanting to be different, *and* wanting to belong. Although I did not yet have any sense of belonging to DOC, I felt fairly confident that I would soon feel a sense of *belonging* to DOC - that I would feel *at home* in DOC.

### **The use of spatial metaphors and why this is problematic**

I said earlier that I was committed to catch myself when I fell into the trap of process reduction. One way of reducing process to 'things' is to use spatial metaphors. As I read the above paragraphs, I notice how difficult it seems to write without using spatial metaphors. When I use the words 'people *in* DOC', it sounds as if I am referring to some kind of container with an inside and an outside. When I refer to wanting to be *at home*, I immediately invite my readers to think of a physical structure. Elias warned against using these kinds of spatial references as it ascribes spatial qualities to processes that do not exist. However, he also recognised that grammatical pressure makes it difficult to escape this mode of thinking. He was particularly concerned about the way in which process reduction is taken for granted in the studies of sociology, where the actor is seen as separate from his activity (Mennell, [1992] 1998). Elias's ([1991] 2001) argument is that, as all actions are experienced by embodied people, it is impossible to split actor from action. Human beings are constantly in movement, always relating to other people. I am aware of the dangers of using concepts such as 'organisation' or 'community' as if they are static and uninvolved in relationship. However, I have also not yet found a way of speaking and writing without using these kinds of spatial metaphors.

### **First TelCo workshop in Finland - 'reality shock' kicks in**

After my first week at DOC, I went off to Finland to facilitate a TelCo management development workshop (this was arranged in the month before I joined). Having

spent some time talking with my colleagues, I was looking forward to doing some 'real work'. I was also looking forward to working with two of my DOC colleagues. My co-facilitators for this particular module were Graham (a Duneford Associate) and Irma (who had just been appointed as the new Managing Director for DOC).

Louis (1980) is interested to discover 'how newcomers cope with the experience of unrealistic/unmet expectations' (p. 229) when they enter unfamiliar organisations. She describes the experience of newcomers in an unfamiliar organisational setting as 'reality shock' (a term that was first used by Hughes). During that first Telco workshop in Finland, I experienced some of the 'reality shock' when I got an inkling that things might not turn out to be exactly as I hoped: Throughout the three days in Finland, I had to work hard to remain engaged and interested in the session. This was partly due to the fact that Graham took up a very strong leadership position on the module which meant that Irma and I felt superfluous at times. We were also working to a 'script' (ie the module was designed by someone else and we were expected to follow their design), which is usually difficult for me as I feel very constrained when I have to work to someone else's script.

Louis (1980) found that one of the coping strategies of newcomers is to engage in cognitive sense-making processes. When things go as planned and expected, we generally do not spend that much time thinking about what we are doing. Over time, we develop trustworthy recipes for 'thinking-as-usual' (Schutz, 1964:95) but when things happen that are *out of the ordinary*, or *surprising*, the 'shock' of the surprise evoke sense-making processes (Weick, 1995). During the three days in Finland, I spent most of my time thinking about the situation in which I found myself, wondering how I could extract myself from doing any further TelCo work. I did *not* join DOC to be a *trainer* – I wanted to do 'proper' organisational consulting.

I also realised that it would probably not be a very clever move to leave the team so soon after my first workshop – at least not if I was serious about *joining* DOC (which I was). One of the *constraints* arising from being a member of a consulting organisation has to do with the type of work one does. In DOC, the large-scale programmatic development work is widely seen as the cash cows – the programmes that should allow us to be less focused on the numbers, thereby enabling us to be more flexible and innovative in the rest of our work. I therefore decided to shift my attention – from wanting to *get out*, to wanting to change things so that it may be possible for me to *enjoy* my involvement in the programme. During coffee breaks

and over lunch and dinner, I tested my ideas about possible changes to the programme with Graham and Irma. Apart from some thoughts about the content and process of the module, I also had a strong sense that the module could be delivered with two rather than three facilitators. I felt that this would make it easier for the facilitators to remain engaged, and that the client would benefit from the reduction in costs. I knew that I had to tread carefully – although I was keen to shift things, I felt constrained as I considered the possible consequences if I was seen to be *too* challenging. I was aware of a sub-text in my conversations with Irma and Graham where I was reminded that I was still a newcomer, who needed to '*earn the right*' to be critical. In Project two, I considered Elias's work on power relations and constraints arising from interdependence. I was very aware of feelings of being constrained – although I knew that it was important for me (personally) to change things, I also felt I could not just tackle it head on as this would be risky strategy in terms of membership of this community. I needed to think carefully about how I was going to deal with this.

On my way home, I sent the following email to my learning set – an attempt to sum up my three-day experience:

*I am on my way back from Finland and struggling with many questions about my work and what I am doing. This was a 3-day workshop for TelCo - I can't remember when I have last been so bored !! Part of settling into DOC is going to mean that I will have to deliver training sessions that were 'designed' by someone else. I am not sure I want to do this - and the thought of having to facilitate this exact same session in a few week's time is just too much! My biggest question is: How do I settle into DOC and do interesting & challenging work? I don't want to be so bored and frustrated!!*

When I read this email, I am reminded of my feelings and emotions as I sat on the plane. I definitely did **not** feel *at home*, and I did not know what I could do to shift things. In capturing this experience, I have unwittingly illustrated one of the forms of surprise that contributes to the experience of reality shock (Louis, 1980). The difficulty to forecast ones internal feelings in response to a specific experience:

[Another] form of surprise arise from difficulties in accurately forecasting internal reactions to a particular new experience. "What will happen" (the external events) may be accurately anticipated, whereas "how it will feel" (the internal experience of external events) may not be accurately expressed by the individual. How new experiences will feel, as opposed to how the individual expected them to feel, is difficult to anticipate and often surprising (p. 238)



I looked forward to joining DOC and was excited when asked to do the TelCo workshops. However, actually doing the workshop felt very different from what I anticipated and made me wonder whether I had made the right decision to join DOC.

### **If organisations are complex processes, how does change happen?**

As I found myself mulling over the question about how to get things changed with regard to my involvement with TelCo, none of what I have learned about 'change management' (Conner, [1992] 1998; Conner, 1998; Kotter, 1996) even crossed my mind. Instead, I found myself thinking about how to approach Mary (the TelCo client director) and raise my concerns without alienating her. In conversations with my colleagues, I raised the questions that emerged for me after my first TelCo workshop and discovered that I was joining a conversation that was already ongoing. This appeared to be one of the shadow themes organising the conversations about the TelCo project (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, 2003b). It was not something that anybody felt comfortable talking about in open forum, but when we were in smaller groupings I heard lots of discontent – about the way that the TelCo account was handled, the frustration about having to follow someone else's design, the extent to which other people felt bored and disengaged by the work. These conversations led to more conversations: I found an opportunity to raise some of my concerns with Mary directly. I also spoke with a few of the leadership team members who apparently continued the conversation which resulted in a coaching conversation with Mary and more conversations between members of the TelCo team. After a few months, I became aware of some changes: Mary was doing an experiment with two rather than three facilitators and I received an invitation to join a TelCo team meeting where the team would get a chance to re-think the design of the programme.

Stacey and his colleagues (2000) point to the everyday nature of this kind of conversational activity – the way in which things change *despite* the project plans, methodologies and processes. This is the essence of a theory of complex responsive processes of relating – the notion that people are always in local interaction – engaged in responsive 'joint action' where no one person can control the outcome of the conversation. Our participation in these conversations is both constrained and enabled by our interdependence and our individual and social histories of relating.

How do we then account for change? By drawing on complexity sciences, conversation is understood as a self-organising phenomenon where people communicate through the use of symbols. From this process themes emerge that pattern further processes of interaction. It is not possible to predict or control the outcomes of these self-organising processes as they are patterned by many interacting themes arising from social and private conversations. These themes are continuously reproduced – always with the capacity for spontaneous transformation (Stacey, 2003b). This leads to a different perspective on organisational change:

Organisational change is change in power relations, is change in conflicting constraints of relating, is change in communicative interaction, is *change in the communicative themes patterning experience of being together* (Stacey et al, 2000:171, italics added)

### **Narrative themes organising experience - contributing to shifts in conversational themes**

In Project two, I briefly considered the implications of Stacey's (2001; 2003b) work on narrative themes that organise experience. I am interested in the potential for organisational change through changes to these themes. Stacey (2003b:227-376) argues that interaction between people are self-organising processes that are organised by narrative and propositional themes. He considers the experience of infants and their caregivers from which organising principles of 'being-with' emerge and he builds on the work of George Herbert Mead (a sociologist and a major figure in the American Pragmatist movement) and Norbert Elias (sociologist) when he argues that the individual's mind, self, personality and identity continuously evolve throughout life, arising in relationships with others and organising further experience. Members of groups have their own personal organising themes that have been taken up in their own private conversations - the stories they tell themselves about themselves: '*I am clever, stupid, innovative, a leader, etc*'. When people come together in groups, they all select and organise their own subjective experience of being with the others. The themes that organise their collective experience emerge as they respond to themselves and to each other.

Stacey points out that there is a difference between legitimate and shadow themes: legitimate themes organise what may be openly and safely talked about which automatically banishes some things from the formal, legitimate conversations. The official ideology is sustained by the formal-legitimate themes, whilst the informal-shadow themes often emerge from spontaneous, unplanned conversations and reflect unofficial ideologies. The informal-shadow themes may well undermine

existing power relations and so shift power relations. These shifts will eventually be reflected in changes to formal-legitimate themes. None of these themes are stored anywhere, they are continuously being reproduced through the communicative interaction between people.

When I joined the conversations about TelCo, the themes that were patterning the conversation seemed to be stuck – many of the project team members have felt frustrated for a long time but despite these frustrations, nothing changed. By joining the conversations, I contributed to shifts which led to different kinds of conversations. Although I know that it is impossible to show a causal link between my contribution and these changes, I am interested to know more about change of this kind. What contributes to transformation rather than stuckness? Stacey (2003b) and Fonseca (2002) point to the importance of *diversity* in conversational themes. They posit that diversity is created by misunderstandings and cross-fertilisation of different ways of talking. In my conversations with my new colleagues, I often heard reference to my *difference* from other people in DOC. Much of this difference was ascribed to my South African background ('cultural' difference) and the fact that I am supposedly more frank and willing to challenge things than many of the people in DOC. Following the months after my first TelCo experience, I often found myself raising issues in public forums that others were choosing to deal with in smaller groups. Or I would raise questions about issues that people were just not talking about. In Stacey's terms (2001, 2003b), I contributed to transformation in the themes patterning our conversations - issues that were previously only discussed in smaller groupings (patterned by informal/shadow themes), got raised in public gatherings (patterned by legitimate/formal themes).

However, this did not make it any easier for me to join DOC. I heard from people that I am not strategic enough in my contribution in formal gatherings and that I am not appreciative enough. My initial response to these kinds of comments from people was to feel shame for not acting in the *right* way. I wanted to join DOC, to be accepted as a member of the community and yet, I kept acting in non-compliant ways, that did not fit with the way things were generally done in DOC. By doing this, I may have contributed to change, but I know that I also alienated people, that there were people who were irritated by my contributions.

## **Relationships bring constraint. What about freedom and autonomy?**

It used to be very important for me to hold on to the notion of autonomy and freedom – the ability to choose my actions without being prescribed by someone else. This is one of the reasons why I find it so difficult to work to someone else's script. In Projects one and two, I explored my wish to remain as an external consultant. This has a lot to do with my wish to remain free of the internal politics in organisations. I have a strong sense that membership of an organisational community is often more constraining than enabling. This is confirmed by Elias's (1998) suggestion that all human interaction are processes of power relating. The way an individual behaves is always determined by past or present relations to other people. Individuals are therefore always constrained in that they need to consider the response of others to their actions (Elias, [1991] 2001). Elias sees individual and social as two aspects of the same process:

each 'I' is irrevocably embedded in a 'we'... When many 'I's form a 'we', the intermeshing of their actions, plans and purposes 'give rise to something which has not been planned, intended or created by any individual... The interplay of the actions, purposes and plans of many people is not itself something intended or planned, and is ultimately immune to planning... the autonomy of what a person calls 'we' is more powerful than the plans and purposes of any individual 'I'. The interweaving of the needs and intentions of many people subjects each individual among them to compulsions that none of them has intended (p. 62).

Elias helped me to understand something of my own experienced of being constrained by my relationships with others. This turns the idea of autonomous individual on its head – it is simply not possible to act autonomously– as we respond to others, and take them into account in considering our response, we are inevitably constrained in what we can or can not do. As Stacey (2003b) points out: 'Organisational action, then, is never simply the act of an autonomous individual but always occur in the relationship that people have with each other' (p 361).

## **How do I account for my non-compliant behaviour? Am I free to choose my actions?**

I am still grappling to account for my own non-compliant behaviour: Why do I keep acting in ways that is different from the expected norm? Why do I not just conform? I often find myself being quite nervous of how others will respond to what I am saying, so it is not that I am oblivious of others' and how they will interpret my words and my actions. I often find myself saying things *despite* a strong sense that I am not doing

myself any favours by saying these things – that people will not like me for what I am saying. And yet, I feel compelled to speak. Why would this be?

In reading Mead ([1934] 1967), I found something that speaks to my experience. He explains the notion of social constraint by the 'I-me' dialectic. He distinguishes between the 'I' and 'me' as different phases of the self. 'Me' answers to the organised attitudes of others in the community, whilst 'I' responds to 'me'. The conduct of 'I' is therefore influenced by others and an expectation of how others will respond to 'me'. Mead describes the structure of 'me' as a kind of censor: 'It determines the sort of expression which can take place, sets the stage and gives the cue' (p. 210). Under normal circumstances, 'the way in which an individual acts is determined by the attitude of others in the group'. However, although an individual is engaged in a social process and constrained by the expectations of others, the response of 'I' to each situation is an individual response – and potentially a novel response. Mead is specifically interested in novel behaviour. The originality of artists seems easy to explain – artists are *expected* to be unconventional. When people impulsively do things, their conduct is uncontrolled - uncensored by 'me'. Impulsive action is therefore often different from that which is expected by the community. However, what I got really interested in, was Mead's exploration of self-expression:

When an individual feels himself hedged in he recognises the necessity of getting a situation in which there shall be an opportunity for him to make a contribution to the undertaking, and not simply be the conventionalised 'me' (p. 212).

I recognise my own experience in this description – my wish to make a contribution and express something of myself in this. Mead points to the kinds of situations that offer self-expression of this kind namely

those situations in which the individual is able to do something on his own, where he can take over responsibility and carry out things in his own way, with an opportunity to think his own thoughts. Those social situations in which the structure of the 'me' for the time being is one in which the individual gets an opportunity for that sort of expression of the self bring some of the most exciting and gratifying experiences (p.123).

As a newcomer into a consulting organisation, it can be quite difficult to find opportunities to make contribution and express something of oneself in doing so. I am suggesting that one way of making this kind of contribution is by actively participating in the conversations, thereby contributing to change and renewal.

## **Themes patterning the conversations: 'it is tough to join DOC'**

Whenever I could, I continued the 'decadent' practice of engaging in stimulating, thought-provoking conversations in the Wyatt room. Each conversation was different from previous conversations, but there were identifiable themes patterning these conversations (Stacey, 2001; Stacey, 2003b): one of these was around the difficulty of joining DOC. As I asked people about their experiences as new joiners, I heard more and more stories about the '*arduous*' and '*difficult*' process of joining DOC. Although the stories varied, the common theme was that it is a very difficult process to get to a point where you are involved in client work and feel that you are able to make a contribution. Many people talked about their sense of loneliness in DOC, and a few people hinted at some competitiveness within the DOC community. They ascribed this to the academic culture where individuals increase their 'value' by having something unique to contribute – which could then get in the way of a sense of community where people are more willing to share ideas and learn from each other. My take-away from these conversations was that I had to be prepared for a *long and difficult* joining process.

Although I have joined (and left) numerous organisations and project teams over the years, I have never before had an experience where people seemed to have such a strong expectation that it will be 'difficult to join'. When I started to hear all the stories about the difficulty of joining, I was slightly taken aback. I was surprised by how often this seemed to pop up in the conversation. I found myself wondering whether this had become a useful construction for people in DOC. My feeling was that this had something to do with abdication of responsibility – whilst people acknowledged the difficulty of joining, it meant that they did not have to do anything about it. I had a strong sense that it must be possible to do things that would make the joining process less difficult. However, Organisational Behaviour (OB) texts about socialisation do so from the perspective of 'the organisation' with processes of socialisation seen as a mechanism for social control (e.g. Greenberg & Baron, 2000; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2001; Gibson et al., 2003). Very few authors acknowledge the emotional experience of newcomers (Louis, 1980; Wanous, 1992). My experience of the process of joining was that it was, above all, a very emotional time.

## **The emotional aspects of joining**

When I heard the stories about the difficulty of joining DOC I became slightly anxious about what a prolonged joining process would mean for me. One of my

strategies to deal with these anxieties was to publicly state that I had chosen to treat this story (that it would be difficult to join DOC) as a 'myth that I did not need to believe'. I wanted to retain a notion of choice in the matter – I did not want to feel like a *victim* that had no choice but to experience the *hardship* of joining. I wanted to hold on to the idea that I was free to choose how to respond, that I could influence the experience and that I was not going to be a passive sufferer. However, as I acknowledged earlier, it is never possible to act totally autonomously in an organisation – we are always influenced by our relationships with others. My interest during this time was to cope – to show (myself and others) that I can deal with the challenges of joining. I knew that my response to these stories was important.

After a few weeks of spending my time in conversations with my colleagues, I became aware of a strong sense of disappointment and rejection. When I started to notice these feelings, I was quite irritated with myself for being so 'wimpish' and sensitive. I did not understand these feelings, and I felt that they were *getting in the way* of allowing me to join successfully.

### **Dynamics of shame and panic**

In reading Eliat Aram's (2001) doctoral thesis, I recognised many of the feelings that I experienced during the first few months at DOC. She lists the dynamics that transpire when people are called upon to 'rethink their deepest assumptions and beliefs' (which is what happens during the joining process). They are:

- Being embarrassed, shamed or even humiliated when having to deal with not knowing;
- Fear of losing control, that is, feeling that the ground is pulled from under one's feet and therefore losing a sense of 'what I am here for';
- Fear of losing one's sense of meaning of being in the world;
- Fear of rejection and the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion.

She is particularly interested in exploring the dynamics of shame and panic as they arise in *learning processes*. From my own experience of joining DOC, I would argue that these dynamics are also relevant in the *joining process* (where one's sense of identity is severely challenged). Aram's view is that 'panic would surface whenever we get involved in a process that challenges us, that questions us at a deep level of our being' (p. 155). This was certainly my experience – as I was struggling to make sense of *who I am at DOC*, I found myself wondering about the things that Aram mentioned. I wondered whether I would ever be accepted into the community. Whether I would be able to make a meaningful contribution? I also began to doubt

my competence as a practitioner: How could I demonstrate my competence and ability to make a contribution if I am not invited to do some client work?

I had a strong sense that I was an outsider (Elias & Scotson, 1994) – that I had not yet *joined*, that there were groupings and conversations where I was not welcome. I was, in Aram's word, experiencing the emotion of shame – the 'personally felt affect arising in the private, silent conversation of the same social, public act of the inclusive / exclusive dynamic of "in and out"' (Aram, 2001:168). I also felt shame for being so concerned about 'joining well' and for raising these questions with people. I had a distinct sense (from talking to some of the established and more senior people in DOC), that 'real consultants just get on with it' – that they do not make such a 'big meal' out of the joining process. And yet, I was clearly raising questions that seemed to evoke discomfort and emotions of shame in others. Some of the consultants became emotional as our conversation reminded them of similar feelings of not quite being at home in DOC, of not yet feeling a sense of belonging in the community (despite being part of DOC for years). Others were clearly irritated with me – it was as if I was re-opening something that they thought had been well and truly sorted. Others appeared sad as they thought things would have got better since their own experiences of joining and they were disappointed that it was *still* difficult for people to join. Others described the difficult joining process as one of the 'rights to entry' at DOC – it is just one of those things that all DOC consultants have to go through (a bit like the seniors in a boarding school who get to hit the juniors with towels – when they are seniors then they will get to do it too).

My sense was that we were all contributing to the dynamics of inclusion-exclusion and the socially-experienced emotions of shame and panic arising from these dynamics. We were all co-creating a sense of discomfort with the joining process – it was not something that I was *doing or experiencing on my own*. I clearly *contributed* to it - as I engaged in conversations, I evoked lots of different responses from people, which often lead to them talking to others about issues such as community, the joining process, the ways in which information is shared etc. I was, however, interested to note how quickly my participation in various conversations became 'Louise's problem'. I have since heard that I had been described as 'pushy', 'complaining', 'critical', 'difficult', 'emotional' etc<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> I will return to this when I consider Elias's work on 'Established and Outsiders' later in this paper



## The meeting with the leadership team

One of the key moments in the process of joining DOC was a meeting with the leadership team. The Leadership team invited all the members of the DOC community to join them for an informal conversation about leadership in DOC. This meeting was at a time in my joining process where I did not feel that I had necessarily made the right decision to join DOC. I felt that I was experiencing all the costs of being part of DOC (being constrained by lots of unwritten rules, having to spend three hours a day in my car commuting, having to do TelCo-type work, etc), and very little benefit (I could not see any evidence of 'community', I was not doing any interesting client work, I experienced lots of defensiveness whenever I raised questions about practice – with what appears to be little interest in engaging with me on this).

I was therefore looking forward to my first opportunity to participate in a meeting where people from DOC were together to attend to DOC issues. It felt important for me to actively participate in this meeting as I was beginning to feel that I was in danger of 'losing my voice' in DOC. I wanted to establish myself in DOC as someone with something to contribute. Following the meeting, I captured as much as I could about the meeting as it felt like an important moment of my joining process. In re-reading my thoughts a few months later, I was surprised by the extent to which I captured the private and public aspects of the conversation, and have decided to keep my earlier reflections (these will be presented in a 'boxed' frame) and to add to this something about how I am making sense of this meeting from my current perspective.

Irma (the MD), started the meeting by saying that she had received four emails from people who could not be at the meeting and suggested that she would read them out to us as a way of starting the conversation. I found myself silently responding to various aspects of the emails, and then speaking almost involuntarily into the silence that followed Irma's reading of the four emails.

*'I was quite struck by Andrew's email and what he said about paying attention to the DOC community. Since joining DOC, I have been struck by how little time and attention seems to be given to developing the DOC community...'*

Having started to speak, I realised that my words sounded like criticism and I felt the need to mediate this somewhat, so I continued by saying ... *'I have always been very interested in the challenges of virtual working. My experience is that it takes more effort and attention to develop relationships and a sense of community when people don't regularly spend time*

together.

*We continuously struggled with this at BCC, and I don't want to suggest that we had the answers, but we explicitly attended to this as a challenge. We found that it was critical for us to regularly spend time together. In fact, this was non-negotiable for us – we had Awaydays every 6 weeks and we knew that we were expected to attend these. It was a way of investing in the BCC community. Not everybody attended all the meetings, but we generally found that those people who did not attend felt that they missed out.*

*I am intrigued by how little time people in DOC seem to spend together – 2 sets of 2 strategy days per year just don't seem to be enough*

As I spoke, I wondered whether this was a mistake – to be the first person to speak, to say something that could be seen as a challenge and criticism, and to respond to something that I felt so passionate about. I know from experience that my passion and enthusiasm often seem to evoke (what feels like) negative responses from others.

In reading this, I recognise some of what Mead refers to as seeking opportunities for self-expression. I was clearly considering the response of others to my actions *and* I continued to speak despite a sense that I may be stepping out of line. I had a strong sense that, by offering my experience of what we had learned at BCC, I could make a contribution to DOC and it felt more important to make this contribution than to keep quiet (or to 'fit in').

Irma responded: *'The frequency of our get-togethers are largely determined by history – this is how we have done it for the last few years. But it is always a struggle to get people in DOC together. Just look at the Strategy days in April and how many people have indicated that they can't be there. People in DOC really value their freedom and don't want to be told what to do and which meetings to attend'*

As Irma spoke, I felt a sense of frustration – I have had a similar conversation with her in Finland, and my experience during that conversation was that she was reluctant to inquire into the possibility of changing this pattern. It felt as if she was just too willing to accept the status quo. I also felt that her stance was based on many assumptions about what other people in DOC wanted or not wanted and I was not sure whether this had been freely discussed and considered.

Barry spoke into the pause following Irma's words: *'I value my freedom. That is what I like about DOC. If we are going to turn into a PwC<sup>14</sup>-like consulting organisation, where people are told when to turn up for meetings I will be out of here. I am not interested'*

I felt my heart sink. This was exactly the type of reaction I feared. But where did he get the

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<sup>14</sup> PwC : PriceWaterhouseCoopers – one of the 'big 5' consultancies

idea that I am advocating a PwC-like organisation?

Before I could even voice my surprise about Barry's response, three or four other people almost simultaneously challenged Barry on what he said. *'What was that about?' 'When did you hear Louise say anything about becoming PwC-like?' 'I would be very interested to hear what you heard Louise say – I certainly did not hear anything about becoming like PwC. I did not hear it anywhere in the ether'*

Barry: *'It is what Louise said about it being non-negotiable'*

Me: *'What I meant was that this was part of the deal – when we joined BCC, we knew that the owners and others in the organisation expected us to invest in the BCC community. Attending Awaydays was one way of doing that. We also found that people wanted to come the Awaydays – most of us felt the need to connect with our colleagues and Awaydays were often the only opportunity to meet with others outside our direct client project teams'*

I was very conscious of the fact that my voice was being heard more than any of the other voices in the room, and I did not feel very comfortable with that. I was hoping that there would be others who would say something that would support the idea of more frequent get-togethers.

As I read my account of what happened on that day in April, I recognise a recurring personal behaviour pattern - a tendency to speak more than others and to continue speaking despite feeling at risk. A colleague had recently suggested that I should do the SheppardMoscow Positive power and influence course to 'learn how to act appropriately in these kinds of settings'. However, I don't just want to discount my tendency to act in this way as *just* a gap in my education. I want to continue to take my own experience seriously. Why do I continue to do this when I know people get irritated with me 'hogging the floor' in this way? This must have something to do with 'being seen' and 'being recognised' (as I touched on in Project two). However, I think there is something more going on. *Wanting to speak* was a response evoked from my conversations with myself and others prior to the meeting as well as what happened at the meeting. I felt silenced in DOC, and wanted to find some way to regain my voice in the community. However, the one who speaks in a large group prevents others from speaking. Conversation analysts point to turn-taking as the 'fundamental organising principle of conversation' (Stacey, 2003b:347). People value turns to speak and it is one of the important ways in which power differentials are established and sustained in conversations. When the one speaking is not part of the 'established' or 'in-group', his/her participation is likely to disturb power relations and the status quo. It is always risky to disrupt and challenge the status quo and I have come to expect the uncomfortable response that my participation

often evoke from others. Disrupting the status quo has become part of my identity as an organisational consultant (I touched on this in Project two) and although I sense that I may irritate people when I speak 'too much', it usually feels more important to voice the things that are not being said or attended to than to sustain the dominant ideology.

Let's return to the meeting with the Leadership Team: I was aware of the fact that I was speaking more than others, and also trying to make sense of Barry's response:

I was not sure what to make of Barry's response. I can only imagine that, by talking about my own requirements for being *at home* in DOC (to be part of a community where people get together frequently to talk about practice) in this forum, I was inevitably raising similar question for others. Barry's response to the question '*What do I need to feel at home in DOC?*' seems to be different from mine. From conversations with others, I knew how much Barry values his sense of freedom. He is also widely regarded as a bit of a lone ranger – he just appears to want to be left to do his own thing (doing some very good work).

When I started speaking, I had no idea where it would lead – I did not know how others would respond to what I said, and to what extent I would be exposing myself. I just knew that I wanted to contribute to the conversation and that my contribution could potentially lead to some movement.

Alexandra: *'I have the same need. I want to connect and meet with others in DOC and I currently find that very hard to do. My feeling is that I am connected with a few people who I have good personal relationships with, but I don't have any sense that we are a community of practitioners. I would love to meet more frequently to talk about what we are all doing. I don't think we are doing enough of that'*

Janice: *'I would too. I need to have conversations with my colleagues in order to fill up my tank. As things stand at the moment, I find myself running from one client meeting to the next and I feel completely empty. But I want to know that others will make the effort to come to these gatherings, without using the excuse of client work'*

The conversation continued for a while – with more and more voices supporting the idea of more regular get-togethers. This inevitably meant that those voices that were *not* supportive of the idea were silenced and excluded.

Following this part of the conversation, Peter (a member of the leadership team) proposed that we should institute a DOC get-together every two months and that we should only have an annual 2-day strategy session instead of two per year. We agreed that it would be useful to use the 'DOC days' to talk about the work we are all doing, but that we wouldn't put any constraints around these days – we would see them as opportunities to talk about what needs to be talked about...

The conversation continued... we talked about practice development (something I have been grappling with) and the mentoring process to support newcomers (a process that I felt was not working).

This meeting is an example of change in private and social conversations. As we talked about issues that were important to us individually, we were all enabled and constrained by our interdependence (Elias, 2000). By participating in this conversation, we were continuing many (private and public) conversations that started before this meeting and which would be continued after the meeting – we were changing the conversation in DOC (Shaw, 2002). This meeting eventually led to many changes in the way things are done in DOC: Regular, bi-monthly DOC days has become an accepted pattern for get-togethers, much attention has been given to the mentoring process and a few important changes were made, many people have joined the conversation about what it would take for the joining process to be less painful and difficult and this has had a big impact on the hiring and 'socialisation' strategy.

I cannot account for the changes that occurred in DOC as something that was influenced by one individual – this was an example of 'joint action' (Shotter, [1993] 2000) – a social process in which people simultaneously gestured and responded to each other and to themselves. The conversation with the leadership team led to changes that none of us could have planned or foreseen, and could be seen as one of the defining moments in DOC during 2003. It was also one of the important moments in my own joining process. I left the meeting feeling quite encouraged that I would be able to influence things in DOC. This was a meeting in which the 'newcomer' contributed to changes in 'the organisation' – where we were all negotiating with each other how we would be working together:

As a man adjusts himself to a certain environment he becomes a different individual; but in becoming a different individual he has affected the community in which he lives. It may be a slight effect, but in so far he has adjusted himself, the adjustments have changed the type of the environment to which he can respond and the world is accordingly a different world. There is always a mutual relationship of the individual and the community in which the individual lives... an individual cannot come into the group without in some degree changing the character of the organisation. People have to adjust themselves to him as much as he adjusts themselves to them. It may seem to be moulding of the individual by the forces about him, but the society likewise changes in this process, and becomes to some degree a different society. The change may be desirable or it may be undesirable, but it inevitably takes place (Mead, [1934] 1967:215-216)

Other members of the organisation saw me 'in action' and developed a sense of what it would be to have me in their meetings – how my contribution would change the nature of meetings in DOC. As I highlighted before, this kind of mutual and simultaneous change ('organisation' *and* 'newcomer') is not an aspect of the 'socialisation process' that is acknowledged by any of the writers of the mainstream OB texts.

### **Joining is a political process**

By raising questions about practice and what it means to join the DOC community, I unwittingly opened up these questions for many other people in DOC. Everywhere I went, people told me that they had been in conversation about the *joining process* – a subject area that had been untouched for a few years. My contribution to the organisational conversation evoked many different responses – from collegiality to anger. I am particularly interested to explore the responses from the group who were angry at me, who felt that I was too critical and '*not appreciative of all the good things in DOC*'. I experienced people in this group as being quite defensive and responding to feelings of being challenged by accusing me as '*the one with the problem*'. I had a strong sense that this group wanted to keep me 'out', they did not want me to disrupt the comfortable existence where people felt generally pleased with themselves because things were going so well. They were certainly *not* keen on hearing the dissenting 'non-appreciative' voices.

In reading the work of Elias & Scotson (1994) about a study they had conducted in a community in Leicester, I found myself comparing the group they call the 'Established' group with the DOC group that responded so strongly to my participation in DOC. Elias refers to a 'we-image' that is held by the 'Established', and the threat posed by outsiders:

The very existence of interdependent outsiders who share neither the fund of common memories nor, as it appears, the same norms of respectability as the established group, acts as an irritant; it is perceived by the members of the latter as an attack against their own we-image and we-ideal (Elias & Scotson, 1994:xlvi).

This sounds very similar to my experience: In engaging in conversations around my own experience of joining the DOC community, I was both disrupting the sense that things were 'OK' in DOC, and raising issues in formal meetings or with members of the leadership team that were previously only discussed in informal gatherings. I

was also raising questions about some of the established traditions in DOC, in the way that newcomers often do. Elias and Scotson (1994) comment on the way in which this process frequently leads to newcomers being cast in the role of outsiders:

...newcomers who seek entry into, or are forced into interdependence with, groups with already established traditions of their own and have to cope with the specific problems of their new role. Often enough they are cast in the role of outsiders in relation to the established and more powerful groups whose standards, beliefs, sensibilities and manners are different from theirs (p. 157).

Newcomers are also described as people 'who do not know their place' (p. 158). In DOC, I felt that there was a sense that I was not following the unwritten rules and that I did not 'know my place' (I was not appreciative enough, I dared to criticize, I spoke out when newcomers are expected to remain silent, I engaged in lots of conversations that caused ripples through the organisation). Elias comments on how newcomers who act as if they are equals evoke a response from the established to 'fight for their superiority, their status and power, standards and beliefs' (p. 158). I had a very strong sense that I was challenging the power relations, and that I therefore evoked a response from others who wanted to ensure that these power differentials are sustained. I was reminded that I will not be 'invited to do work' or 'accepted by the DOC community' if I did not change my ways and become 'more appreciative' and 'less challenging'.

## **Concluding thoughts**

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In this project, I have been reflecting on my experience of joining a new organisation. By taking my experience seriously, I have been able to make new sense of my developing understanding of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating. I explored my contribution to the ongoing conversations in DOC and how that led to changes in the way things are done in DOC. Throughout the joining process, my sense of who I am (my identity) kept shifting whilst my new colleagues and I jointly negotiated what my membership to this community would mean. Joining was not something that I did in isolation, everything I did or said was always constrained by my interdependence on other members of the community. In seeking to express myself in DOC, I disturbed existing power relations and evoked changes in the organising themes that none of us could have predicted or controlled.

As external consultant, I am always joining groups and organisations. The process of joining is a political process in which the presence of an actively participating newcomer is likely to lead to shifts in the themes organising the experience of people belonging to the group that is being joined. Each experience of joining has the potential to change the 'I' identity of the one that joins as well as the 'we' identity of those that are being joined. The newcomer 'contributes' to organisational and culture change by actively participating in the organisational conversations. Newcomer and established members evoke and provoke responses from each other and 'organisational change' occurs as they respond to these provocations and responses from each other.



# Project four: Being involved in a global 'cultural change' project

## Introduction to Project four

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In this project, I started to answer the '*so what*' question. Through my research, I have come to think of organisations as 'complex processes of relating' as opposed to 'systems' but *so what*? What are the implications for our day-to-day practice? In previous projects, I have considered my contribution to conversations in small groups and how this has contributed to processes of cultural and organisational change in the Pharmaceutical company in Ireland and Duneford Organisational Consulting. In this project, my research material is my involvement in a complex cultural change program for a global pharmaceutical organisation (PharmaCo).

The PharmaCo cultural change project is a business-critical project with an objective to get employees across the organisation to act in compliance with regulatory requirements (something that is not happening at the moment). My ability to participate in conversations on the various sites is clearly limited by time and distance. I have been asked to help the organisation deal with the cultural change process across the global business. In this project, I keep asking myself: '*Given the complexity and the size of the challenge, how am I to practice from a complex responsive processes perspective?*' There is a sub-text to this question: How am I as practitioner (working from a non-mainstream perspective) to function in a world where the systemic view is so pervasive? How am I to respond to the requests from senior managers for a 'three-year plan to cultural change' and 'metrics' and 'KPIs' to show that things are changing? How do I practice in a way that is congruent with what I have come to understand and believe about organisations? How do I 'go on' (and convince others to go on with me) when I can not predict or control the process or the outcomes of our activities? On what basis do I hold on to the belief that my colleagues and I will be able to influence '*the way things are done*' in PharmaCo?

I am pursuing two themes in this project:

- The implications of a conversational approach to the early phases of a global cultural change project;

- The extent to which it is possible to influence *a particular kind of change* across a global organisation

Having completed this project, I am frustrated because there is always more that could be done. I have more stories to tell and more research to do. This project has made me realise that, as social scientists, our work is always in-progress, it will never be quite 'finished' and 'ready for presentation'. We are forced to create artificial breaks and pauses in our work. However, I am quite excited about this particular piece of work-in-progress in which I have been able to pull together many of the themes from earlier projects into a perspective on cultural change as a process that can be influenced through processes of sensemaking.

## Introducing my inquiry for this project

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### To sterilize or not

I have chosen to introduce this paper with another story:

I am working as a member of a global project team (the 'All for Quality' (A4Q) project) for PharmaCo<sup>15</sup>, a global pharmaceutical company with manufacturing sites in Europe and North America. The pharmaceutical industry is a highly regulated industry with laws governing every aspect of the development, manufacturing and distribution process. There have been a number of internal and external audits indicating that many employees in PharmaCo do not comply with these requirements. The task of our project is to ensure that people in the organisation become more compliant (ie that they follow the procedures without deviation).

One of my project colleagues recently had a conversation with a shopfloor operator who did not follow a procedure. The procedure clearly states that a particular machine has to be sterilized after each batch. When asked whether he knew what the procedure stated, the operator said that he did. When pushed to explain why he did not follow the procedure, he finally said something along the lines of: *'We are under a lot of pressure to meet our production targets. It takes 10 minutes to sterilize the machine. We can't afford to lose so much down-time so we have made the decision to sterilize the machine after every second batch'*.

I think this story encapsulates so much of organisational life. I often find myself in a situation where I feel pulled in many different directions, and then have to make a decision to do *this* or *that* - to sterilize or not to sterilise, to do what **other people** want me to do, or to do what *I* want to do or to follow **the procedure**? As a project team, we have a clear mission: to persuade people in PharmaCo to adhere to the specifications set by the organisation's customers in order to continue to produce and sell products. The regulatory agencies have a 'law enforcing' role on behalf of governments around the world. They set the rules (by defining Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs)), and then check whether the people in the pharmaceutical organisations adhere to these rules. Within the organisation, these 'rules' are translated into Standard Operating Instructions (SOPs) and other internal

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<sup>15</sup> A pseudonym

instructions. If an inspector of one of the agencies had the conversation described above with a PharmaCo employee, it could have very negative consequences for the organisation. Regulatory authorities have legal sanction to take action against the entire organisation when they find one individual contravening the procedures in this way.

In this paper, I will be exploring my experience of being part of the A4Q project team and will be considering the implications of a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes when working as 'cultural change advisor' for a global cultural change project. When I was asked to join the project team, I was confronted with a series of questions (pointing to the changes in my practice): *Do I still think it is possible to **make** cultural change happen? If I believe it **is** possible, how does it happen and how do I account for my practice? If I **don't** believe it is possible, how do I justify my involvement in the project and how do I account for my practice?* I will endeavour to answer these questions in the following exploration.

### **The meaning of 'culture change' keeps changing**

The 'culture change' workstream is one of three workstreams of the A4Q project. The second workstream has to do with the implementation of a new Quality Management System (QMS) and the third workstream is dealing with processes and technology. 'Culture change' was included as a workstream because of a strong theme in the Quality movement that 'quality management is more about cultural change than it is about any specific practices' (Woods, 1997:49). Many Senior managers in PharmaCo felt that the organisation needed more than 'just' a new system - they saw the Quality & Compliance issues as a manifestation of 'the culture' and if we were able to change 'the culture' then compliance would follow. As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, this way of thinking (the systemic perspective on culture) has been introduced by practitioners such as Schein. For scholars and practitioners in this school of thought, the term 'culture' refers to the (relatively static) norms, values and beliefs of a group (e.g. Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sathe, 1985; Trice & Beyer, 1993) which then lead people to behave in a certain way (behaviour as *manifestation* of 'the culture'). In this paper, I will be using a *process* perspective on culture, considering the ever-changing cultural themes that emerge from interaction and the possibilities of influencing and changing these themes (thereby changing 'the culture' of the organisation).

When I joined the A4Q team, I discovered that 'culture' meant different things for people (as so often happens with these kinds of abstract terms). I kept asking the question: *What do we mean by cultural change in PharmaCo? What are we hoping to change?* Initially, the stated objective was to change the culture to become 'more quality-focused'. But I was not sure what this meant either. We embarked on a tour to the manufacturing sites and engaged 4,000 people across four sites in a series of site-wide events (more about this later). During this time, we continued the conversations about the meaning of culture change: *What is needed in PharmaCo? How do we understand the requirement to become more 'quality-focused'?* From these conversations emerged an objective to change the culture so that people will routinely comply with GMPs<sup>16</sup> as required by the regulatory agencies. If we were to achieve this objective, the regulatory risk to the business would be reduced and the Quality-levels would be significantly improved.

So, although we may have used the words '**culture change**', my colleagues and I started to see our task as '**behavioural change**'. We did not set out to change some kind of abstract cultural 'system'. We did not target the 'values' and 'beliefs' of 'the organisation' but thought it was important to attend to the behaviours of people in PharmaCo - *the way things were being done*. After much discussion, we (the A4Q project team) eventually defined our goal to '*change the behavioural norms*' in the organisation. We realised that PharmaCo's survival depended on our ability to persuade individuals and groups of people to work differently. We wanted to persuade them that compliance is not just a 'nice-to-have', but a non-negotiable expectation from all members of the PharmaCo organisation - *'the way we work in PharmaCo'*.

As I continued to learn more about a theory of organisations as 'complex responsive processes of relating', I found myself raising questions that I would not have done before: *Is it valid to talk about a set of behavioural norms for all of PharmaCo? Surely there are different behavioural norms for the countless subgroups in the organisation - different ways of working that have emerged between different groups?* Through my research, I had come to see behavioural norms as **one of the cultural themes** patterning the interactions of people in the organisation - not 'held' somewhere but being continuously iterated as people work and talk together. As 'cultural change advisor' I therefore suggested that we should attempt to influence the '**cultural themes**' rather than trying to change '**the culture**'.

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<sup>16</sup> Good Manufacturing Practices

## **Do we need to change 'the culture'? Is it not enough to implement a new system?**

There were a few influential people in PharmaCo who were annoyed by our focus on the 'soft issues' (such as 'culture'). They felt that we were diverting attention from the 'real issue' which, in their opinion, was the need for a 'new system'. They were firm in their belief that, once a new system has been implemented, the Quality & Compliance issues will be resolved. There are practitioners who agree with this idea, that organisations are governed by *rules*, and that change occurs through the implementation of new rules (e.g. Clegg, 1981; Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991, Mills & Mills, 2000). This way of thinking derives from the engineering metaphor which is underpinned by an assumption that 'If you get the engineering right, the human factor will fall into place' (Morgan, 1998:26). This has been taken up in the theory of management science which sees organisations as entities to be controlled and members as 'rule-following entities' (Stacey, et al, 2000:62). I have been arguing that it is not valid to think of social interaction as 'something' that can be 'managed' and 'controlled' in this way and needed to offer an alternative perspective on how to facilitate change.

## **Can we plan this change? If not, how are we to practice?**

A few years ago, I would have been tempted to define our task in terms of a process to move the organisation *in a 'planned' way* (with pre-defined activities) from the current 'state' (**'As-Is': non-compliance**) to an idealised future 'state' (**'To-Be': compliance**). This way of thinking comes from Lewin's (1951) famous 'unfreezing' - 'moving' - 'freezing' model, which also underpins most of the 'change management' methodologies that are widely used in organisations to 'manage change' (e.g. Conner [1992] 1998, 1998; Kotter, 1996). The promise of 'change management' is that it is possible to 'manage change' from where you are today to where you want to be, and these kinds of methodologies are often used by large consultancies that have a recipe-based approach to 'managing change'. However, we know that many of these 'planned change' initiatives are dismal failures and it is an issue of concern for practitioners and scholars alike (e.g. Buchanan & Boddy, 1992; DiBella, 1996). If we can not *plan* organisational culture change, how are we to practice?

When I joined the PharmaCo A4Q team, I heard that many people expected me (the 'expert') to arrive with a methodology and a '3-year plan' for 'culture change' (complete with pre-defined activities, deliverables and milestones). This way of thinking is based on a Rationalist teleology (Stacey *et al*, 2000) where the

assumption is that it is possible for individuals to autonomously choose goals and then take actions to realise these goals. I do not believe that Rationalist teleology accounts for the transformative nature of human interaction and have learned through bitter experience that it is not valid or appropriate to think about cultural change along these lines. I therefore thought it would be dishonest to suggest a 'three year plan for culture change'.

*If I don't believe it is valid to develop a three year plan for cultural change, what is the basis for my practice? How do I account for my role and contribution to the A4Q project?* In this project, I will be articulating my response to these questions. I start my exploration by briefly considering the various ways in which I might have chosen to deal with this kind of situation in the past. I then consider the implications of practicing from a theory of complex responsive processes of relating: What does it mean *in practice*? How am I to think about behavioural change from this perspective? How can we, as a project team, influence the processes of organisation culture change? I will argue that it is possible for practitioners and organisational members to *influence* or *provoke* organisational change, although they are unable to *manage* or *control* it.

## **How am I to think about this 'problem'? How am I to practice?**

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### **The *individual* needs changing**

If I was presented with an issue of an operator who is not behaving as he should in 1990, I would almost certainly have focused on *the individual* as the 'problem' to be addressed. I would probably have 'diagnosed' the situation as one of *an individual* who lacked knowledge of the pharmaceutical industry and the regulatory implications of contravening the approved procedures in this way. My response would most likely have been to book him onto the next GMP<sup>17</sup> training course, and I would also have suggested that he needed a comprehensive training and development plan. Many HR and Training practitioners would have agreed with my diagnosis of the 'problem' as well as the 'remedy' that I proposed. Training is an action that is widely accepted in the quality management literature. It is often cited as a 'success factor' for quality (Jha, Michela, & Noori, 1996) and is seen as the tool

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<sup>17</sup> Good Manufacturing Practices

to help orient people in organisation towards the kinds of behaviours that will lead to a change in culture (e.g. Brown, 1989; Chapman, 2002; Richards, 2004).

### **There is more to this story**

The conversation with the operator occurred during an investigation following a critical quality incident. Members of the Site Quality Organisation wanted to identify the 'root cause' of the incident, so they walked around the area and asked people about their work. It turned out that this particular site had recently achieved '*Class A for Supply Chain*' status. They used a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure the performance of the various production areas. All of the KPIs had 'Class A' targets, and the site had to show that they were able to consistently meet these targets in order to achieve 'Class A' certification. All over the site, the Supply Chain KPIs were proudly displayed on notice boards and plasma screens. The Site Director and most of the senior managers were personally interested in the performance of the various units as their annual bonuses were linked to the achievement of Class A, in addition to 'making the numbers'. My colleague's take-away from the various conversations in the area was that *speed and production output* seemed to be regarded as much more important than *compliance*.

There was clearly more to the story than an individual *deciding on his own* that he would not comply with the procedure. I also want to suggest that it is more than a knowledge and understanding issue. Why do I say this? If the operator was to go on a GMP training course, he would learn how important it is to follow procedures, and that it is not acceptable to skip any of the steps. On return to his workgroup, one would hope that his newly acquired knowledge would be sufficient reason for him to follow the procedures (and therefore be compliant). Instead of an objective to complete the batch *as quickly as possible*, his objective would now hopefully be to complete the batch *in a compliant manner*. However, who knows what kind of social setting the operator is to return to? Who knows how his manager or colleagues would respond to his interest in being compliant? What would it mean for his relationship with his colleagues and his manager (and his sense of belonging to the team) if his actions meant a drop in production figures? How would the Site Director respond if a critical Supply Chain KPI is adversely affected by his actions? How does he understand the expectations from his local colleagues from him (is it to be compliant or to help them to meet the production targets)?



## **The systemic patterns need to be changed**

Systems Thinking (and the work of Peter Senge ([1990] 1999)) offered a way of understanding and dealing with these kinds of interrelationships between various aspects of 'the organisation' (where organisation is understood as a 'system'). If I came across the 'problem' of the operator during the time in which I experimented with systems thinking as a way of addressing organisational problems, I would have been interested to explore the patterns and structures that lead to the 'problem', with the aim to develop the systems archetype for the situation. This would then have allowed me to identify the 'levers' that would lead to change (Brill & Worth, 1997). The 'systems' approach to 'implementing' a 'Quality culture' calls for a focus on the *values* of an organisation, suggesting that, if the organisation 'holds' the 'right' values, and these values are appropriately exemplified by leaders of the organisation, then quality will be a natural outcome (e.g. Beecroft, 1995; Cameson, 1998; Scholtes & Hacquebord, 1998; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Some practitioners argue that behavioural norms lead to values whilst other argue that values lead to the appropriate behaviour. The problem, as Michela and Burke (2000) points out, remains: *how to instil norms or values for quality?*

In my experience, people in organisations learn from each other in local interactions what it takes to get things done and to succeed in an organisation (Weick, 1995; Louis, 1980; Trice & Beyer, 1993). In Project three, I explored my own experience of joining DOC and discovering that our experience was organised by narrative themes, rather than 'shared' values, assumptions or beliefs. Cooke & Szumal (2000) argues that values, missions, goals and strategies have only marginal impact on the cultures of organisation, and that it is more appropriate to pay attention to the 'realities that members face on a day-to-day basis' (p. 153). This is consistent with my experience, which has led me to a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating.

## **Making the move from 'Individual' to 'Systems' to 'Process' - paying attention to *conversations***

Through my research, I have been grappling with what it would mean to shift from a Systems Approach to practice to one that is informed by a theory of Complex Responsive Processes of Relating, which highlights *conversations* as 'the most important feature of organisational life' (Stacey, 2003b:398). In her book *Changing conversations in Organisations*, Patricia Shaw (2002) makes a cogent case for organising to be understood as a conversational process through which change

emerge. The activity of conversation itself is the process through which 'forms of organising are dynamically sustained and changed' (p. 10). She draws attention to the extent to which our ordinary everyday conversations contribute to organisational change and continuity. She encourages practitioners to pay attention to their participation in 'conversational gatherings' as she argues that *this is the work of organisational change*. When people gather to make sense, they construct the future together as they engage in the conversational process of joint sense-making. She suggests that we should approach the work of organisational change as 'improvisational ensemble work of a narrative, conversational nature' (p. 28). Through her stories and reflections, she provoked me to think about my practice and how I account for what I do. When I first read her book, I found myself interpreting her exploration as *prescriptions for practice*. I thought that, if I wanted to call myself a *practitioner informed by a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes*, I should practice in the way that she does. However, I have come to see her work as provocations for my practice - encouraging me to re-think my own practice, not copy hers. I want to **account for my own practice and how my practice is being informed and changed by a perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating**. Let me start this process by revisiting my first assignment for PharmaCo:

## Joining the conversations in PharmaCo

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### A phone call from Derek

August 2003: I am on holiday in Australia when my mobile phone rings. It is Derek, a client whom I had previously worked with (when he was still European president for Medya<sup>18</sup>). I am surprised to hear Derek's voice as I knew that he had left Medya to join PharmaCo. He tells me that he is having an interesting time at PharmaCo in his new role as Global Head of Manufacturing. He is phoning to ask whether I could help design and facilitate a Global Quality Summit planned for November. He explained that when he arrived at PharmaCo he discovered that Stuart (VP Quality) and his team were planning to host this global event. Derek was the sponsor of the event and it was going to be his first opportunity to speak to a gathering of 150 senior people in the organisation. He wanted to be sure that the time would be used well. He mentioned that he was hoping I would be able to do something as interactive and enjoyable as the Medya Supply Chain conference that I had helped

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<sup>18</sup> A pseudonym for a global pharmaceutical firm

with a few years earlier. I had no idea what I was saying yes to, but it sounded like an interesting piece of work so I agreed to phone Stuart to arrange a meeting to talk about my possible involvement with the Summit.

### **Meeting Stuart and his team**

When I arrived at Stuart's office a few weeks later, I was not quite sure what to expect of this first meeting but I was looking forward to finding out. When I think about that first day in Stuart's office, I remember how chaotic the day felt. Chaotic in a nice way. When I arrived, Stuart was alone in his office. I discovered that he was originally from the North of England and that he had been living in France for almost thirty years. When Stuart told me about the Summit, he did not appear to have any fixed ideas about the event. His main objective was to get people from around the world together to discuss Quality and Compliance in PharmaCo. He felt that it was necessary *to do something* to get people to take in interest in Compliance as it was a neglected topic in the organisation. He wanted to get Quality and Compliance 'back onto the agenda' and thought it would be good opportunity for Derek to say something about his vision for Quality and Compliance.

Shortly after I arrived, Stuart's first 'visitor' walked into his office. Jacques wanted to hear what Stuart thought about an issue he was struggling with and dropped by for a quick chat. Stuart introduced me as *'the consultant who was going to help with the arrangements for the Quality Summit'*. I had not realised that we had made any decisions that I would definitely do the work, but I was already enjoying myself so I did not contradict Stuart. Shortly after Jacques's arrival, Ian popped in to talk about something he was working on. He did not stay long and then Clive arrived. Stuart's office seemed to be a general gathering point for members of his team. Throughout the morning, I found myself talking to different people who were all keen to tell me about *'the need to do something'* to get people to pay attention to Quality and Compliance.

A few members of Stuart's team joined us for an informal lunch at the local pizzeria. During lunch, I heard many stories about 'the way things are' in PharmaCo – these stories were clearly told for my benefit (so that I would understand something about the situation), but it also felt as if people were using the opportunity to make sense of some of the things they had been grappling with. It sounded as if the members of Stuart's team felt quite lonely in their quest. In their attempts to join the organisation (most of them were quite new), they were discovering just how serious things were

and were finding it difficult to understand how Quality and Compliance could have been neglected to such an extent. They were frustrated by what they perceived to be people's lack of understanding of the pharmaceutical industry and the Compliance issues in the organisation. They felt that many people in the organisation (including senior managers), saw Quality and Compliance as an add-on cost, as opposed to an integral part of the way business is done in a Pharmaceutical organisation. Their biggest frustration was about the difficulty of speaking about these issues. Ted (the legal council to the CEO), would not allow anybody to openly speak about Compliance issues in the organisation. It sounded as if he understood his role as one of protecting the CEO from knowing about the issues so that he (the CEO) could claim ignorance if the regulatory authorities decided to take legal action against the organisation (and the CEO as responsible person). The stories about Ted caught my interest:

Me: *I find it difficult to believe the stories about Ted. Are you telling me that he deliberately withholds information from the CEO?*

Stuart: *It does sound unbelievable, doesn't it? But that is how it is*

Me: *Surely it would be better for issues to be openly acknowledged and dealt with than to hide them*

James: *You would have thought so, wouldn't you?*

Me: *To what extent will Ted control what we can or can't say at the Summit?*

Stuart: *We will have to get him to approve the agenda and any slides that we intend to use*

Me: *What will happen if we don't?*

Stuart: *It is just not worth it. We can't take the risk of exposing the company to that kind of legal risk.*

The conversation meandered into other areas: a technical issue that one of the team members was grappling with, a forthcoming meeting, a new appointment, and back to the Summit when I was asked whether I had any ideas about the Summit? It sounded like an invitation to say something about the kinds of 'events' that I believe in (and also those that I do not believe in), so I said:

*'I think the most important thing with a big event like this is to create as many opportunities as possible for people to talk together. I don't believe there is any value in bringing people from all the sites together if you are just going to talk at them. We need to think carefully about how we are going to structure the two days so that people like Derek, Stuart and the CEO get an opportunity to say something about how they see the issues around Quality and Compliance. I think it is useful to see these kinds of presentations from senior people as stimuli for conversation but I would suggest that we focus*

*our attention on the possibilities for conversations that these kinds of events offer'*

As I looked around the table, the others appeared to be listening with interest and nobody spoke into the pause, so I continued:

*'From the stories I heard today, it appears as if there are only a handful of you who appreciate the seriousness of the issues. I think we should see the Summit as a chance to help people across the organisation to understand the extent of the challenge and the potential implications of not dealing with the Compliance issues. The Summit could be a wonderful opportunity to engage 150 people across the organisation in different conversations about Quality and Compliance. The only thing we can hope for is that people will become sufficiently interested in this to go back to their home sites and continue the conversations that we would have started at the Summit. I just don't know how we are going to deal with this legal issue as I think we need to be able to openly acknowledge the issues, not hide them'*

It was almost time to return to the site, so shortly after my little monologue Stuart and I made our way back to his office. He seemed to be interested in what I suggested and asked whether it would be possible for me to put together a few ideas about a high-level agenda for the Summit so that we could talk about it when we met again.

### **Doing the work of culture change *and* preparing for the Global Quality Summit**

Over the next few weeks and months, I made a few more trips to France to join Stuart and his team for more provocative and enjoyable conversations, and to prepare for the Global Quality Summit in November. During this time, we continued to chop and change our design until we were all reasonably happy with the agenda for the two days. After many conversations about *'what we are trying to do here'*, we agreed that the best we could hope for was to evoke an interest in the Quality & Compliance issues from the 150 people who were due to attend the Summit. We saw the event as an opportunity for *'conversational sense-making gatherings'* (Shaw, 2002), and encouraged the few presenters to see their presentations as *provocation for further conversation*, rather than *messages to be broadcasted*.

After much deliberation, we had structured the two days into four sessions with each of the sessions being introduced by one or two speakers with the rest of the time

used for conversational sessions in different configurations (self-organised mixed groups, functional groups, site groups, people who are interested in particular topics, etc). Members of Stuart's team were at first very uncomfortable with the fact that the design appeared 'loose' and 'unstructured' but eventually agreed to go along with my suggestions. I had a strong sense that the topic (Quality & Compliance) required us to pay extra attention to making the session as interesting and engaging as possible. In most Pharmaceutical organisations, 'Quality & Compliance' is generally viewed as one of the 'constraining' aspects of the business. For many people (especially those outside the Quality Organisations), the words 'Quality', 'Compliance' and 'Validation' evoke thoughts of 'control', 'constraint', 'paperwork', 'non-value added activity', 'cost', 'systems', 'processes' etc. My interest was therefore to do something at the Summit that would get people to be *interested*, rather than *bored*. I thought it would be important to get the delegates *actively engaged*, rather than letting them be *passive members of an audience* (waiting for a message to be delivered to them). I therefore suggested that we use a variety of props to add extra stimulus which led to a decision to create many opportunities for moving around, use music to punctuate the sessions and ask people to make posters to share the essence of their definition of 'Quality'. We employed a graphic artist to capture the output from the session and asked a well-known French cartoonist to capture his interpretation of what was happening in cartoon-form.

However, every time I flew back to the UK, I had a sense that we were not *only* planning the Quality Summit. We were also involved in the wider process of organisational change. We kept having conversations along the same lines as the one we had about Ted's role and when we re-visited the conversation during my next trip, I routinely heard that things had shifted in some small way.

### **Continuing the conversations from the Global Quality Summit**

During the weeks following the Summit, I kept hearing stories about people who felt they got new insights about an aspect of the organisation that they knew little about. Having been involved in conversations about the potential impact to the business if the Quality & Compliance issues were not addressed, these people became interested in continuing the conversations within their local areas. I was pleased to hear this and wondered what else we could do to encourage people to continue talking.

A few weeks later I was sitting in my home office in the early morning hours, drafting the executive summary that would accompany the post-summit feedback document (a 78-page document with all the verbatim comments from the Summit participants). I had just finished capturing all of the responses and felt excited because the feedback seemed to suggest that the participants left the Summit with a sense of urgency about the work that needed doing. The plan was to send printed copies of the feedback document to all of the delegates so that they could all have access to the comments from their colleagues. However, I did not just want to send the document, I wanted to say how much I appreciated the fact that they took so much care with their feedback. I also wanted to encourage them to read the verbatim comments from their colleagues and I wanted to encourage them to continue the conversations, so I wrote them a note:

***Personal note from Louise (Summit facilitator)***

It was a real privilege to read the comments from all the participants. I passionately believe that [PharmaCo] will get the most value from this document if it is seen as a stimulus for further conversation. I compiled this document because I see it as part of an ongoing process and not an end in any way.

I have included **all** the comments from all of the participants who completed the questionnaires. You may think this is overkill - *too much data!* However, I hope that when you read the verbatim comments, you will discover the richness and texture in these individual comments. I am hoping that the verbatim comments will give you as reader a sense of the diversity of the responses to the Summit, but that you will also notice the themes emerging from these responses.

I would urge you to take your time and read it carefully. My plea is for you to honour the commitment from the people who took the time to complete the questionnaires. Notice the *differences* (in language, perspective, culture) and the *similarities*. Allow yourself to get excited about the commitment from people in PharmaCo, and notice where you get slightly anxious about the extent of the work to be done. Notice your responses and your silent conversations as you read these comments and then (most importantly) - ***please continue the conversations with our colleagues. These conversations will be another step in the process of culture change in [PharmaCo]....***

I continued the note by inviting people to ask themselves how they understand the comments from others and what it might mean for them as leaders in PharmaCo, and finished by offering a few suggestions for the kinds of gatherings in which they may want to continue these conversations.

Since writing this note and sending off the documents, I have often wondered what compelled me to write the accompanying note. I know (because I have been told) that many people have responded to my provocation by talking with others about what they have read in the document and that these conversations have led to many

small shifts across the organisation. I did not plan to write a personal note. Having done the executive summary, I was ready to press the 'send' button on my email program when I felt I needed to do something more. In Project one, I explored the notion of improvisational practice and how I often feel that I *act into* an opportunity that presents itself as opposed to deciding beforehand exactly what I will be doing. This is one of those occasions. I was excited about the Summit and what had happened there. I had a sense that it was an important moment in PharmaCo's history and I wanted to do what I could to encourage people to continue the conversations that started at the Summit. I thought that the document with all the comments from the participants was bound to provoke a few more conversations.

### **Reflections on my contribution as 'external facilitator'. Questions arising**

When I think of what has happened in PharmaCo over the last 12 months, I have a strong sense that the conversations in PharmaCo are changing. Following the Quality Summit, Stuart asked me to help arrange Mini Summits on the various sites to engage more people in conversations about Quality. I worked with the various site leadership teams and helped them to put together a series of half-day sessions on the four sites with the intention to engage the rest of the organisation in conversations about Quality & Compliance. The site sessions were also focused on 'conversation' rather than 'presentation', and we asked those people who attended the Summit to share their stories about their experiences at the Summit as provocations for further conversations. I asked the Site Directors to lead these sessions as a way of showing their personal commitment to focus more attention on Quality & Compliance.

The CEO has identified Quality as the Key Strategic Objective for 2004/5. This gesture *in itself* has led to an increase focus on Quality because the PharmaCo Performance Management process requires all managers to have Short Term Incentive (STI) targets that are linked to the key strategic objectives. Managers suddenly found themselves presented with the challenge to identify STI targets linked to Quality & Compliance. Over the last few months, Stuart and members of his team have met with various functional and site groups to talk about what needs to be done to address the Quality & Compliance issues. We have also had another round of site-based events (we called these Quality Days) where local workgroups attended sessions to discuss the implications of increased focus on Quality. We



asked them to consider the question: '*What do **you** need to attend to in order to be compliant in everything you do?*'.

I recently saw Stuart speak to the HR leadership group. I had a strong sense of a man who has found his voice in the organisation. When I met him and his team, they felt marginalised and silenced. Their activities over the last year have moved them firmly into the spotlight and people are now interested in what they have to say. A few months ago I attended a Quality Day session at one of the North American sites. It was six months after my first visit to the same site (for the Quality Summit Cascade session). When I first visited the site, I left with a feeling that the people on the site were quite arrogant about their Quality and Compliance Status and I wondered whether the Site Director was paying lip service to the work we were doing around Quality. This time, when I saw him speak about what has happened so far and what still need to be done, I felt myself responding to a man who seemed to have changed in some way. I did not have the same doubts about whether he was serious about this, I felt convinced that Quality and Compliance was very high on his personal agenda. I have previously said that ***this is the work of culture change*** - as people talk together, they make new sense of what they are doing and there is a possibility that something may shift in the process. Many things have changed already and the conversations are still ongoing, so I'm expecting to see even more changes going forward.

How do I account for my role in all of this? Let me explore this by using one of the tools that Shaw (2002) used so effectively in her book: an interview of myself.

Interviewer: *What was your role in all of this?*

Responder: It is difficult to explain *exactly* what I did. At first I saw my role as helping to arrange the Quality Summit. But my conversations with people in PharmaCo were never *only* about the Summit. I often had the sense that I was somehow contributing to some subtle shift in the way people made sense of things, especially when I raised questions about the taken-for-granted assumptions about 'the way things are'. For example: Although I am not sure that any of us realised this at the time, the conversation about Ted and the convoluted argument about why it was not possible to talk about compliance issues was part of a process that recently led to a significant shift in Ted's role. A year ago, people in the Quality organisation felt compelled to ask for Ted's blessing for everything they wanted to do. I would be surprised if anybody did that today. Too many questions have been raised about the validity of his role

and the way in which he tried to control things.

Interviewer: *What else have you been doing?*

Responder: I have been immersing myself in the workings of the Quality Organisation and the A4Q project team. I have been looking for opportunities to stimulate further change, and to amplify what was already happening.

Interviewer: *You say that the conversations in PharmaCo are changing? Isn't that enough? What more can you do?*

Responder: This is a difficult question. I do think it is important that the conversations are changing is important. However, it feels as if there is always more that we can do. The situation in PharmaCo is critical. Things need to change pretty quickly or else the business may be in danger. All of us need to be continuously looking for opportunities to influence further change, to stimulate more and different conversations.

Interviewer: *Give me an example*

Responder: I have been uncomfortable with the extent to which the CEO and members of the Executive Committee (Excom) seemed to be disengaged from what we were doing. I sometimes got the idea that they were criticizing other people (for example the Corporate Quality team) for the Quality issues in the organisation. I felt that it was important for them to realise that many people across the organisation had to accept joint responsibility for the situation, and that they (as Excom) may also have contributed to the current situation by the decisions that they had made.

Interviewer: *Isn't it a bit presumptuous of you as external consultant to make these kinds of judgements about the senior decision making body in an organisation? And anyway, what could you do to influence them?*

Responder: It may be presumptuous, but I don't believe it is possible to be part of this kind of process without making some kind of assessment or interpretation of what the issues are. I think this is at the heart of what it means to be an 'engaged participant' in the process. I see myself as being just as entitled as anybody else in PharmaCo to make subjective assessments of the situation. I don't claim to be objective and I don't act as if I am.

Interviewer: *So you see the executive committee as a 'problem' to be 'fixed'?*

Responder: I don't think that is what I said. What I meant is that I kept looking for an opportunity where we could engage them in what we were doing.

Interviewer: *So what happened?*

Responder: Stuart was asked to give an update on Quality to the Excom. His boss (Derek) usually does these updates, so I was quite excited about the fact that Stuart would get an opportunity to meet with them. However, Stuart was not planning to do anything other than deliver a 'good news' message along the lines of *'there are issues, but don't worry, we have got it under control'*. In Stuart's mind, this is what was expected of him. From what I knew about the way people seemed to filter information so that only good news would be going to the senior managers I thought this was an opportunity for Stuart to do something different.

Interviewer: *And why do you think it is OK for you to want to suggest Stuart does anything else?*

Responder: I am being paid to help PharmaCo with a difficult challenge. I think it is my duty to say when I see things that might be contributing to the current situation. I am not suggesting that I have the answers or that I *know* what the issues are. But let's consider the situation with Excom: I have been struggling to understand why people are so afraid of being honest with the CEO and other members of the ExCom. I know that there are many stories about the CEO blaming the messenger or firing people when he does not like what they say and I know that many people are scared of how he may react if they were to deliver bad news to him. However, I felt that, if we are serious about changing the culture, this was one of the patterns that needed to change.

Interviewer: *OK, so you thought the pattern needed to change. How were you proposing to do this?*

Responder: I did not know how to change the pattern. But I thought Stuart might be in a position to disrupt a familiar pattern and invite a different kind of conversation by saying something different than *'we have got it all under control'*. So when Stuart asked me to develop the slide pack for him to use at the ExCom meeting, I used the opportunity to develop a fairly provocative set of slides, that encapsulated many of our thoughts about the various factors that may have contributed to the current situation, as well as some suggestions of things that we needed to pay attention to and how the ExCom members could help.

Interviewer: *What did Stuart think of all of this?*

Responder: I was working in my home office on the slide pack, so I sent the slides to Stuart by email, anxious to hear what he thought. He was in meetings, but managed to drop me a quick SMS: *'Got the presentation. Looks very good. Last slide will be a challenge. Thank*

*you!*. When Stuart later showed the slides to Derek, his response was: *'It is a good thing you are going to present this and not me. It would be better if you are fired rather than me'*. Derek meant this as a joke but Stuart knew that he was taking a risk with presenting these slides rather than a safe update report. Anyway, he presented the slides and was pleasantly surprised by the response he got. The CEO asked him to come back in September to tell them more about what we are doing.

Interviewer: *I keep hearing you talk about things other people did. Stuart went to the Excom. The Site Directors facilitated the Quality days. What are **you** doing?*

Responder: It depends on how you understand 'the work'. I see myself as challenging, supporting, provoking and helping the people in PharmaCo with *their* endeavour. It has become *my* endeavour too. I think I feel as much ownership for the project as any other team member. However, I see my role as being *in the background* in support of all of the people in PharmaCo who are trying to bring the company back into compliance. I spend a lot of my time *thinking* about things and wondering what other opportunities there might be for us to influence people to do things in a compliant way

Interviewer: *You sound like a designer, who see yourself as standing outside the system, wanting to develop interventions to influence the system*

Responder: I understand that it is possible to interpret my stories in this way. It does sound as if I am standing outside and looking for things that other people should do. However, to say that I am acting as a designer is to suggest that I have some power or ability to **make** things happen or to force people to do things that I want them to do. I don't have this kind of power or ability. I would suggest that no one has that. Yes, I often suggest that we should do things, or respond to something in a certain way but many of my suggestions are not taken up by people. For example: Stuart left the slide pack virtually unchanged but he removed the one slide which I felt addressed something that needed to be talked about. He did not feel comfortable to present that slide. I think he was reasonably comfortable with the content of the rest of the slides as they conveyed the sense that we made of things which evolved over many months of talking together. I can't **make** people do things. However, I realise that my formal position as 'culture change advisor' sometimes make it easier for me to persuade people to do something in a certain way. And it helps to have Stuart on my side as he has at times supported me when I have been challenged and his voice clearly carries some weight

Interviewer: *You say that you are not a designer but you do seem to influence a lot of what is happening. How do you account for that?*

Responder: Over the last few months, I have come to care a lot about the project. I am participating in this process as actively as I can. I act into opportunities as they open up, and I do my best to create opportunities where my colleagues or I can influence the conversations.

I spend a lot of time talking to people and often find that these lead to other conversations. I cannot know in advance how others are likely to respond to my gestures but spend a lot of time imagining what the responses are likely to be, which often leads me to participating differently. I sometimes find that I carefully plan what I will do and say in a given situation and at other times I participate spontaneously, often taking personal risks as I act into an opportunity that has emerged. I have a strong sense of shaping and being shaped by my experience as a member of the PharmaCo A4Q team.

Doing this self-interview made me realise afresh how important it feels to be able to account for my practice as a practitioner who is acting with intention - who wants to contribute to *a specific kind of change*. I understand my role as a leadership role in which I am paradoxically a participant and observer 'at the same time', involved in paradoxical processes where an ***unknown future*** is perpetually constructed (Griffin, 2002). Although I agree that the future is unknown, I want to hold on to the notion that it is possible to influence *a particular kind of change* (e.g. to introduce a behavioural norm of compliant behaviour), even though it is impossible to know exactly how this will happen, or which 'activities' would lead to the change, or what the 'unintended and unpredictable' consequences of my attempts to influence and persuade will be.

When I joined the PharmaCo project, I did not know what kind of endeavour I was getting involved with. However, as time passed, I came to understand the significance of the Quality & Compliance issues: If these were not resolved, products that could make the difference between life and death might not be available to people who desperately need them. I wanted to help ensure that these products remain available. Once I became cognitively and emotionally involved in the quest for Quality and Compliance, I found myself in the midst of political

processes of persuasion and negotiation. We (the A4Q project team), were arguing for significant changes to the way things were being done in PharmaCo. I was part of the endeavour and wanted to help the A4Q team achieve their objective. I would argue that we have been 'successful' - Quality and Compliance is now firmly on the PharmaCo 'agenda'. I want to be able to account for our 'success' and am wondering whether my understanding of what happened at PharmaCo is consistent with a theory of organisations as complex responsive processes.

Over the last few months, the story I told myself about what I saw and heard developed into what felt like a plausible account about 'what was going on' at PharmaCo (Søderberg, 2003). However, I am not suggesting that my interpretation is the 'truth'. There is never **one** objective reality (Watzlawick, [1976] 1983). We construct our realities socially (Berger & Luckmann, [1966] 1991; Searle, [1995] 1996) and the nature of this reality, the kind of sense we make, the story we tell ourselves is likely to influence our public actions (Blumer, [1969] 1998; Feldman, 1989; Weick, 1995; Blumer, 2004).

In this thesis, I have been arguing for a move from a pre-determined, methodology-based 'planned' approach to organisational change to an improvisational, one-step-at-a-time approach focused on conversations. I have been suggesting that change happens when permanent and temporary members of organisations actively participate in the social processes of organisational life. However, I'm still required to account for my own participation in these processes: On what basis do I practice? What is the story that I tell myself about behaviour of people in organisations? How do I think about behavioural change and processes of persuasion and influencing?

## **Influencing a particular kind of behavioural change**

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### **Wanting to influence change of a *particular kind*. What am I bumping up against?**

Stacey and his colleagues took care to set out how a theory of complex responsive processes of relating moves away from Kant's rationalist perspective on individuals as ***autonomous individuals*** (See Stacey *et al*, 2000 and Griffin, 2002 for a detailed argument). Kant argued that individuals can use their powers of reason to set their own goals and strategies and that they are therefore free to choose how to act. Modern management and leadership theorists have taken these ideas to mean that

**leaders** in organisations should be able to articulate a vision for the future and then direct others in organisation to realise this vision. This is the essence of a systemic view on leadership and organisational change which sees the leader as 'outside' the 'system' with the task to **design** and **control** the 'system' (or 'the organisation').

When I argue that I am acting with *intention*, and that I am interested in contributing to a particular kind of change, it is easy to interpret this as more of the same - another example of the 'engineering-voice'. However, I am thinking about intention as an organising theme that arises through participation in social processes.

Stacey (2001, 2003b) and his colleagues (2000) follow Mead when they argue that people do not arrive with pre-formed intentions in social situations, but that individual intentions and plans arise through social processes. 'A single individual does not simply "have" an intention' (p. 352). Intentions that have arisen in this way become organising themes for further interaction. When people interact (as in organisations), all these organising themes interweave in complex, self-organising processes that are impossible to control. Some themes are amplified and others are dampened although it is impossible to predict which themes will be amplified and which will be dampened.

How am I then to think about the work we were doing at PharmaCo? How do I account for the kinds of changes we were seeing in response to our activities? I am arguing that we intentionally influenced the organising themes in the organisation. A year ago, Quality and Compliance did not feature 'on the agenda'. This is very different from how things are at the moment (with Quality and Compliance as a major focus in the organisation).

Elias argues that the interweaving of people's actions leads to the emergence of patterns that are independent of any individual's actions and also beyond the control of an individual / group (Mennell, [1992] 1998). How am I then to account for the fact that we intentionally influenced the organising themes in PharmaCo? In Project two, I referred to the game models developed by Elias (1998) where he considers the role of power in social processes. Elias offers a process view of power - power should not be seen as a 'thing' held by one individual/group. Power is relational - one individual/group has *more* or *less* power relative to another individual/group. It is therefore meaningless to consider the 'power' of a group or individual in isolation, but important to consider *power balances* when looking at social action. He argues that 'balances of power are always present whenever there is functional interdependence between people' (p. 116). Elias developed game models to show

what happens when interdependent groups of people are 'measuring their strengths against each other' (p. 115). Elias suggests that, where the power ratio is tilted to one group, the stronger group could potentially influence the activities of the other. Following Elias' argument, it is therefore possible to explain the changes in PharmaCo by considering the relative 'power' of the A4Q project team. The 'Quality' group is interdependent with all the other groups in PharmaCo (production, finance, supply chain etc). Because of our interdependence on each other, we were constrained in what we could and could not do. However, through our participation in political processes of persuasion and negotiation, we seemed to have temporarily 'won' the contest (against those focused on volumes and cost for example). Why would this be? I am suggesting that many things have contributed to our 'success': We had a persuasive argument ('the business is at risk') and were able to 'call on' higher authorities (e.g. the regulatory authorities) to support our 'case for change'. Because of the perceived risk to the business (and our persuasive arguments built on this risk), we were able to secure resources, skills and 'air-time' that were not available to other groups. We also knew that it was important to participate actively in formal-legitimate / informal-shadow processes in PharmaCo whilst paying careful attention to the responses and experiences of the people we encountered. We were not constrained by any pre-defined methodologies and were therefore able to pay attention to the organising themes and respond creatively to existing and emerging organising themes.

It is tempting to stop here - excited about our success at influencing change at PharmaCo. However, in doing so, I will be ignoring a very important part of Elias' argument (and the theory of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating). Elias (1998) argues that, 'out of the intertwining of many people's actions there may emerge social consequences which no one has planned' (p. 134). In PharmaCo, we knew that the focus on compliance would have consequences in other areas of the business (e.g. cost, product availability, supply chain performance etc.) but we argued that none of these would matter if the authorities removed PharmaCo's license. We had the 'luxury' to remain focused on *our* objective without being too concerned about the unintended and unplanned consequences of a move to compliance.

I am suggesting that this is the nature of organisational life - a political process in which many different plans and intentions are pursued by individuals and groups. Because of their interdependence, they *interweave* their activities with others in



ways that may lead to some people 'winning' (if only for a short while). At the same time, the changes brought about by the pursuance of goals and objectives may lead to unintended and unplanned consequences that could not have been predicted or controlled by anybody. This insight requires us to re-think our assumptions about 'success'. We (the A4Q team) are claiming 'success' because we achieved *our* objective. We predicted that an increased focus on compliance would have other consequences like a reduction in output, stock-outs of certain products, increased costs etc. but Elias' theory on social processes reminds us that there are also likely to be many other consequences that we could not have foreseen. We saw this happen in PharmaCo: Stuart routinely returned from meetings with stories about responses to what we were doing which indicated that our activities created discomfort around the organisation. We felt it was important to respond to these concerns and frequently adapted our plans or decided to do something to respond to these concerns. However, we remained convinced that we were doing 'the right thing' for PharmaCo and continued our pursuit of Quality and Compliance.

Over the last year, I have often been forced to re-think my assumptions about the political processes of persuasion and influencing. Our task was to influence and persuade people across the organisation to do things differently. Stacey and his colleagues (2000) argue it is not possible to *control* or *manage* self-organising processes of interaction. It is, in Stacey's (2003b) words, not possible to 'programme the responses from people' (p. 334) to the gestures of managers, consultants or members of project teams. I agree with Stacey. However, it is also true that much of my practice is focused on processes of influence and persuasion. And even though I know that I can't control how people will respond, and that organisational life is inherently uncertain, I am still left with a job that needs doing. In PharmaCo, the 'job' was to convince people across the organisation to do things in a compliant way. I am suggesting that these kinds of objectives are part of organisational life and that much of the work I do as practitioner will continue to be objective-based (wanting to achieve a specific kind of change). I clearly have a role to play in the definition of objectives, and have choices about which kinds of projects I am joining (and therefore which kinds of objectives my clients and I will be pursuing). I think I have an ethical responsibility to only do projects where I believe in what we are trying to do (and where I think we have a reasonable chance to achieve the project objective). How am I to think about these kinds of projects and the objectives we pursue from a perspective of organisations as complex responsive processes of relating?

Streatfield (2001) points to two kinds of defensive responses when managers come to recognise the 'inherent uncertainty in organisational life' (p. 128-129). The first alternative is one of 'acceptance': to accept that a manager does not know and cannot control the outcome and to see what emerges. He argues that this way of thinking collapses the paradox to one extreme and would not help us to function effectively in an organisation. The second alternative response is to want to 'do it better' or 'get it right' which leads managers to want to cling to the ideal of 'being in control' by implementing prescriptions for better processes of interaction. The third alternative response, which he calls the 'complex responsive processes perspective' is to avoid collapsing the paradox to either being 'in control' or 'not in control'. Managers are encouraged to see 'organisational life as an exciting and anxiety-provoking process of living with paradox' (p. 129). I am arguing that Streatfield has an important point here. I believe that outcomes and objectives are important aspects of organisational life and it is how we think about the accomplishment of these outcomes and objectives that matter. I am suggesting that, when we think about the outcomes we need to achieve, we need to let go of notions of *control* and focus our attention on the themes organising the social processes and the people we are trying to influence. It may be possible to influence or amplify these themes (although there are no guarantees), and this may or may not lead to the kinds of changes we are hoping for. The challenge is to act 'courageously' into situations whilst *knowing* that it is not possible to control interaction, and *not knowing* how others will respond or what the unintended and unanticipated consequences of our activities will be.

### **Influencing behavioural change at PharmaCo**

At PharmaCo, we seemed to have been successful at influencing the social processes and persuading many people across the organisation to do things differently (for a while anyway). According to Elias' theory, we were the more 'powerful' group, hence our 'success' at the political process of persuasion and influencing. Elias (1998) suggests that power comes from dependence - if A is able to withhold something important from B, or B is dependent on A for something, A is more powerful than B. Power is also linked to the ability to 'steer the activities' of another (p. 120). In PharmaCo, we (the A4Q group) seemed to have influenced the activities of other people but it is impossible to draw causal links between what our actions and the 'outcomes'. However, having gone through the PharmaCo experience whilst reflexively paying attention to what was happening, I have

developed a perspective on behavioural change through processes of sensemaking which I would like to share as a conclusion to this paper.

### **Traditional perspectives on behavioural change**

The dominant perspective about behavioural change in organisations is that individuals need to be trained, coached (e.g. Downey, 2003; Gilbert, 2001; Goldsmith, Lyons & Freas, 2000), disciplined, controlled and managed by their managers, coaches, trainers etc. Positive and negative reinforcement should be used to amplify or dampen different kinds of behaviours (Martin & Pear, 1992). Although I do not want to discount the validity of this approach, I am interested in what it would take for individuals to change the ways in which they do things without these kinds of individualised interventions.

Another strand in behavioural change is the work done on *belief* change. Wanous (1992) points to two different approaches to belief change: The *first* approach (also called the 'peripheral route to persuasion' (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)) was developed by Hovland, Janis & Kelly ([1953] 1963) in the 1950s. This approach is based on the stimulus-response / sender-receiver model of communications. They suggested that the persuasive power of an attempt to change beliefs depend on:

1. The **source** sending the persuasive message;
2. The **content** of the **message**;
3. The **medium** or '**channel**' used to send the message;
4. The **characteristics** of the 'receiver' or 'target' (the person(s) being persuaded)

Much research has been done to investigate the effects of these four factors on persuasion (see McGuire, 1985 for reviews). Much of the work done by 'internal communication' people in organisations is based on this approach (primarily on the first three aspects). The focus is on using the right **medium** for communication (face-to-face is always better than written communication when the objective is to change beliefs), getting the **source** right (ie the more powerful and credible the person 'sending' the message the better) and ensuring the **content** is powerful, persuasive and engages 'hearts and minds'. This approach sees the **meaning** as being *in the message*, without recognition that meaning is an 'output' of complex social sense-making processes (Weick, 1995:5).

As far back as **1896**, John Dewey published an essay where he rejected this way of thinking (the stimulus-response model of action) as 'overly mechanical' (Cook, 1993:28). Dewey's argument was that the distinctions between 'stimulus' and 'response' loses the ongoing circularity of experience in which 'stimulus' is also simultaneously 'response', whilst the meaning of the 'stimulus' is dependent on and being changed by the nature of the 'response' it evokes. I am suggesting that managers and leaders would do well to pay attention to what Dewey said in this article and to the work of those scholars who responded to Dewey by developing a theory of human action (eg. Mead [1932] 2002, [1934] 1967, [1964] 1981; Schutz 1962, 1964).

The **second** approach to belief change focuses on the role of *active thinking* by the person being persuaded. This approach was developed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). They call their approach the 'central route to persuasion' and they refer to the earlier approach as the 'peripheral route to persuasion'. I will return to their work shortly, but want to briefly consider the field of behaviourism and the theories of action developed by Mead and Schutz before doing that.

### **Going beyond 'behaviourism'**

The field of behaviourism (as defined by Watson) is concerned with *observable actions of isolated individuals*. Although Mead was 'favourably impressed' with behaviourism (Reck in Mead [1964] 1981:xxv), he thought that Watson was wrong on two counts: He explicitly excluded any mental phenomena and did not deal with the social context of action. Mead ([1934] 1967) argues that both of these are critical omissions from the study of human behaviour: He held that human behaviour can only be understood within the context of the social process of which this action is a part: 'the behaviour of an individual can be understood only in terms of the behaviour of the social group of which he is a member' (p. 7). He also argues that a theory of action is incomplete without consideration of the private mental processes involved in observable action. He argues that 'the external act which we do observe is a part of the process which has started within' (p. 5).

I will briefly consider the implications of both of these arguments:

### ***Human behaviour can only be understood within the context of the social process***

Mead's starting point is the social process of complex group activity and his attempt is to explain the conduct of individuals *in terms of* the conduct of the social group. He does not account for the conduct of the group by considering the conduct of individuals belonging to it. My interest is similar to Mead's: I want to understand the behaviour of an individual (for example: the operator who decided not to sterilize the machine). Mead suggests that I can only do so by considering the social processes of which he is a part.

### ***The observable act starts within***

Mead ([1934] 1967) does not want to ignore the inner experience of the individual and wants to consider the rise of inner experience within the overall social process of which individual action is a part. He describes 'the act' as having an 'inner and outer phase, an internal and external aspect' (p. 8). Thinking is often preparatory to action, but it is still a social process in that one's thoughts are always in response to others and self. In the process of acting, people think about the next step they are going to take - constantly having to choose between different possible courses of action. In the words of March & Olsen (1976): 'people move in and out of choice situations'. The process of choice-making is a **privately experienced** process of thinking through (and responding to) alternative options. In most of my professional work, I am aware of thinking (privately) whilst acting (publicly). Sometimes it is a fleeting thought whilst I am in the process of taking the next step: *What will others make of my action? What do they expect of me? What is possible to say or do here? What are the potential implications of what I am about to say / do? Do I really care? Who am I talking to? How are they likely to respond?* At other times, I may agonize about it for hours (or days), and I may consciously try and delay taking any next step so that I have more time to think about what to do next: *What shall I do? What is at stake? Which relationships are likely to be affected? What are the potential implications for how I have come to see myself (my identity)? What will this mean for my relationship with others? What is important for me in this? Do I care enough to take a risk?* I want to suggest that we all 'think' in the process of acting, however fleeting the thinking may be.

### **Deciding what to do next - an individual process**

I want to focus my attention on the process of making a choice - on the moment in which an individual chooses to do 'A' rather than 'B' (to sterilize or not to sterilize).

My interest in this aspect of human behaviour led me to carefully study the work of Mead ([1932] 2002, [1934] 1967, [1964] 1981), Blumer ([1969] 1998, 2004) and Schutz (1962, 1964). I wanted to hold on to the paradoxical nature of human behaviour as individual and social *at the same time*, without falling into the trap of privileging either of these aspects of human behaviour.

***Mead on individual choice:***

Mead ([1934] 1967) distinguishes between *intelligent* behaviour and reflexive, instinctive and habitual behaviour. Intelligent behaviour is only possible when response is *delayed* - when one purposefully considers the alternatives and then chooses the appropriate response. He uses the term 'human intelligence' (p. 98) to describe the ability of an individual to consider a number of alternative responses in any given situation (*to sterilise or not to sterilise*), and then to deliberately choose a response that is deemed to be appropriate for a specific situation. When considering the various alternative responses, individuals make decisions based on previous experiences, what others expect of them, and with reference to the future - their interpretations and expectations of what the future may hold.

Mead developed a process theory of human action in which individuals develop a sense of 'self'. He suggests that individuals have the unique ability to become objects to themselves. He sees self as social structure which 'arises in the process of social experience and activity' (p. 135). Mead, in the tradition of the Chicago social pragmatists (Mead, Dewey, James, etc.) regarded emergent selves as 'social through and through' in that they develop *through* the communities in which they live, not simply *in* them (Hickman, 1998). Mead regards the essence of self as cognitive in that it lies in the 'internalised conversation of gestures which constitutes thinking' (p. 173). Mind is a conversational process of gestures and responses in response to social and private experiences. It is through this conversational process that human beings develop self-consciousness (in that they become aware of how others respond to them and over time develop the capacity to know how others are likely to respond to their actions and utterances). People are always taking other people into account, adjusting their behaviour in light of the imagined or actual responses from others. Our behaviour is also socially-evoked as we engage in the circular process of gesture-response in which each gesture is simultaneously a response to a previous gesture.

Let me pause here for a moment. Mead is pointing to the social nature of our decision-making processes in that we are always responding to others and to ourselves in the choices we make. Choices are then paradoxically chosen *and* evoked. Individuals are not **autonomous** in that they have free choices as to what to do next. What is possible to do depend on their individual and collective histories of interacting. When I read Mead's account of human choice, I recognise my own experience in what he is saying. I know that much of what I do is socially-evoked and in response to others. However, what I am missing when I read *Mind Self & Society* (the most popular Mead text), is an explanation of **individual motivations** for action (*Why do individuals do things? Why do people make the choices they make?*). In his writing, Mead pays much attention to the social nature of **responsive** and **adjustive** action - how people respond to each other and adjust their actions in light of the responses from others. It is easy to interpret his work as to suggest that all of our actions are socially-evoked. However, Gary Cook (1993), who made a careful study of the development of Mead's thought throughout his life, points to the difficulties of focusing on *Mind, Self & Society* as primary text for Mead's work: 'Much of that volume is devoted to a discussion of the way in which societal patterns are imported into the conduct of the human individual' (p. 134). Cook points out that 'this line of thought represents only one side of ... [Mead's] treatment of self'. Cook reads Mead as considering the self as 'more than a mere product or reflection of the social process of which it is a part; it is also an agent of reconstruction...'. In Mead's ([1934] 1967) words: '[the organism] is not simply a set of passive senses played upon by the stimuli that come from without.' (p. 25). Mead sees the organism as 'acting and determining its environment'. Dewey echoes this idea when he regards people as 'participants', not just 'spectators' in life. *Participants*, unlike *spectators*, have 'care and concern for the future; they are therefore inclined to act so as to assure the best possible consequences' (Hickman, 1998:68). For me, this is an important aspect of human conduct. I want to hold on to the paradox of human activity as being simultaneously social and individual and do not want to negate the individual nature of the motivation for conduct (the goals being pursued by individuals). There are many goals that I recognise as my own **individual** goals (e.g. to do this Doctorate programme is **my** goal and although it may have developed socially, and many others are helping me to achieve it, it is not a socially-shared goal. It has become **my individual and personal** goal and *I* am pursuing it). I want to find a way of thinking about the pursuance of these individually-owned goals at the same time as recognising the socially-evoked aspects of action.

Mead does not develop a theory of motivation, except to argue that the conduct of humans and animals are rooted in impulses or instincts ([1934] 1967:348-349; [1964] 1981: 97-99). He defines impulse as a 'tendency to act' in a certain way in a certain situation and acknowledges that a person's behaviour depends on what he/she is in the process of doing - his 'campaign of conduct' (Mead [1934] 1967:104).

### **The contribution of Alfred Schutz: *In-order-to* and *because* motives**

Why am I involving Alfred Schutz in this 'conversation' about human action? Alfred Schutz can be described as one of the original contributors to the field of social constructionism. Thomas Luckmann, the co-author of the influential book 'The Social Construction of Reality' (Berger & Luckmann, [1966] 1991) was a colleague and co-author of Schutz. Schutz's work inspired Harold Garfinkel to develop ethnomethodology as a social research methodology (one of the methodologies that contributed to the development of autoethnography and the methodology I am using for my research). There are many parallels between the work of Schutz and philosophers in the pragmatist tradition and indeed, he often refers to the work of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey in his writings (Barber, 2002). Although Schutz differed from Mead on many points (Joas, [1985] 1997), the major tenet of his thoughts is in congruence with that of Mead in that he sees the individual as fundamentally social - the 'We' as prior to the 'I'.

Schutz's interests overlap with mine: he was interested in the common-sense world of everyday life (Berger & Luckman, [1966] 1991) and suggested that, in order to study others, social scientists need to pay attention to the **everyday experience** of their 'subjects', the actual way in which people in daily life interpret their own and others' behaviour (Schutz, 1962). We need to consider the *meaning* that the other's action has for him as well as what his action means to me. We also need to consider the 'relatedness' of the action with social reality. By saying this, he is making an argument similar to that of Mead and Elias: we cannot understand the action of an individual without considering the social processes of which this action is a part. Schutz follows Dewey in developing a theory of motivation. For Dewey, motivation creates the unity between the socially-developed self and its acts. Motivation arises through social processes and is not 'externally caused' (Hickman, 1998). My specific interest in Schutz's work is his theory of motivation and his distinction between 'in-order-to' and 'because' motives. He is suggesting that those motives that support the pursuance of ends or goals should be termed 'in-order-to' motives and



differentiated from 'because' motives. The time structure of these two kinds of motives are different: *In-order-to* motives are future-orientated (*'I am working for PharmaCo in-order-to earn a salary and provide for my family'*), whilst *because* motives are generally rooted in the past (*'I am focused on production targets because of what happened the last time we missed our targets'*). We are generally more consciously aware of our *in-order-to* motives, whilst we are often not consciously aware of *because* motives. It usually requires a reflexive 'turning back on oneself' (Mead, [1934] 1967) to understand the influence of *because* motives (e.g. *my need for approval, things that happened in my childhood, my fear of loneliness and exclusion, etc.*). Both *in-order-to* and *because* motives influence our behaviour and our responses to what happens in the 'living present' (Stacey, 2001:172). They are forming and being formed by each other.

I am suggesting that we are generally more aware of what we are in the process of doing / pursuing / accomplishing (future-oriented) than what we are responding to (past experiences). I know that I am generally very aware of my own *in-order-to* motives for doing things, and it requires conscious thought to discover the *because* motives that influence my choice to do *this* rather than *that*. I have come to think of 'because' motives as '*responsively-evoked*' (social) motives - things I do *in response* to others and myself without always being consciously aware that I am doing so. *In-order-to* motives are *in service of* (what have become) my own goals and objectives that have emerged from my participation in social processes. It could be argued that the distinction between *because* and *in-order-to* motives is a false dichotomy - they are closely interlinked and mutually forming. What might start out as a *because* motive (*I am pursuing production output at the cost of compliance because it is what is expected by my manager*), may turn into (or be at the same time) an *in-order-to* motive (*In-order-to get a bonus, I must pursue production output and turn a blind eye to compliance requirements*). My *in-order-to* motive is another person's *because* motive (e.g.: *The department head wants to make the production targets in-order-to get a bonus. The shop floor operators do all they can to make the numbers because they fear their manager*). However, even though it may be a false dichotomy, I have found the distinction useful in the conversations I have been having with people at PharmaCo. By attending to both of these kinds of motives, it feels easier to hold the paradox of individual and social *at the same time*.

### **Schutz on individual choice:**

Schutz (1962) follows Dewey and suggests that, when we deliberate whether to do 'A' rather than 'B', we imagine the potential outcome of all of the choices under consideration, the 'state of affairs to be brought about by my future action' (p. 68) e.g.: *If I sterilize the machine, it will take too much time and we won't make our numbers for the day, or If I don't sterilize the machine, we'll be able to get more product through and make our numbers.* When we make choices like this, we base them on our knowledge of previous experiences of similar situations and what happened in these instances (e.g. *The last time we missed our target our manager was furious. However, when we made our target, our department was recognised for our achievement,* or the other side of this same argument: *Everybody takes short cuts to make the numbers. Nobody expects me to be 100% compliant and to sterilize the machine after every batch. It really isn't that important. We have been working this way for years and it has not been an issue).*

### **A brief pause:**

Let me pause for a moment. Why have I chosen to look at the work of Mead and Schutz on individual choice? As a project team, we wanted to influence the processes of individual choice-making. We wanted to encourage people to choose to behave in **compliant** ways, rather than cutting corners and being focused on output rather than numbers. We intuitively felt that it was important for people in the organisation to reconsider the collective goals as we kept hearing people talk about the extent to which senior managers seemed to be exclusively focused on production volumes and output, rather than compliance. The focus on targets and volumes (often at the expense of Quality and Compliance) has become a *theme* organising the experience of people in PharmaCo. We wanted to shift this theme.

However, we knew that we needed to pay attention to the processes that were sustaining this theme. This led us to various conversations with people around the business about the Performance management and incentive processes (that were almost exclusively focused on measurable targets and production volumes). When talking to senior managers close to the CEO, they were horrified to hear us explain how people have interpreted the attention to production targets to mean that outputs were more important than Quality and Compliance. According to people who are in the CEO's inner-circle, he has been working on an assumption that Quality & Compliance is a **given**, with no need to focus any extra attention to it. We were keen to hear the CEO say that *'compliance is a critical priority for our business - it is the*

way we work in PharmaCo' but we felt that it would have little impact of him to say this if people in the business continued to be rewarded purely on production volumes.

In our conversations with people, we repeatedly discovered that there was a disconnect between the espoused 'in-order-to' motives for 'the organisation' (*we are in business in-order-to manufacture products that meet our customer specifications - ie products that are **compliant***), and the 'because' motives for individual action: *I am doing things this way (non-compliantly) **because** my manager is focused on targets; I have not updated our procedures **because** I thought it is more important to focus on production volumes and meeting our KPIs*. Our assumption is that people in PharmaCo would not purposefully do things to put their jobs at risk. When we explored the 'because' motives with them, we discovered that their **because motives** were vague, unarticulated and 'made up' by interpreting the cues from their social environment. Nobody had ever **said** that output is more important than quality and compliance but you only needed to spend a few months in the production organisation before drawing similar conclusion as the people we were talking to. This insight forced us to pay attention to the many cues that were interpreted by people as meaning '*other things are more important than compliance*'

When, on the other hand, people talked to us about their own individual 'in-order-to' motives, they were quite clear about what they were trying to achieve: '*I am working for PharmaCo in order to earn a good income and provide for my family*' or '*I am working in this area in order to make products that save lives around the world*' or '*I am working in production as I need some production experience in order to be promoted*'. The conversations became interesting when we explored **how** they needed to go about meeting their own goals as this lead us to more 'because' motives: '*What seems to be valued in PharmaCo is 'numbers'. In order to do well in this community, to be accepted and liked by my manager and colleagues, I need to do what I can to ensure that we meet our targets*'.

### **Influencing individual choice-making processes**

We became focused on the behaviour (and experience) of *individuals* in PharmaCo. What would it take for individuals to do things differently whilst participating in the ongoing social processes? Mead ([1934] 1967) argues that people are fundamentally social. Membership is important for us. Our sense of self (identity) is defined by the groups we are members of. In our acting, we are concerned about

other people and what they think, wondering how they will respond to what we are about to do or say. We interpret other peoples' actions and responses to our actions and develop a sense of what 'they' (the 'generalised other') expect from us as members of this community.

### ***Arguing for the work of Herbert Blumer***

Herbert Blumer was a student of George Herbert Mead. He is widely regarded as one of the leading figures in symbolic interactionism<sup>19</sup> which is 'one of the most important currents in Western academic sociology' (Joas [1985] 1997:6). Blumer acknowledges Mead as the person who 'laid the foundations of the symbolic interactionism approach' (Blumer [1969] 1998:1). However, Joas ([1985] 1997) suggests that Blumer's work 'cannot be regarded as the authoritative interpretation of Mead's work' (p. 6). He acknowledges that Blumer remains faithful to Mead's thoughts on the 'collective, problem-solving activity of human individuals having a socially constituted self' but then suggests that Blumer reduces the concept of action to that of interaction, that he has a reduced linguistically-focused concept of meaning, and that he does not take evolution and history into consideration. I read Blumer differently from Joas. I do not think he negates the broader implications of meaning or action. In his original text on 'Symbolic Interactionism' (Blumer, [1969] 1998), he focused his attention on *certain aspects* of the experience of an individual rather than ignoring or negating the other aspects. However, in his recent book (Blumer, 2004), he presents a comprehensive treatment of Mead's thought on action and meaning which persuaded me to draw on his work despite Joas' criticisms. What is important to me, is that Joas acknowledges the 'social' nature of Blumer's work, despite his so-called '*subjective*' focus. Morrione (in Blumer, 2004) suggests that scholars depict Blumer as a 'subjectivist' because of his interest in how people define their own situations. He is interested in the experience of the *experiencer*. (Morrione argues that Blumer is *not* a subjectivist.) I do not see Blumer's subjective focus as a problem, as it resonates with my own experience of being in the world and making sense of my own experience - although my experience is socially-formed, it is always *subjectively experienced by me* and it is the subjective nature of meaning-making that Blumer pays attention to in both of his books ([1969] 1998, 2004). Blumer is interested in how individuals interpret and make sense of their social situation and how this influences their behaviour, and it is this aspect of his work that I am interested in.

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<sup>19</sup> Blumer coined the phrase 'Symbolic interactionism' in a 1937 article published in *Man and Society* (Blumer [1969] 1998)

Blumer's texts do not always portray a sense of *process*. I get the idea that he is busy with sensemaking, which leads him to 'edit continuity' and to 'create breaks in the stream' of pure duration (Weick, 1995:35). I would suggest that this is what we all do when we attempt to *make sense of* specific situations and experiences. Weick uses the word 'bracketing' to describe what happens when we focus on *moments in a process* (Follett, 1924:60). However, Weick acknowledges that there are downsides to this approach:

To edit continuity is to render the world less unique, more typical, more repetitive, more stable, more enduring. *However, the world of continuous flows has not thereby become less unique or transient simply because people choose to see it that way* (Weick, 1995:108, italics added)

Weick's answer to the 'problem' is to use *verbs*, rather than *nouns* as verbs remind people that we are always in the middle of things, experiencing life as ongoing activity. From the perspective of a theory of complex responsive processes of relating, being '*in the middle*' of life as *ongoing activity* means being involved in social processes. It is therefore meaningless to consider the experience of an individual without considering the social processes that the individual is simultaneously engaged in. Stacey (2003b) makes the point that no individual

can be organising his or her experiences in isolation because all are simultaneously evoking and provoking responses in each other. Together they immediately constitute intersubjective, recursive processes (p. 341).

Stacey continues by reminding us that the organising themes that emerge from these kinds of 'back and forth circular process' are always experienced as a 'bodily experience' (p. 342) by embodied individuals.

Let me take this further as I argue for the relevance of Blumer's work when one's practice is informed by a theory of complex responsive processes of relating: I agree that people are *fundamentally* social beings (socially-developed selves). I am forming and being formed by relationships. And yet, when I am confronted with a decision to do *this* rather than *that* (to sterilise or not to sterilise), I am only aware of *my own experience*. I am sometimes aware of the fact that I am acting *in response* to what has happened before, but I can not say that I am always conscious of this fact. I am vaguely aware of my *constrained* freedom to choose my next step and that the constraints have emerged from my relationships with others. I can not just do what I want. I have to take others into account when I decide what to do next and

I imagine what others are likely to think about what I am about to do but I am always aware that I have choices about how to respond to a situation or to others and that it is *my* responsibility to choose which of the options open to me I will choose. In his book *'The emergence of leadership: linking self-organisation and ethics'* Griffin (2002) explores Mead's contribution to thinking about ethics and leadership and argues for an interpretation of Mead's work that is similar to what I have described as my own experience. He summarises his argument as follows:

I have shown how Mead retains the notion of responsible individuals who emerge in the social process, but who always have the freedom to choose their next acts. They have this capacity because they have the capacity, rooted in their bodies, to take the attitudes of others, indeed of society. They can know and so must be responsible for their own conduct, even though none of them can individually determine the outcomes of what they together do (p. 160)

Let's return to Blumer: My reading of Blumer is not that he negates or ignores the social aspect of experience, it is just that he 'brackets' and chooses to focus on the bodily experience of an individual within the social process and what happens when an individual is faced with a specific situation, and a choice to do 'A' rather than 'B'.

### **The contribution of Herbert Blumer: *Meaning and Interpretation***

Blumer follows Mead in developing a perspective on *human action* (Blumer, 2004). He, like Mead, was interested in the *action of individuals* who are involved in social processes. He saw individual and social action as processes of people doing things *mindfully* in regard to themselves and others. He spoke of people confronting 'ongoing streams of situations' and forging lines of action based on their *interpretation of the social situation* in which they find themselves. These interpretations become the basis for action.

For Blumer, 'symbolic interactionism' rests on three premises:

1. 'Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them';
2. 'The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows'; and
3. 'These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person, in dealing with the thing he encounters' (Blumer [1969] 1998:2)

I want to specifically explore two aspects of Blumer's theory: the **centrality of meaning** and the **interpretative process** through which individuals decide what to do next.

### ***The centrality of meaning***

Dewey called human beings 'meaning-makers' (Hickman, 1998:72). Blumer points to the importance of 'meaning', and the tendency of psychologists and sociologists to ignore or bypass the role of meaning in human behaviour. In developing a theory of symbolic interactionism, he seeks to focus attention on 'meanings' as central to human behaviour. He does not regard meaning as an attribute of a thing or an expression of a person's personality. Instead he 'sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people' (Blumer [1969] 1998:4). In saying this, he is truthful to Mead's argument that

meaning arises and lies within the field of relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behaviour of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture (Mead [1934] 1967:75-76)

Blumer sees social interaction as the social process of individuals taking others (and what they are doing) into account whilst their actions are being formed by their interaction with others:

One has to *fit* one's own line of activity in some manner to the actions of others. The actions of others have to be taken into account and cannot be regarded as merely an arena for the expression of what one is disposed to do or sets out to do (Blumer [1969] 1998:8)

Whilst in the 'middle of' social processes - responding to the gestures of others, sizing up situations and forging their lines of activity, people take themselves and others into account in ways that acknowledge their own and others' past, ongoing, or implied future acts. Their 'taking into account' is shaped and evoked by the social processes they are part of. 'Meaning-making' is therefore a social process which is individually-experienced.

### ***Meaning is handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process***

An important theme in Blumer's work is his contention that 'people's meaningful behaviour is never an automatic reflex' and that the process of **interpreting** the situation precedes action into that situation. In this, he follows Mead's perspective on *intelligent action* as action with a delay between stimulus and response. He agrees with Mead's suggestion that thinking is a social process (privately

experienced by an individual), and argues that the private process of interpreting one's situation and assigning meaning to things is therefore also social in nature. He is building on Mead's assertion that, through life, people develop 'knowledge about' (Mead, [1932] 2002:91) how to act and behave in certain settings. Because of the human being's ability to make indications to himself (as suggested by Mead), he is able to note things in his environment / take things into account and then guide his actions based on what he notes. Blumer is not specific about what it is that people take into account. Instead, he lists examples of the kinds of things that people may be taking into account:

The things taken into account cover such matters as his wishes and wants, his objectives, the available means for their achievement, the actions and anticipated actions of others, his image of himself, and the likely result of a given line of action (Blumer [1969] 1998:15)

Blumer argues that we tend to take things into account that are likely to have an impact on what we are doing / what we are trying to do. This process of selectively taking some things into account and not others has a significant impact on the interpretation process itself - it is transformative in nature:

Interpretations of new situations are not predetermined by conditions antecedent to the situation but depend on what is taken into account and assessed in the actual situation in which behaviour is formed. Variations in interpretations may readily occur as different acting units cut out different objects in the situation, or give different weight to the objects which they note, or piece objects together in different patterns (Blumer [1969] 1998:89)

Blumer suggests that we handle all the things that we have taken into account through a process of *interpretation* in which meaning is assigned to the matters that we have noted, whilst *evaluating* them in terms of their implications for the act and its context. Note that for Blumer (as for Mead), meaning does not exist prior to the interpretive process, it is *created* through a subjective cognitive process. His definition of interpretation is similar to Feldman's (1989), who defines interpretation as 'the process of giving meaning' (p. 7). Blumer argues that the evaluation of things can only be done as part of the act, it is not something that can be decided prior to a specific situation and the execution of a specific act within this situation. The important point is that, *whilst in the process of acting*, 'the mental activity of human beings consists of an interpretive process in which the actor identifies objects, sizes up situations, and organises conduct' (Blumer, 2004: 94).



Let me pause here and reflect on the implications of what Blumer is saying. Blumer continues the theme of thinking as a private conversation which he calls an *interpretive process* that is also an evaluation of what an appropriate next step would be. I am suggesting that it might be possible to influence this private conversation - to *amplify* some voices and *dampen* others. When I joined the PharmaCo project a year ago, very few people in the organisation ever talked about the compliance-implications of their actions. When they decided how to do things, they habitually privileged production targets and volumes over quality and compliance. Today, we keep hearing stories about people who have made conscious choices to pursue *compliance* rather than *volumes*. Many people across the organisation are actively engaged in the challenge to reduce the compliance risk to the business. Although it is not possible to draw causal links between the work we have done and the current organisation-wide interest in Quality & Compliance, I am arguing that we have successfully persuaded people to consider compliance in addition to volumes and output.

### **Pulling together the threads to develop a perspective on persuasion through processes of sensemaking**

I referred earlier to the influential theory of persuasion developed by Hovland, Janis & Kelly ([1953] 1963) that is based on the stimulus-response model of psychology and the sender-receiver model of communications. In this paper, I have been developing an argument for a process theory of persuasion. Following my research into processes of culture and behavioural change and the role of persuasion in these processes, I am suggesting that it is possible to persuade people to do things differently by provoking them to consciously *think* about what they are doing. In developing this argument, I am drawing on the work of Mead, Shutz and Blumer as set out earlier in this paper, as well as Weick's work on sense-making. I therefore need to highlight the key themes of Weick's work before concluding with some examples of how we have been using this 'method' to influence people in PharmaCo.

#### ***Weick on sense-making***

In 1995, Karl Weick wrote 'Sensemaking in Organisations'. This book is widely accepted as a comprehensive work on sensemaking and I will use this as the basis for an alternative perspective on processes of persuasion.

As we go through life, we tell ourselves stories about how things are. These 'stories' are changing and being changed by our normal everyday experiences. We develop conscious and unconscious expectations of how things are likely to be (Louis, 1980). When things turn out like we expect them to, the story about 'how things are' is being reinforced. However, when things turn out to be different from what is expected, we need an explanation for the discrepancy (I explored this experience in depth in Project three - when I attempted to make sense of the discrepancies between what I expected to find at DOC and what reality turned out to be). Weick calls this cognitive process of *searching for an explanation* a sensemaking process. In the course of our normal everyday lives, 'shocks' or surprises (when things do not go like we imagined they would) evoke the interpretative meaning-making processes that Blumer ([1969] 1998) studied. Sensemaking is evoked when people are faced with questions about taken-for-granted assumptions about how things are. In my practice and involvement in organisational life, I have witnessed (and experienced) sensemaking processes being evoked in two kinds of situations:

- When people encounter things that leave them confused and uncertain how to act - when it feels as if the world is changing and the old assumptions are no longer valid;
- Through deliberate provocations, when people are *asked, invited, or provoked* to think about things

What I am suggesting here is congruent with Weick's (1995) work on 'occasions for sensemaking' (p. 83-105): He draws on Schutz and suggests that people see things differently when 'they are shocked into' paying attention. Meanings arise through the *act of paying attention* to things. We pay attention when our ongoing activities are being *interrupted* in some way. Sometimes, we fleetingly notice something but do not pay sustained attention to it as it does not appear to be of any real consequence. This typically happens when it is not important enough to 'warrant a place on one's agenda' (Smith quoted in Weick). However, I am interested in the kinds of occasions that *do* capture sustained attention. Weick suggests that there are specific kinds of situations that would lead people to take note of what is happening and pursue it (in an attempt to make sense of what is happening). These kinds of situations lead people to shift 'cognitive gears' from 'automatic to active thinking'.

Let me pause here for a moment: I have previously highlighted Mead's perspective on *thinking* as silent conversational process with oneself. What I am pointing to

here is that these silent conversations are often stuck in habitual repetitive patterns that are so familiar that we are no longer conscious of the ongoing conversation with ourselves. Dewey argues that this is the 'role' of habits – they enable us to act without having to consciously think through and plan our actions at every step (Hickman, 24). I am, for example, rarely aware of thinking whilst driving - I am so used to all the motions that are involved in the process that it requires something dramatic to happen while I am driving for me to consciously think about my actions. Something else that prompts me to think about what I am doing in a car is when I rent a car that is different from my own. For the first few miles, I am aware of thinking whilst driving (*Is the indicator on the left or the right hand side? Where is the light switch? How does this radio work?*) Once I am reasonably familiar with the car, I am no longer aware of 'thinking' about driving it, until I suddenly need to use the indicator and I am not sure which lever to pull, then I am 'shocked into thinking' again.

This is what Weick is referring to when he refers to the switch from 'automatic' to 'active' thinking. He suggests that this happens in response to three kinds of situations:

- when people experience something as unusual or novel - when it stands out of the ordinary;
- when there is a difference between expectation and reality, when things do not work as planned, when ongoing activities are interrupted;
- when there has been a deliberate request to pay increased conscious attention - when people are 'asked to think' about something

For the purposes of my work, I think it is unnecessary to distinguish between the first two kinds of situations and will therefore simply differentiate between occasions for sensemaking that arise as part of ongoing everyday activity, and those that are deliberately evoked.

### **Sensemaking that arise through self-organising processes of interaction**

Following the Quality Summit, we started to hear stories about individuals doing things differently. In doing so, they provoked their colleagues to think about what *they* are doing, thereby prompting a re-evaluation of the 'appropriate' ways to do things. In Project three, I explored the extent to which my actions in DOC evoked these kinds of reactions from the other people in DOC. In PharmaCo, I continuously

recognised similar situations of individuals raising questions about how things are being done in their areas.

Let me illustrate this effect through a story: I recently attended a workshop on one of the French sites where we asked a group of volunteers to join us for a conversation about the story so far - *what has happened since we started the project, what sense they made of it, etc.* We asked the participants to tell us whether they thought things were changing and if so, tell us stories that would illustrate how things have changed. One of the participants told the following story:

*My manager used to be totally focused on making the numbers. He never seemed to be too worried about compliance issues. If the batch records were not complete, he just filled the gaps (or told us to do it) so that we could get the batch records through Quality Control. A few days after the Quality Days, he came to sign off a batch. When he found that the batch records were incomplete, he told us to destroy the batch as he was no longer going to allow us to retrospectively complete the documentation. We were stunned. We could not believe this. It was the most visible sign that things were changing. For days afterwards, we could not stop talking about it.*

Mead points out that people come to expect certain behaviours from others. In this case, the operators expected their manager to just pass the batch as he had always done. However, in this instance, the manager did not act as expected. This was confusing to his team and a visible sign that things were changing and that they would no longer be able to 'get away' with acting out of compliance with approved procedures. I can imagine that operators in that area would no longer just act on the basis of the assumptions that used to be valid - the behaviour of their manager must have had some influence in making them think about their choices. *Shall I sterilise or not?* It is this kind of situation that Mead ([1934] 1967) had in mind when he says that the function of reflective intelligence is to bring about a resolution of those situations in which the individual recognises more than one possible way to respond. It is in these kinds of situations that individuals think before they act:

In the type of temporary inhibition of action which signifies thinking, or in which reflection arises, we have presented in the experience of the individual, tentatively and in advance and for his selection among them, the different possibilities or alternatives of future action open to him within the given social situation - the different or alternative ways of completing the given social act wherein he is implicated, or which he has already initiated. (p. 90)

I am arguing that the mere fact that people are acting differently from what others have come to expect lead to many private and individual conversations as people try

to make sense of these unexpected behaviours, which inevitably leads to different ways of working across the organisation.

### **Provoking sensemaking processes deliberately. What does this mean in practice?**

I am also suggesting that there are things we can do to provoke and influence these sensemaking processes. Weick suggests that people are likely to actively *think* about things *when they are asked to*.

We intuitively knew that we needed to involve people in PharmaCo in the change process. We needed to find out why things were being done in non-compliant ways and what we could do to encourage people to do things differently. I am suggesting that one of the ways to change social processes is to inquire into them: It is impossible to know (from the outside) *why* people behave in the ways they do. It may be possible to develop a plausible account about the 'in-order-to' motives of other people. However, most people would be unable to articulate their 'because' motives as they are generally not consciously aware of these motives. It is only by talking with people, and encouraging them to think through their own motives for doing things that we (and they) can discover their 'because' motives. I am suggesting that this inquiry process *in itself* might lead to change as people pay attention to their own experience. For example: At PharmaCo, we held workshops in which we asked people to discuss certain non-compliant practices. Following this 'inquiry', one of the managers said the following:

*'I did not even realise that it was a problem to retrospectively change batch documentation. I just thought it was a more efficient way to do things. However, now that I understand the regulatory implications, and realise that we are putting our future at risk by doing it, I will put a stop to this practice'*

However, not all the people participating in these kinds of conversation will be able or interested to change or challenge practices and ways of doing things, so it is important for us as change facilitators to pay attention to the themes emerging from these kinds of conversational inquiries. When we understand the organising themes, it may enable us to deliberately target some of these themes for change.

Another way to encourage people to think about their actions is to invite a joint inquiry into shared objectives: At PharmaCo, we heard that our awareness-raising activities were leading people to ask questions about the 'real' priority for the production organisation. Is it to *make the numbers*, or is it to *ship compliant*

*products?* When we discussed this with senior managers in PharmaCo, they were confused: 'These objectives are not in competition with each other. We can't sell our product if it is not compliant, so it does not make any sense to make non-compliant products. We are just wasting money by making non-compliant products'. What appeared to be self-evident to these senior managers, was not at all clear to people on the shop floor. Many people on the shop floor did not even know who the clients were and what their expectations were - they were just doing what they thought was expected of them. Our response to our 'finding' was to ask Stuart to explain the regulatory requirements in unambiguous terms at the Quality Day sessions. He explained to people that this was not so much a *Quality* or a *Compliance* issue, it was a *Customer Service* issue. PharmaCo's customers have very strict requirements that have all been incorporated into approved procedures. When these procedures are not followed, the customer's requirements are not being met which means that the customers can refuse to buy the products. When we followed Stuart's talk with some information about the number of batches that were destroyed because of non-compliance, shop floor operators were stunned and, in some cases, angry at their site management team. They felt that they were not being told the truth. In their minds, they were keeping their side of the bargain (meeting the targets set for their departments). To then find out that 25% of products were being destroyed because of non-compliance was an unpleasant shock. Following these sessions, we heard shop floor operators ask what they could do to stop this unnecessary waste of resources, and demand that the reporting process is changed so that the focus is not just on *total* output, but on *compliant* output.

In the above example, I showed how our deliberate provocations evoked sensemaking processes and a demand for change as people thought about the way things are being done in the organisation. Throughout my projects, I have been citing examples of ways in which I and others influenced organisational processes by provoking our colleagues to *think* and *talk* about things (in private and public conversations with themselves and others). I am not alone in suggesting that this is a valid approach to persuasion. I have recently discovered that, in the field of social psychology there is a growing group of scholars who are focused on 'cognitive response' (what people say to themselves in response to a persuasive message) as a key mechanism to change attitudes (e.g. Greenwald, 1968). The 'Elaboration Likelihood Model' developed by Petty & Cacioppo (1986) suggests that persuasive messages will evoke cognitive processing when the content of the message is *personally relevant* to people. However, the work done by these scholars do not

cover the kinds of organisational change processes that I have explored in my research.

### **Narrative themes organising experience**

In previous projects, I have considered the implications of Stacey's (2001; 2003b) work on narrative themes that organise experience. This has become a major theme of my work - how to influence and shift these themes and I would therefore like to end this project with a more detailed exploration of his argument.

Stacey (2003b:227-376) argues that interaction between people are self-organising processes that are organised by narrative and propositional themes. Although organising themes arise in a 'particular place at a particular time' (p. 343), the bodies that are interacting locally with each other are located in a wider context. I understand him to say that, although (for example) the operator and his manager are interacting locally, their interaction is influenced by the themes from the wider organisation. Over the last decade, the over-riding theme in PharmaCo has been '*we need to get the product out at all cost*'. For many years, this very strong theme made it very difficult to openly acknowledge Quality & Compliance issues. The formal reporting structure supported this theme in that people who were responsible for batch release decisions reported to Site Directors who were under enormous pressure to meet the production targets. Decisions to fail batches brought personal risk to individuals who felt under pressure to support the goal to '*make the numbers*'. However, it was very difficult if not impossible to talk about any of this.

Stacey points out that this is exactly the nature of legitimate and shadow themes: legitimate themes are themes organising what may be openly and safely talked about which automatically banishes some things from the formal, legitimate conversations. A year ago, when we planned the Global Quality Summit, I felt that it was important for Derek and the CEO to talk openly about the Compliance issues. We got strong opposition from Ted (legal council), who argued that this was too risky. Although we tried a few times to convince him, we consistently failed and finally gave up. A few weeks ago, the CEO presented his quarterly 'CEO Forum' message and I have just had a look at his slides: 4 out of the 24 slides contained messages about 'Compliance issues'. This would have been unheard of a year ago. What was 'undiscussable' only a year ago has now become a major thrust of the business strategy.

Earlier in this paper, I looked at conversational processes in organisations. Stacey argues that 'conversation is complex responsive processes of **organising themes**' (Stacey, 2003b:363, emphasis mine):

How people talk, what patterns that talk displays, is of primary importance to what the organisation is and what happens to it. The processes of conversation are also of great importance to how individual members of the organisation experience themselves. This is because the silent, private conversation with oneself is one's mind and self, and this conversation inevitably resonates with the vocalised, public conversations taking place in an organisation. In other words, individual and collective identities emerge simultaneously in human interaction (p. 363).

This reminds me of how things have changed in the French business: When I first started to work with the French sites and suggested that we create opportunities for people to talk together across boundaries functional and hierarchical boundaries, I heard: *'This kind of thing isn't appropriate for France. Operators would never feel comfortable about talking openly in the presence of their managers. They won't contribute to the conversation'*. I did not 'buy' this and kept arguing for a different way of thinking about formal site-wide meetings. After much persuasion, I finally managed to convince the Site Implementation Leader of one of the French sites to incorporate unstructured conversational sessions into their Quality Days. The consequences from these sessions have surpassed our wildest expectations. Operators who have previously felt marginalised and silenced are now taking the lead in improvement activities. People who say that they felt that they had no option but to 'do as told', now tell stories about how they feel more able to challenge their superiors and to contribute to the change process on their site.

I am arguing that it might be possible to change cultures and behaviours, **if we are able to influence the silent conversations of people in the organisation**. As Stacey points out: 'Individual behaviour can only change when individuals' silent conversations changes because it is this that organises their experience' (Stacey, 2003b:350). The work of organisational change is to change the narrative and propositional themes organising individual and social experiences, and we can only do that by actively participating in the formal/legitimate and informal/shadow organisational processes.



## Concluding thoughts

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### Learning to live with the anxiety of practicing differently

In this project, I explored my own experience as external facilitator to PharmaCo. My intention was to account for my contribution to the changes that we are starting to see at PharmaCo. As I am concluding this paper, I am aware of a nagging voice that reminds me that I have not written about the personal difficulties and challenges that I have experienced during this project. I have not explored the extent to which I have had to learn to 'live with' the anxiety that accompanies working from a perspective that is very different from the mainstream perspective on what consultants or facilitators *are supposed* to do. Buchanan & Boddy (1992) refers to the 'expected public performance of change agents' (p. 87): Many people at PharmaCo expected (and still expect) me to bring a ready-made methodology for cultural and behavioural change and often express their frustration at the lack of methodology, project plan, outcomes and milestones associated with the approach that I am advocating. Others keep reminding me that they are expecting me to tell them what the 'levers' are that will bring about the required changes in PharmaCo. In an environment where control and measurable outcomes are valued, it remains difficult to argue for an emergent approach that is not guided by a 3-year plan, underpinned with a 'tried and tested methodology' with pre-defined milestones and activities.

Pierre (the A4Q project manager) recently returned from another meeting with the Manufacturing Management Committee where they discussed some of my suggestions. He recounted the conversation to me and ended by saying: *'I did not really understand your role in the beginning but now I realise why [Derek] brought you on-board. He wanted you to disrupt things. Not everybody understands this and that is why the Site Directors are sometimes uncomfortable with your suggestions - they think you are encroaching on their territory. But we have no option. If we are not willing to make people uncomfortable, nothing will change'*. While he spoke, I tried to make sense of what he was saying. I realised that the story about me and my role keeps changing. A few months ago, Pierre saw me as an out-of-control consultant that needed to be put back into my box. At times, I have felt an enormous sense of personal risk - every time I challenged the status quo, I wondered whether I had gone too far. Over the last nine months, I have experienced a whole range of emotions. I have felt a sense of belonging to the Global Quality team and I have felt as if I am overstaying my welcome. I have felt both included and excluded, and have

been depressed and excited about my work. I have worried about the fact that I have overstepped boundaries and have been simultaneously encouraged by the results of these political acts. There have been times where I felt that I am not achieving anything and other times where I have stood amazed at the extent to which the conversations in PharmaCo are shifting.

As I conclude this paper, I have a sense that I am starting to find my voice. I am beginning to feel confident about my ability to account for my contribution to organisational change and I am excited about the changes in my practice over the last three years.

### **Accounting for my role and contribution to cultural change processes in PharmaCo**

In this paper, I have been accounting for my practice as cultural change facilitator. I have told stories about my own experiences and have been exploring these stories further in light of contributions by others practitioners and scholars. I have shown how I have contributed as fully as I could in PharmaCo's organisational processes, by creating various opportunities for conversations and by using opportunities to join the ongoing conversations in the organisation. I have been engaged in shadow and legitimate processes, addressing informal and formal aspects of the organisation. Through participating actively, I have been disrupting power relations and have called into question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about how things work in the organisation. I have often had the sense that I am disrupting things which feels uncomfortable and risky for both me and the people I work with. It is impossible to show causal links between these conversations and the shifts that we have seen, but I have a strong sense that I have contributed to many of the changes that we are starting to see across the organisation. There is no doubt that Quality & Compliance are firmly on the PharmaCo agenda. People across the organisation are actively engaged in processes to address the Quality & Compliance issues in their local areas. People who have previously been seen as 'disengaged and uninterested' are now actively engaged in these issues. I have a strong sense that all of these individual and social acts are contributing to a movement in PharmaCo which will eventually lead to people behaving in more compliant ways (even though we are unable to know what other unanticipated and unintended consequences there will be in response to the move to compliant behaviour).

Hatch (2000) argues that

there can be no such thing as changing the culture from the outside - one must engage with the culture to change it, and engagement changes what one sees, thinks, and feels by embedding one in the context of perceiving, thinking, and feeling that forms the culture (p. 254).

I hope that I have shown through my own exploration that she is right - an external facilitator can only make a contribution to culture change through ***active and opportunistic participation*** in the organisational processes.

# Synopsis

## A process perspective on organizational culture

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In the introduction to this portfolio, I considered the systemic perspective on culture. In Projects two, three and four, I have considered the implications of a process perspective on organisations and have argued that this is a more helpful way of understanding organisations and organisational culture than the systemic perspective that is so pervasive. I will now summarise my argument here by pointing to the key differences between this perspective and a 'systems' view on culture

***Culture never settles into an 'it'***: I have come to understand organisations as ever-moving, continuous processes of interaction between people. These interactions do not produce a separate entity like a 'system' or a 'culture'. The only product of these interactions is further interaction. People with individual plans and intentions interweave their plans with each other in friendly or hostile ways and these 'interweavings' give rise to 'changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created' (Elias, 2000:366). These changes and patterns never settle - they are in perpetual motion as people continue to engage in processes of communicative interaction, evoking and provoking responses from each other. In Project three, I explored this phenomenon in Duneford Organisational Consulting - where I and the more established people in DOC continually found ourselves engaged in conversations about what it meant to be a member of that community. Through our conversations we were creating our reality and our identities. I was never able to define the 'DOC culture' or point to the 'shared basic assumptions or values' of people in DOC. Our experience was not shaped by 'the culture' or some system outside our experience. Our interactions were organised by stories and themes that emerged from our interaction.

***From local interaction, themes emerge that organise further experience***: In Projects three and four, I considered the work of Stacey (2001; 2003b) and considered the narrative and propositional themes emerging from self-organising conversational processes. During the last few years, I have paid attention to the themes emerging in the groups of people that I have worked with. I have been specifically interested to explore the extent to which it is possible to expose themes, shift them, and introduce new themes, thereby facilitating organisational change as

people start to pay attention to different things and have different kinds of conversations. In my papers, I share many examples of changes that occurred as a consequence of paying attention to the themes that patterned the conversations. In Project two, the directors and I explored to what extent it would be possible to change the story they were iterating around Paul (*'It is not possible to challenge Paul'*). In Project three, I noticed and pointed to the way in which our experiences seemed to be organised by the theme that it *'is difficult to join DOC'*. In Project four, I touched on our deliberate attempts to change one of the organising themes in PharmaCo from *'get the product out at all cost'* to *'produce products that meet customer specifications'* and how things changed when we deliberately chose to act in deviance of the theme that *'people in France don't participate in these kinds of conversations'*. Over the last three years, I have come to see 'organising themes' as an important aspect of organisational life. I have argued (and shown in project four) that it is possible to deliberately change organising themes by actively participating in organisational processes. I am not suggesting that it is therefore possible to predict or control *what happens* in response to these changes (as we can not know how people will respond to these changes, and we can not predict the result of interweaving themes) but I am pointing to the possibility of organisational change as a result of changes to organising themes. Experiments done in the natural complexity sciences suggest that nonlinear interaction between heterogeneous agents has the potential to amplify small differences into different overall patterns (Allen, 1998a). I am suggesting that it may be possible to affect the wider thematic patterns organising experience in the organisation when we focus on local interactions and provoke people to think about the ways in which they do things.

***Behavioural norms could be understood as narrative themes organising***

***experience:*** 'Behavioural norms' is widely regarded as an important aspect of organisational culture. The word 'norm' is referring to what is regarded as common practice in a particular environment (Burke, 1994). Some scholars define organisational culture as 'the way we do things around here' (e.g. Michela & Burke, 2002). Brown (1998:22) suggests that these norms develop over time through processes of negotiating between people in their attempts to 'reach a consensus on how to deal with specific problems of organisation'. He, like most other culture scholars, sees behavioural norms as an 'it', something that develops and then has an existence of its own. I am suggesting that it might be more useful to consider behavioural norms as one of many themes organising experience - a story that people have come to tell themselves about *'the way things are'* and *'the way we do*

*things around here'*. These narrative themes influence behaviour as people engage in silent and public conversations with themselves and others, always being influenced by their expectations of how others in their community are likely to respond to their gestures and responses (Mead, [1934] 1967). However, these expectations are always in perpetual movement - with each iteration potentially resulting in continuity and/or change. 'Behavioural norms' never settle into an 'it' - they are always in the process of changing and being changed by the behaviour of people within in the group. In Project four, I explored the emergence of new behavioural norms in PharmaCo - what used to be acceptable (eg. to retrospectively complete batch documentation) became questioned (when the manager publicly ordered the team to destroy the batch because of incorrect batch documentation), and then lead to the development of a new story around what was acceptable and what wasn't.

***It does not make sense to talk of the culture of the 'whole' organisation:*** A process view of organisations focuses attention on the 'micro, local interaction between people in the living present' (Stacey, 2003b:313). Given that these are in perpetual movement, the notion of a 'whole' organisation does not make sense. In this thesis, I have been building on Shaw's (2002) argument that conversation is the key organising process in organisations and have shown how people engage in conversations with themselves and those around them as they negotiate ways in which they will go on together. These conversations are influenced by their personal histories of interaction and participation in organisational life and the stories that have emerged between them about these experiences. As we wander through the corridors of company buildings, we are likely to find different groups of people with different stories and experiences, and no matter how hard we try, we are never able to find the 'whole' organisation - it remains an elusive, abstract concept which I am suggesting is not helpful when looking at organisational culture. My argument is that it is much more important to pay attention to the local interactions between people who work together and the themes that have emerged through these local interactions than to be concerned about the 'shared assumptions, values and beliefs' of the 'whole' organisation.

***Values and beliefs re-interpreted as ideological themes organising experience:*** The systems perspective on culture holds that 'values and beliefs' are part of the 'cognitive sub-structure of an organisational culture' (Brown, 1998:26). *Values* are connected to moral and ethical codes, and what people think 'ought' to

be done. *Beliefs* concern what people believe to be true or not true. According to the systemic perspective on culture, people in organisations are likely to hold 'shared' values and beliefs which account for the sense of cohesion and integration in organisations. I have already pointed to the difficulties inherent in notions of fixed entities that are 'shared' amongst members of organisations. However, I want to suggest a re-interpretation of these concepts as 'ideological themes' organising the experience of people in organisations. As Stacey (2003b) points out, ideology is a 'form of conversation that preserves the current order by making it seem natural'. In PharmaCo, as I talked with people I often heard them say '*This is just the way things are*'. When I asked them why they said so, they were often surprised at my interest to discuss something that they have (consciously or unconsciously) rendered 'unchallengeable'. In their private and public conversations, and in their insistence that '*this is the way things are*', people are reiterating these ideological themes in a repetitive way. This is different from saying that these are 'shared values and beliefs'. I am suggesting that the stories we tell ourselves and others about '*the way things are*', are continuously being reiterated in our conversational activities.

***A process perspective on culture:*** In this thesis, I have been arguing for an understanding of 'culture' as the continuously changing configuration of interweaving themes organising the experience of people who participate in the social processes of being an organisation<sup>20</sup>.

## **Processes of culture change**

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### ***Processes of cultural change are inextricably linked to processes of identity:***

In my projects, I have been following Elias, Mead, Stacey and Schutz in arguing that people are fundamentally social. My sense of who I am (my 'I'- identity) is inextricably linked to my 'we'-identities (my membership of various groups). It leads to an understanding of *belonging* as a basic human need. We want to feel that we *belong* to the groups that we are a part of, that we are *included*. In order to know what to do and how to behave to be accepted and included in these communities, we get our cues from those around us. In Project three, I explored my own experience of joining Duneford Organisational Consulting. In my search for acceptance and inclusion, I paid a lot of attention to what other people did and said

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<sup>20</sup> Writing this sentence made me realise afresh how difficult it is to hold on to the sense of *process* when using the English language

in order to determine what it would take for me to be accepted and included in this community. However, it was not only a one-way process in which I changed in order to 'fit in', I also found myself challenging some of the taken-for-granted ways of doing things that I did not feel comfortable with. I am arguing that this ongoing process of mutual negotiation about how we will *go on together* is being reiterated in organisations in everyday, ordinary conversations between people. When things change (or we receive different cues from our colleagues), we find ourselves in a situation where our taken-for-granted assumptions about 'how things are' are no longer valid. This inevitably leads to private and public sense-making processes in which we re-visit questions such as '*What does it mean to be part of this community?*' and '*What is valued around here?*'. In PharmaCo, these social sense-making processes became visible as people struggled to make sense of what they experienced as conflicting messages: '*We need to pay attention to Quality & Compliance*' **and** '*We need to get the product out*'. It was no longer so clear cut as to what was valued. In the past, the message had been unambiguous: '*Get the product out at all cost*'. People knew what that meant and knew how to act accordingly. However, the messages from senior management are now changing which leads people to engage in social sense-making processes as they attempt to understand what these new messages mean. Thinking and doing are two aspects of the same process. As people's thinking changes, they start to act in different ways. In PharmaCo, people used to think that the way to be accepted and valued was to get the product out at all cost (and they acted accordingly). However, as all the cues from colleagues and superiors now seem to suggest that it is more important to manufacture in a compliant fashion (than to get the product out *at all cost*), they are starting to act differently.

***Change happens through local interactions between people:*** I have been arguing in this thesis that change happens in the ordinary everyday moments that people responsively 'go on together'. People are always interpreting the actions of others, and continuously making fresh sense of what they see and hear. I am suggesting that the potential for change lies in these processes of *sensemaking* and that it is often through unplanned ordinary everyday experiences that shifts occur. For example: People come to expect certain behaviours from those around them. When someone responds in a way that is different from what is unanticipated (like the manager who rejected the batch), this behaviour is noted and likely to influence the future behaviour of people in that local area as people re-consider their interpretation of '*the way we work around here*'. When the CEO does his quarterly



forum meetings and focuses much of his attention on issues that he does not usually talk about, it is likely to lead to a change in the story about '*what is important*'. When a newcomer joins an organisation and has many conversations in which she disrupts the sense that things are OK in the conversation, the established members of the organisation are likely to consider the implications of these questions in their private and public conversations. This is not to say that changes do not happen because of planned events - I am merely suggesting that we need to pay attention to the meaning-making and interpretative processes that are always at work across organisations as people talk and work together (in formal and informal situations). I am suggesting, like Hatch (2000) that cultural change happens 'in the trenches of everyday life in organisations' (p. 259).

***The role of leaders in culture change:*** Because of our interdependencies and the power differentials between people, leaders and managers may have more influence in this process as their behaviour is watched by all those that are dependent on them. Senior executives have more power in organisations and generally interact with more people than people lower down in the hierarchy. There are many stories about leaders who have personally taken an interest in culture change and who have been actively involved in the process of culture change (e.g. Thornbury, 2000; Dyke, 2004). I am not disputing the value of having the CEO involved. I have personally been part of the culture change process that Greg Dyke (previous Director-General of the BBC) initiated at the BBC (Dyke, 2004) and can testify to the value of having the Director General personally engaged in the process. I think it is always valuable to have the senior leaders actively engaged in any culture change initiative. However, this is not to say that culture change is *dependent* on the leader as 'designer' of a new culture or that senior leaders can stand outside of the interaction as Schein suggests. In PharmaCo, we have seen how the CEO is being influenced by the activities of others in the organisation to the extent that what used to be 'undiscussable' has now become a strategic thrust for the business. What I am pointing to is that leaders do not need to 'make' culture change 'happen'. Cultures change because many different people (including leaders) are interacting with others. In their conversations, they are continuously re-iterating the themes that pattern their experience and each iteration has the potential for change (or continuity)

***Cultures change through the actions of individuals across the organisation:*** I am suggesting that each of us have the ability to influence organising themes. All of

us are engaged in activities where people around us interpret and respond to what we do and say, as we interpret and respond to what they do and say. In this ongoing process, we are able to expose themes, shift them and introduce new themes. We may not be able to control the responses of others, or predict the result of interweaving themes but what matters are the choices we make as we participate in this process. At PharmaCo, we are inviting people to think about ways in which they could clearly signal to their colleagues that they *expect* compliance from them. I am suggesting that it is through the courageous actions of individuals that change will happen in PharmaCo. As Hatch (2000) points out:

Everyone involved in a culture remakes meaning daily, thus opportunities for change are ever present, as change itself... It is at this microscopic level of everyday being (and becoming) that cultural change as we know it (or as we commonly conceptualize it) is engaged - not on the grand scale of Christ giving his sermon on the Mount, but at the level of small, imperceptible changes that occurred prior to this (and continued afterward), changes that brought people out to hear Him and predisposed them to listen (p. 260)

***Change happens 'here and now', not 'there and then':*** One of the key changes in my practice over the last three years is a recognition that, as pointed out by Hatch in the above quotation, every conversation and every meeting offers opportunities for change. In recognising this, I am joining a large community of practitioners (e.g. Bellman, 2000; Block, 2000; Hatch, 2000; Shaw, 2002) who suggest that we need to pay attention to all of our interactions and the potential consequences of all of our activities, not just those that are labelled as planned 'interventions'. I still plan 'events' in the hope that these will lead to changes, but I have come to recognise that many changes occur in our normal, everyday conversations as we come to understand things differently or think differently about things.

## **Contribution to processes of organisational and cultural change**

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In this thesis, I have been arguing that organisations change because members of the organisation (permanent and temporary) ***participate actively*** in the processes of being 'an organisation'. When people provoke others to re-consider taken-for-granted assumptions about 'the way things are', they evoke private and public sensemaking processes that lead to change (and continuity). These kinds of provocations come from (and are responded to) people at all hierarchical levels of organisations. It is not a 'privilege' that is only available to senior people in

organisations. When people act 'into' an unknown (potentially risky) situation, their actions have the possibility to change the shift the web of enabling-constraints that they have 'spun' around them<sup>21</sup>. I am suggesting that organisations change when people raise questions (in private and public conversations) about these kinds of constraints rather than accept and comply with 'the way things have always been done'. Sometimes, sensemaking processes are evoked by *actions* rather than *words*, when people have no option but to pay attention because the actions of a colleague is so different from what they have come to accept from him/her. The manager that rejected the batch, the newcomer who raise questions in public forum, the consultant challenging the directors about their corporate governance responsibilities, the Head of Quality delivering a different message to the Executive Committee than the 'good news' message that is expected – these are all organisational members (permanent and temporary) who participated actively (cognitively, emotionally and physically) in the organisational processes. Some of these 'acts' were planned, premeditated and deliberate, others 'just happened' when the person in question acted opportunistically 'into' an unknown situation, despite feeling at risk and not quite knowing how others will respond to his/her gestures. I am suggesting that this is the work of culture change - individuals acting courageously 'into' live situations, despite not being able to control the responses of those around them.

So, what about the contribution of an '*external*'? I am suggesting that the distinctions between 'external' and 'internal' are false dichotomies, that 'externals' are not exempt from organisational constraint and therefore able to act freely. Externals, like their internal colleagues, are also constrained in what they can or cannot do. However, externals and newcomers do bring something to the 'party' that may not be so readily available 'in' the organisation: They have generally been exposed to many other organisational settings. They have *different* 'histories' and backgrounds to the people 'in' the organisation. They are more likely to be puzzled by things that the 'internals' have come to take for granted, and therefore more likely to raise questions about 'the way things are' than people who have been 'socialised into' a particular way of working. As Dewey pointed out, the role of social customs are so powerful, that we rarely notice how powerfully it shapes our actions – we take it for granted (Hickman, 1998). I am suggesting that people who have worked in different settings, different industries, with different groups of people are likely to be

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<sup>21</sup> This metaphor of a web 'spun' by people was first used by Clifford Geertz (quoted in Hatch, 1997:218)

more aware of alternative ways of doing things and that they may therefore be more likely to recognize or ask questions about the socially-constructed nature of the constraints that feel so real to those who have been involved in 'creating' these constraints. Hatch (1997) points out that 'challenges to cultural values most often come from marginal members of the culture such as newcomers, revolutionaries, or outsiders' (p. 215).

I am suggesting that, as permanent and temporary members of organisations, we make a 'contribution' to processes of organisational change when we are willing to **participate actively** in organisational processes, whilst **reflectively paying attention** to our experiences. Our 'contribution' is not the 'knowledge' or 'experience' we bring from elsewhere but our curiosity about (and interest in) organisational processes and our willingness to keep talking (with ourselves and with others) about our experiences of organisational life, even (or especially) when it feels a bit risky for all of us.

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