



Journal of Organizational Change Management

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Arthur Jay Sementelli , (2016), "OD, change management, and the a priori: introducing parrhesia", Journal of Organizational Change Management, Vol. 29 Iss 7 pp. -

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JOCM-12-2015-0234>

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OD, change management, and the a priori: introducing parrhesia

Introduction

There is substantial literature on engagement across managerial disciplines in discussions of change management (Waddell. & Sohal, 1998; Pearce & Sims, 2002; Detwiller & Petillion, 2014). In organizational development, engagement is seen as “the” key to improvement (Solomon & Sridevi, 2010), cynicism is the enemy (Cartwright & Holmes 2006), and an implicit or sometimes explicit demand for democratic engagement processes (Denhardt & Campbell, 2006) to guide them. This requirement for engagement both prior to and during interventions has been associated, at least in practice, with an a priori need for a Habermasian (1984, 1987) style of egalitarian communication for both processes and outcomes.

Yet, this assumption of democratic, egalitarian communication as an a priori is not as commonly held as one might believe. There is an emergent body of literature on critical organization studies that has begun re-examining a priori assumptions of change practices (Bokeno, 2003), the application of critical theory to reveal the more politicized, often messy, elements of practice (Barratt, 2008), and the impacts of critical theory on managerial ethics (Munro, 2014) to highlight a few developments. More links to informed praxis are needed (Barratt, 2003), and for both change management and organizational development, it is imperative to understand practical engagement processes and communication rather than the utopian forms offered by Habermas (1984, 1987). Practices of both organization change and development have more in common with the work of Foucault (1977, 1980, 1982, 1985), revealing issues of power, control, and ‘truth’ echoing Barratt’s (2003) argument in reference to HRM, this time in the case of organization development and change management. To move in a Foucauldian grounded direction, it becomes imperative to begin examining issues of power and control as well as how current practices are impacted as part of a reasoned shift toward diagnostics that reveal power disparities among employees, managers, and leaders.

Multiple scholars have wrestled with how Foucault might be employed in practice as part of strategic resistance (Dalglish, 2009), understanding hegemony (Prasad, 2009), and broader power disparities with disciplinary opportunities in organizations (Munro, 2012). Despite efforts to include Foucault in management disciplines, it has not yet reached broad acceptance (Barratt, 2003). Consequently, many mainstream theorists continue to gravitate to the work of Habermas, which often reinforces the ideal of democratized, egalitarian engagement processes. This tacit acceptance of accepting a Habermasian a priori leaves scholars and practitioners of change management and Organizational Development further away from understanding practice, and such a priori can create opportunities for a variety of organizational traps, including those posited by Argyris (2012).

Problematic incongruities emerge from some of the mainstream literatures implicit or explicit consent to employing idealized speech situations often grounded in the work of Habermas (1984, 1987) as an a priori for successful organizational interventions. In contemporary Change Management and Organizational Development, it is essential to reconsider the genealogy of such assumptions consistent with the work of Barratt (2008). If we continue by incorporating Foucault's (1985) notion of parrhesia, broadly understood as the 'act of frank truth telling (p. 529) as a tool to uncover aspects of organizational duress, we can enhance practice further. This piece proposes that parrhesia, in combination with reflection on the genealogy of organization development and change, can advance both theory and practice.

Overview

The observance of parrhesiastic communication offers two valuable insights to change agents. The first is the act of frank truth telling, which can expedite inquiries into organizational duress, and the second is the notion of a threat or danger. Parrhesia, according to Foucault represents speech by someone in the face of a power disparity. Parrhesia would not occur in an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas, 1984) since the speakers would be in an agora type of setting where 'free speech' is understood as the norm. Instead, parrhesia happens *in spite of* chances for personal or professional harm, offering potential insights into organizations.

Consider in both OD and change management the often made assumption of democratic, egalitarian discourses and engagement. In practice a priori assumptions do not often enough correspond with our experiences as professionals, consultants, and academics. This lack of correspondence makes it sensible to reflect upon and possibly alter some longstanding a priori assumptions rooted in our collective genealogy (Barratt, 2008). Choices need not happen in a vacuum, as critical management theorists have either called for such action (Barratt, 2008 p. 519), or have theorized methods to reconstruct our professional genealogy within existing frames (Alvesson & Wilmott, 1992a, 1992b, 1996). Alvesson and Wilmott (1992b) in particular, through their presentation of microemancipation, demonstrate how someone might pursue such a reconstruction in practice, moving critical inquiry from the periphery of contemporary management into more mainstream consideration.

Despite cogent efforts to shift discussion of critical management theory into more mainstream applications, process gaps remain. Rather than focusing on a broad 'mechanical application' of Foucault (Barratt, 2008 p. 517), selecting a narrower concept like parrhesia, provides direct diagnostic support that might lead to opportunities for microemancipation along with broad reconsideration of the genealogy of a priori assumptions about organization development and change.

A need for reconsideration is apparent as some scholars and practitioners in both change management and OD, cleave to arguably utopian Habermasian ideals (Kersten, 2000; McLean, 2006; Raelin, 2012) as part of a broader narrative about a priori assumptions about the need for

democratic processes (Cummings & Cummings, 2014), hampering both practice and thought. One of the most challenging limitations associated with employing Habermas (1984, 1987) is tied to his conception of *lifeworld*. The lifeworld implicitly sets requirements for open, democratic, agora- type spaces for communication grounded in mutual accommodations making it a place for idealized speech. Examples of idealized speech can be found in textbook approaches to OD and change management where buzzwords like inclusion, democracy, and collaboration hold sway (Source: OD network). As mentioned earlier, ideal speech scenarios are often not experienced in the practices of either OD or change management (leading to a need for interventions and reconceptualization). Rather than working from an ideal speech situation, it could be fruitful to understand resistance (Waddell & Sohal, 1998) and find artifacts of such resistance in the diagnostic phases of an intervention.

Gaps between ideals and practices are often most pronounced when faced with communication in the face of power asymmetries (Barratt, 2003; Sementelli, 2009). Rather than remaining conceptually ‘stuck’ by unmet assumptions of ideal speech assumptions, we might instead as scholars and practitioners look for people *speaking truth to power* or engaging in parrhesia (Foucault, 1985; 2001) as part of an organizational diagnosis. Consider for a moment how often silence or a lack of participation is the norm (O’Connor, 1992; Timming & Johnstone, 2015) often requiring interventions to correct them. Given the frequency of silence and non-participation, it becomes imperative to identify how parrhesia can reveal existing power asymmetries, aiding in diagnosis.

Values: Traps and Speech

Certain values and a priori assumptions underlie the practices of both organizational development and change management. When we train our students, we reinforce the ‘norm’ of unworkable Habermasian style a priori assumptions that fail to prepare new organizational development or change management professionals for the realities of practice. As stated earlier, idealized, democratic, and open processes are desirable—yet few OD practitioners and change agents will experience such conditions upon entry into an organization. In the precious few cases where a priori assumptions are met, practitioners might separate from their clients, leaving them with a rough approximation of an idealized agora. More frequently, under the best of circumstances, disparate communication and power relationships are somewhat mitigated in some cases by interventions from OD practitioners and change agents.

Bokeno (2003 p. 636), in particular, considered power asymmetry, but relied heavily upon the work of Habermas (1970, 1984, 1987) to understand critical theory in organization studies, hindering its practical applicability. When examined in the context of OD and organization change, we remain trapped (Argyris, 2012) by the a priori assumptions offered by

Habermas which reinforce existing professional genealogical issues and hamper practice. Acceptance of a Habermasian a priori leaves us with mismatches among theories and practices.

A Remedy

Consider the possibility of re-grounding practices through a genealogical critique, not in the work of Habermas, but instead with the work of Foucault (1985, 2001) and others including Barratt (2003, 2008) and Sementelli (2009) who reflect upon power disparities as part of organizational processes. Re-grounding practices using Foucault (1985, 2001) represents a shift of assumptions away from striving for ideal speech situations (Habermas, 1987) to recognizing fearless speech (Foucault, 1985, 2001) or ‘frank talk’ (Barratt, 2008). Fearless speech, or parrhesia, could serve the theory and practices of both OD and change management by placing the issues of power disparities, impeded speech, and professional danger at the forefront in organizational diagnosis. Moreover, practitioners who identify parrhesiastic activity in organizations can use incidences of parrhesia as a tool for diagnosis to reveal a willingness to change among minority participants. Parrhesia can also identify organizational duress, and allow us to consider alternatives from critical management studies like microemancipation (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b) as a possible path to resolution.

Fearless speech (Foucault, 2001) allows for a more realistic, nuanced, approach to both OD and change management. Parrhesia can reveal the often problematic issues of power disparities, a lack of respect, inclusion, or collaboration (O’Connor, 1992; Timming & Johnstone, 2015). As part of the broader literature on critical management studies, we gain access to underutilized tools grounded in the work of Alvesson and Wilmott’s (1992a, 1992b). Alvesson and Wilmott’s (1992a, 1992b) concepts appear to provide suitable tools to advance process in both change management and OD practices within problematic environments.

A shift away from Habermas (1987) toward Foucault (2001) might also benefit the instructional practices of OD and change management. Including the possibility of fearless speech in change management and OD curriculum helps prepare students to become informed practitioners. The work of Foucault generally, and parrhesia in particular can help illustrate the realities of interventions, while maintaining the idealized values of the profession. Overall, a shift toward a greater consideration of the work of Foucault could benefit both theory and practice in terms of reconciling ideals with theoretical mechanisms to address situations when practices fall short of ideals.

Justifying Parrhesia

In *Organizational Traps*, readers can almost feel the frustration radiating from Argyris (2012) as a rallying call to action. Argyris (2012) in this case was particularly concerned with issues that include victimization, both self-imposed and by management, dissonance, and disengagement. Many of Argyris’ (2012) espoused organizational issues require change agents to actively engage communicative structures that have *specific barriers* among individuals,

groups, and departments. Employing the ideal speech situation imagined by Habermas (1984, 1987) with its a priori assumptions of authenticity, egalitarianism, and democratic speech would likely result in an impasse in the diagnostic process. However, identifying parrhesia, and engaging the change agent or OD professional to help ‘unstick’ the diagnostic process fits within a more mainstream approach. Recall that parrhesia (2001) is a Greek concept that not only enables, but requires people to speak truth to power, to speak boldly, or fearlessly (Barratt, 2008; Sementelli, 2009; Stivers, 2004 p. 21) in the face of some danger. In this sense, parrhesia is beyond simply being practical ‘troublemaking’ (Barratt, 2008 p. 528) and has the potential to trigger for change as well as cause further duress. The dual nature of parrhesia enhances the value of parrhesiastic activity during diagnosis because it provides diagnostic information to the trained change agent.

Consider the role of danger. The element of danger can help unstick diagnostic processes. Parrhesia, in Foucault’s (1982, 1985, 2001b) discussions assumes danger, power disparity, and necessarily unequal communication. In many ways, the Foucauldian idea of asymmetric relationships underlying his arguments might better reflect the environment of organizations, particularly those under duress. Furthermore, Foucault’s writings can provide conceptual bridges for recognizing and considering how discourses are culturally embedded social constructs that are naturally entangled with power and interest (Sementelli, 2009).

Parrhesiastic behavior is a useful indicator of organizational duress, helping to identify key organizational actors, and locate counterproductive issues and dynamics. Parrhesia is the metaphorical canary in the coal mine, referring to periods where a bird or other warm blooded animal was used to signal the presence of toxic gases in a mineshaft. Much like our metaphorical canary, indicators including speaking out to supervisors, organizational leadership, and other powerful members of organizational elites can provide solid information about organizational issues, driving it towards becoming a more common diagnostic tool (Sementelli, 2009). Specifically, consider the possibility of parrhesia when one or possibly a few individuals might challenge institutional processes or leadership. This should trigger a conscious interrupt of normal diagnostic processes to consider if such behavior is parrhesiastic, possibly altering where one might begin an intervention.

It is important to note that circumstances often challenge expectations for the initiation of OD and/ or change management process. The author would argue that parrhesia would be less likely to be seen as abnormal during unplanned change. Parrhesia could be potentially ‘less dangerous’ to the person engaging in communication during broader organizational turmoil. In a planned change scenario, the same parrhesiastic communication could be interpreted or misinterpreted as insubordination or as a breakdown of normal, hierarchical communication processes. Members of organizational leadership might also perceive parrhesiastic behavior as an internal organizational threat, triggering the initiation of an intervention.

Based on the discussion above, an intervention in practice likely mirrors the events, processes, and issues presented by Foucault (1985, 2001) more so than the subtly utopian environments envisioned by (Habermas, 1984, 1987). This is particularly apparent during the diagnostic stages. During an intervention, as part of diagnostic processes, experiencing people speaking frankly (Sementelli, 2009; Stivers, 2004) can be both beneficial and enlightening if some variation of ‘speaking truth to power’ is noticed by the change agent or OD professional. The change agent or OD practitioner then can uncover issues at multiple layers within organizations revealing parrhesiastic behavior during a diagnosis.

Considering parrhesiastic communication is less controversial than one might believe at first blush. A number of organizational scholars have already begun to include more general discussions of Foucault and his ideas in their work. As a recap, Dalglish (2009) tied Foucault to a discussion of creative resistance, while both Prasad (2009) and Barratt (2008) identified the roles that an examination of genealogy might play. Munro (2014) articulated how Foucauldian concepts could lead to transformation while McKinlay and colleagues (2010) used Foucault broadly to inform strategy. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) touched upon how discourses are employed in literature on organizational change. Moreover, by focusing on ‘deep structures’ of stakeholders (p. 774) Heracleous and Barrett (2001) distance their work from the often idealized assumptions linked to the work of Habermas, helping justify the use of parrhesia in this discussion. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) provide insights into the limitations associated with using Habermas exclusively to frame change discourses. They further allude to issues of power relations in organizations using Knights and Willmott (1989), who argue for a Foucauldian conception of communication in organizations. Knights and Willmott (1989) focus on a different facet of Foucault’s (1982) work, “The Subject and Power.” Though conceptually intriguing, “The Subject and Power.” might not be as useful a tool as Foucault’s (1985, 2001) monographs on parrhesia for either change management or OD.

One of the most influential existing links in the critical management literature comes from the work of Barratt (2002, 2003, 2007, 2008). Working primarily within the context of human resource management, Barratt (2002) provided a critical analysis, illustrating the need for a more circumspect treatment. In 2003, Barratt builds on this critical analysis, advocating for more HRM scholarship in critical management studies. In 2007, Barratt articulated how management could explore issues of practical engagement while making an explicit reference to parrhesia in the conclusion. Barratt (2008) extended his argument further exploring the possibilities of using elements of Foucault’s work carefully while providing a detailed treatment of both genealogy and parrhesia. This article extends Barratt’s (2008) work further by focusing on the first steps toward using a Foucauldian concept narrowly, for the purpose of organizational diagnosis.

Hopefully, we have alleviated concerns regarding the application of Foucauldian ideas in change management and development. Next, it becomes imperative to develop processes for organizational members to speak truth to power as a means to help identify organizational

dysfunction. Unlike its historical application (Foucault, 1985; Sementelli, 2009; Stivers, 2004), parrhesia in contemporary organizations is unlikely to result in physical harm (i.e. death) (Sementelli, 2009). Rather, the real harm in employing parrhesia in contemporary organizations likely leads to professional or psychological damage such as a lack of career progression, retaliation, or job loss. Though the threat is not overtly physical, there is real danger in contemporary parrhesia. Capturing events where people speak out despite danger has the potential to work well as a diagnostic tool, since there are (1) known power disparities (2) real risk, and (3) some impetus for ‘truth telling.’ The risk, possible reward, and impact on the organization as a whole meet our conceptual needs.

Even if the ‘truth telling’ is personified and relative, if it is based on limited information, issues of communication, of understanding, and personal bias, parrhesia remains beneficial for organizational diagnosis. The dual nature of ‘frank speech’ is able to identify both problematic leadership and troublemaker through a process of testimony (Foucault, 1985). Thus within parrhesiastic action, the person undertaking risk in public can identify problems, even when the problem is with the person speaking to the powerful. The important part of this process for change management and OD comes from the person’s choice to speak truth despite risk to oneself or their career. Though mainstream literature might continue to assume or cleave to utopian ideals of democratic processes and engagement (Porras & Silvers, 1991), parrhesiastic action offers some tantalizing possibilities to help gauge organizational dysfunction.

Incidences of parrhesiastic activity have the potential to provide the needed indicators to identify deep issues (social, cultural, power, leadership) relatively common in discussions of organizational traps. Such dysfunctions might not come to the forefront of a diagnostic phase of an intervention without parrhesia emerging from employees. At some level, even within established narratives of fostering democratic processes (Porras & Silvers, 1991), parrhesia remains a powerful, desirable practice that can act as a macro level challenge, a counter narrative, and as a diagnostic tool for both scholars and professionals studying organizations.

Engagement

As stated above, there is a desire to create egalitarian if not democratic processes that remains implicit in many OD practice narratives, training texts, and other materials as mechanisms to improve engagement and quality of intervention processes. There is an underlying utopian desire to create organizational situations with minimal dysfunction, most often interpreted as a lack of dissent, critique, or conflict, often taking on a mythic quality. OD literature in particular, points to the need for healthy dissent, critique, and conflict which undermines utopian goals for a harmonious workplace. In general, it illustrates how these mythic qualities are both unattainable undesirable especially when faced with rapidly changing environments and other unplanned changes. Moving away from such utopian a priori assumptions is a point of particular importance. In multiple historic cases, a lack of dissent, critique, and conflict often identifies severe instances of a particular form of organization

dysfunction (Allison, 1971; Janis, 1982). This particular dysfunction has been linked to ‘organizational ossification’ (Veblen, 1967) and is a generally understood term among institutional economists.

Moreover, considering the case of public sector organizations, there is often a narrative of civic engagement or participation. On the surface, participation appears to be a panacea for at least some of the critiques that emerge from actors and their actions in public organizations. Though often heralded as a beacon of representativeness, engagement and participation efforts can often in practice derail administrative processes, making them slower, less logical, and more expensive. Sometimes participation and engagement can render a proposal non-viable through implicit or explicit resistance along with the potential for an empty procedural participation which relies on silence (Timming & Johnstone, 2015), cynicism (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006) which can lead to decision impasses (O’Connor, 1992).

In private firms, the adoption of democratic narratives might impede both the speed and efficiency of decision making while promoting at a minimum, an image of participation and consensus building. Democratic processes can be viewed as inefficient because it increases layers of engagement, increases redundancy, and otherwise impedes the goal of creating nimble, well managed organizations. Yet, proponents of democratic processes, particularly during times of change, are often willing to accept such inefficiencies as part of ritualized democratic processes (Goffman, 1967). These processes show often anecdotally how they can develop ‘better’ or at least more cohesive solutions built on foundations of organizational participation and buy in.

Is all Organizational Speech Parrhesia?

Not all speech that looks like parrhesia is a parrhesiastic act. There are a number of situations that might present as parrhesia. The most common is the contrarian organizational member, known as the ‘practical trouble maker’ (Barratt, 2008). Such a person may appear to be speaking truth to power, but are more likely to be reflecting personal perceptions, experiences, and beliefs about an otherwise normal or adequately functioning organization. The trick of course, becomes how to distinguish among those speaking truth to power from those simply being contrarian. Regardless of which you are dealing with, parrhesia or a contrarian employee, the diagnostic process benefits. This is not to say one should abandon other diagnostic tools. There are a number of other diagnostic tools available to both OD professionals and change managers, and triangulation is always a safer strategy than relying on any single technique or idea.

As part of the preparation for an OD diagnosis, it is common practice to familiarize oneself with elements of the structure, processes, and personnel. Part of this can now include a pointed review and consideration of employment records including reprimands, turnover, absenteeism, and other potential artifacts of organizational duress. The key, as always, is to

identify patterns and trends. A single instance of a problematic employee might not register as an issue, but patterns of employment issues stemming from ‘problem employees’ comprising a certain percentage of the workforce can identify a systemic problem. This makes it more likely in such a situation that an employee is engaging in parrhesia and not simply acting in a contrarian manner.

A second part of one’s strategy could involve interviewing a cross section of employees, including those identified during the earlier familiarization stage as potentially being ‘at risk,’ contrarian, or even a ‘trouble maker’ (Barratt, 2008). The identification stage is simple enough in practice, often requiring passive observation as part of a larger brainstorming or related processes. In such scenarios, it is a simple task to identify non participants, negative participants, and marginal participants. By triangulating on combinations of observations, experiences, and unobtrusive measures, determining intent becomes more feasible and more accurate.

Conventional practice in OD often makes the argument that if we find someone, regardless of their motive, who is willing and able to speak up, their willingness can provide revealing insights about the organization, supporting the earlier notion that identifying parrhesia or contrarian behavior enhances diagnosis. Even if the employee speaking out is simply contrarian, finding out *why* they are and what caused it can provide valuable diagnostic insights. Moreover, if the person is in practice engaging in parrhesiastic behavior, speaking truth to power in the face of danger, it provides valuable insights into organizational dysfunction.

Consider how roles change from influence by organizational discourses and practices. Note further that talking about change, performing rituals of change behavior, and considering change are not the same as implementing, adopting, and fostering change. All too often we as change agents and OD professionals find ourselves working in or working with ‘ossified’ organizations (Veblen, 1967; Dudau & McAlister, 2010). These organizations continue to exist *in spite of*, rather than because of the lack of changes, undirected changes, or erroneous interventions conducted upon an organization and/ or its associated environment. These are sometimes referred to as ‘imbecile institutions’ (Veblen, 1967) in institutional economics. In brief, an imbecile institution is one that continues to function, at least marginally, though it inexplicably holds on to specific ‘atavistic rituals’ even when faced with “instrumentally warranted” processes (Tillman, 1987 p.688).

In the case of imbecile organizations in particular, it would be difficult if not impossible to accomplish meaningful change, meaningful interventions, and meaningful improvement without some drastic organization wide cultural, environmental, or cataclysmic shift that ‘breaks’ the ossification of organizational processes (Abel & Sementelli, 2003; Sementelli, 2007). Any such organizational shift, planned or unplanned would be risky, dangerous, and likely deleterious. Shifts triggered by a speech from an organizational member also meets the criteria

for undertaking parrhesiastic action, and has great potential for fostering meaningful change by challenging ossified structures in organizations.

Why this matters to OD and Change Management

Many cleave to the ideals of democracy, participation and informed judgement in both OD and change management. This set of utopian assumptions remains central to our principles of practice and textbooks as explicit goals. The assumptions further can skew choices made about interventions. Utopias are nice to daydream about, but they remain philosophically unachievable. Unreflective daydreaming warrants careful reflection on the genealogy of the profession (Barratt, 2008) alongside the under considered a priori assumptions. Particularly in practice, it is important to recognize that the ideals of democracy, participation, and informed judgement, are inherently utopian. Though important to consider, a utopian a priori *must not be assumed* to be an achievable goal.

Moreover, embracing utopian a priori assumptions without reflection and consideration does both our clients and students a disservice by not preparing them for the all too common possibilities often met in the practices of OD and change management. When facing power disparities, issues of control and authoritarian experiences, professionals can maintain the desire for utopian ideals like democracy and egalitarianism while remaining cognizant that achieving democracy and egalitarianism, even in the short term is uncommon if not impossible. One practical way to begin reconciling theory and practice might emerge from further scholarly consideration of conflict theories in general focusing on what parrhesia might tell us about productive and dysfunctional conflict in organizations.

As a secondary issue, we must understand how interventions can help without showing powerful results. In a number of instances, the OD professional or change manager undertakes a sort of organizational ‘triage,’ where the focus tends to be on short term survival as the goal for improvement. Thinking of this as analogy, one must realize that stopping the bleeding of a deep cut doesn’t ‘cure’ the patient, at best, it merely stabilizes the patient. Parrhesia represents the bleeding as the means for identifying more serious underlying problems. In terms of OD and change management, change agents might not address all of the underlying sources of organizational duress because the primary focus is triage. As a result, change agents might fail to correct other problems that could cause harm.

Facets of organization and management studies, and particularly critical management studies have begun to question assumptions democracy moving toward more nuanced understandings of organizations that account for disparities of power, control, and other social factors. In both public and nonprofit organizations, there have been marked increases in examining the processes and practices that critical theorists consider oppressive. There are tendencies to try and foster normalization and conformity (Foucault, 1977). Over the past several years in particular, there has been an increased interest in policies, procedures, and

practices that shift emphasis from happy, productive workers towards more mechanistic accountability practices that often devalue professionalism.

In some situations, the presence of organizational pathologies including the decision pathology ‘groupthink’ (Allison, 1971; Janis, 1982) dictatorial management practices, and unresponsiveness would benefit from the sort of jolt that parrhesiastic behavior might provide. The literature is full of examples demonstrating the dangers associated with organizational pathologies. Beyond the obvious problem of poor decision making, in groupthink, the primary danger derives from alienation, from dictatorial management, dismissal, and unresponsiveness which falls within Finer’s (1941) discussion of nonfeasance if no one engages in parrhesia.

Parrhesia as a diagnostic tool has utility as both a primary and support tool to identify duress. Recall, that organizations can become overly concerned with adherence to rules (Merton, 1957), becoming *rule bound*, making the identification of parrhesiastic action critical. It is in the face of over conformity where an OD practitioner or change agent might gain powerful insights into the sources of rule conformity and organizational fatalism from parrhesiastic engagement. . In such cases, one might argue that parrhesia might provide some of the only clues to sources of organizational duress in a rule bound organization.

Identifying parrhesiastic behavior can also provide some insights into problems of unresponsiveness. Oligarchic tendencies tend to increase in public organizations when they mature (Michels, 1966). This reinforces habits of behavior where power shifts to a minority while also becoming more conservative over time. One might postulate oligarchic tendencies can lead to overall reductions in conflict, particularly the positive, productive conflict that can impair creative developmental processes in organizations. If parrhesiastic activity emerges, the OD practitioner or change agent can obtain immediate insights if someone were to speak out or question how the organization held onto SOP’s or ‘rubber stamped’ complex or contestable decisions.

Concluding Remarks

This piece sought to illuminate the organizational traps created by a lack of reflection upon the conceptual, the idealized, and the practical decisions we make regarding change management and organizational development. Specifically, the paper focused on challenging the Habermasian a priori assumptions, which tend to mirror the indoctrinated belief in collaboration among some change managers and OD practitioners. Moreover the often espoused values of democracy, authenticity, and social justice, though consistent with Habermas’ ideas, are rarely if ever met at the onset of an intervention. In certain situations, adherence to ritualized democratic processes can serve to undermine OD and change management interventions.

Rather than simply embracing pervasive assumptions that egalitarianism is an achievable end, this piece offered an alternative conception, more consistent with at least some contemporary discussions of power, oppression, and emancipation in organizations (Alvesson

& Willmott, 1992b; Barratt 2002, 2003, 2008). Specifically, if successful, this paper has raised curiosity about situations in change management and organizational development where a subordinate, or subordinates, raise their voice and engage in fearless speech at their own peril.

If we include parrhesiastic behavior at least as a concept in our broader discussions of organizational diagnosis, it might lead us to reflect more on our other assumptions made about genealogy theories, methods and practices. We have already moved beyond blind acceptance of the ‘things will get better’ approach to OD and change management, realizing that in contemporary organizations we might reveal an ossified organization, one that has engaged in the Red Queen’s race (Ridley, 1995; Sementelli, 2007), or even cases when we have arrived at outcomes that are ‘less worse’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Moving away from requirements for an agora—like situation toward one where we do not just recognize power disparities, but actively try to understand the nuances of consequences they have, we can interject a long overdue dose of more realism into the theory and practices of change management and OD.

Finally, consider something as innocuous as a strategic planning session. Some organizations institute top down mandates for participation. Participants, particularly those who have undertaken multiple strategy sessions (i.e. due to leadership changes) can become increasingly detached from decision making. Rather than assuming the development of lines of democratic engagement, consider what might happen if some employees engaged in fearless speech, risking career progression, disciplinary action, and even dismissal. Instead of a ritualized (Goffman, 1967) panacea one might gain diagnostic insight into deep seated organizational issues that might not be identified otherwise in a strategy session.

Giving serious consideration to parrhesiastic behavior as part of diagnosis moves change management and organizational development out of the realm of ritual toward potentially meaningful change. Revealing organizational issues clarifies the interventions required, drives the profession forward and prevents the hollowing of both the change management and organizational development professions, while simultaneously elevating both theory and practice. Change management and organizational development interventions are often needed. Determining which interventions are ‘right’ for each situation has always been more art than science—yet it is imperative that we do not cleave to utopian beliefs that fail to reflect the experiences of professional practice.

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