

Critical perspectives of Change

Postmodernism, realism and complexity



MGC3130 Lecture
Week 3

Week 3 Reading List; Critical Perspectives

- [Managing change](#) - Bernard Burnes **Prescribed text** Ch 6
- [Consultant as teacher or teacher as consultant: what is the relationship?](#) - Chrusciel, Don 2004; Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 2004, Vol.25(8), pp. 663-677
- [Five symbolic roles of the external consultant - Integrating change, power and symbolism](#) - Kaarst-Brown, Michelle Lynn 1999; Journal Of Organizational Change Management, 1999, Vol.12(6), pp. 540-561
- [Making a case for change management theory to support IS/IT curriculum innovation](#) - Susan Benvenuti 2011; Issues in Informing Science & Information Technology, Annual, 2011, Vol.8, pp. 93



.....so far.....

We have taken an historical journey through the development and practices of management thought & practices from the early IR to the present day.

We did this to show the various and many "options" for designing and running organisations in order to meet the various challenges that change brings to them.

What has emerged is a 'somewhat' confusing picture of theories which claim, in their own way, to be **"the answer"** to all organisational ills and issues.

Yet all are open to realistic criticisms; i.e. they are all limited in their applicability to the range and complexity of 'situations' found in everyday organisational life.

- **This is a clear shortcoming in all these theories.**

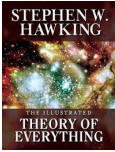
...., think about it.....

.....wouldn't it be great to have a **single Organisational Theory** that would help us to manage successfully?

Is there one?

...well in the physical sciences there is *an attempt to develop* a
General Theory of Everything

e.g.....In physics.....



A **Theory of Everything (ToE)** or **final theory**, **ultimate theory**, or **master theory** is a **hypothetical single, all-encompassing, coherent theoretical framework** of physics that would fully explain and link together all physical aspects of the universe

Finding a ToE is one of the major unsolved problems in physics.

See: http://physicsbuzz.physicscentral.com/2010/09/hawking-misodine-no-theory-of_30.html

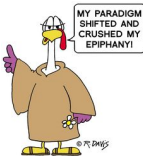


A General Theory of Organisations?

Many managers of organisation, even today, see the theories we have examined as "General Theories of Organisation"
They see them as "having the answers"
They stay 'loyal' to them.
That is their paradigm.



In this part of the course we'll be challenging this.....



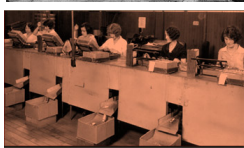
A General Theory of Organisations?

Most of you will agree that the belief of the **Classical school** (see RHS top; group workers Midvale Steel Works C1910) and the **Human Relations movement** (see RHS bottom; Hawthorne Works C1927 Relay Works room)

And even a firm's **contextual factors** – i.e.

- Its' external environment,
- The size of the it &
- Its' use of technology, etc.

Are either irrelevant or easily accommodated for - **is flawed**.



A General Theory of Organisations?

- Also, the assumption by both the - **Contingency theorists** and the proponents of the **Culture–Excellence approach** that *“...managers are powerless to change the situational variables they face and have no choice but to accept the prevailing recipe for success....”*

is unrealistic & proven to be false

- Hmmmm? Not looking good..



Even in the research literature, **there is a growing scepticism** regarding the ability of rational, objective science to provide a **general explanation** for the many fundamental changes taking place in organisations and in the wider society.

What is the answer?

Is there an answer?

- Also, all of the theories we have explored explicitly or implicitly reject the notion that managers have **“choices”**.
- Their basic argument is that organisations need to follow **‘their recipe’ for success or they will fail**.
- Yet, if we look at today's **population of organisations**, we can see, over time, a vast variety of often very differing approaches to how they ‘design their business and how they manage change’.



Why?

Because in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, many organisations tried to reinvent themselves to cope with what they saw as a rapidly changing, complex, unpredictable and chaotic business landscape = **VUCA**

The answer?

It is now commonly believed that our world is changing significantly and that **we are entering a new era**.

Whether we refer to this development as ‘the Information Age’, ‘the Age of the Internet’, ‘the Age of Innovation’, ‘the Age of Unreason’, ‘Post Industrial Society’, ‘the Postmodern Age’ or ‘Globalisation’, the message is the same: **what worked in the past will not work in the future**, and **organisations**, like society at large, **will have to change in unprecedented and unanticipated ways if they are to survive**.



To help understand how managers can ‘deal with’ this **brave new world**, we will examine some critical perspectives that emerged post the 1950's on organisation theory with a view to understanding how these approaches view ‘reality’ and the implications of their differing views for managers. **Some of these ideas were to ‘shake-up’ that very same world.**



Some of these new ideas that were critical on previous organisation theory & practices

1a. Modernism?

A late 19th & early 20th C style or movement that started in the arts and **departed significantly from the previous classical and traditional ideas.**

e.g. LHS; In Art = Henri Matisse; "Woman in a hat"

In business we saw the emergence of sociological theories following the great scientific, technological and social progress which followed the Industrial Revolution.

It was a movement towards modifying traditional beliefs in accordance with modern ideas.

It was influenced by the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities.

Modernism was influenced by the new technologies and ideologies from the period & can be seen in the design of houses, furniture, cars, airplanes, radios, & other artefacts of the period.

Modernism was the major 'player' from 1890-1945 and after this point postmodernism **was gradually introduced/considered.**

Critical perspectives on organisation theory

1b. Postmodernism? A late 20th-century (particularly **post 50's**) style and concept in the **arts, music & architecture**, which represents a departure from modernism and is characterized by **a general distrust of accepted theories**



In Art a good example of Postmodernism is Andy Warhol's the *Marilyn Diptych* painted after her death in 1962 (see LHS)

In music, a good example is Simon & Garfunkel's 1965 *hit "The Sounds of Silence"*; it was written at a time when there was a great disillusionment in American society and dissatisfaction with the status quo – particularly from the "youth" of the day.

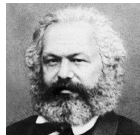
e.g. *To the youth of that time, they were involved in an ever escalating war in Vietnam, with no clear objectives, allied to a government that they saw was as evil as the ones their father's had fought against.*

Their "Hope", President Kennedy had been assassinated, leaving many of this new generation feeling disenfranchised. It wasn't long before an entire generation was ready to reject their parent's 1950's middle class (American Dream) values – the emergence of the postmodernist idea.

1b. Postmodernism; examples

Thus Postmodernism is typically defined by **an attitude of scepticism or distrust** toward grand narratives, the prevailing "view", existing ideologies and various tenets of enlightened rationality.

It particularly challenged the notion of the Western values system.



e.g. **In Politics** and wider society, it was the acceptance by many disenchanted individuals and groups to develop "new approaches". So, some of the beliefs that have come from postmodernism include **feminism and the wide acceptance of socialism.**



e.g. of this popular "scepticism": In the 1980's, take Matt Groening's *The Simpsons*; the very structure of this television show satirically admonishes the classic 1940's-70's era of the family sitcom. Here the misadventures of its cartoon characters ridicule all forms of institutionalised authority – patriarchal, political, religious and so on.

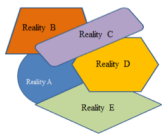
Postmodernism

However, it is **difficult to accurately define postmodernism** and to create boundaries for its studies because it is a fairly elusive principle (as we shall see in the workshop)

Postmodernism has become increasingly influential in the social sciences over the last 40 years.

It concentrated on the ways in which human beings attempt to shape reality and invent their "own" world.

Postmodernism & multiple realities



Therefore for postmodernists, **reality is socially constructed and for this reason, to them, there is not ONE reality but multiple realities.**

Its' view was that there are "other choices" besides the 'socially-accepted & widely practised' ones.

Implications of the postmodernist view

- **Culture** – **important** but sees *attempts to manipulate and change culture as generally unpredictable and sometimes undesirable.*
- **Reality** – to them this is **socially constructed**...thus **powerful and dominant groups** in organisations have the ability to impose their 'reality' on the rest of the organisation.
- Thus, to this view, it is open to organisations to construct whatever reality they wish.
- Therefore, **organisations potentially have a wide degree of choice about what they do, how they do it and where they do it.**
- **We'll see examples of this in our workshop**

Postmodernism; the criticisms

The main problems with postmodernism is that it can be **seen as unrealistic, idealistic and overly sentimental and romantic.**

Others feel that postmodernism is actually dangerous because it will create a place **where there cannot be any growth or progress.**

So, in summary:

- Difficult to define.
- Based on irrationality.
- Draws on right-wing ideology.
- Modernism still offers great emancipatory potential.

Let's now move to two other 'views of how to organise and deal with change' - realism and complexity?

POSTMODERNISM
is
MODERNISM
with the
optimism
striken out

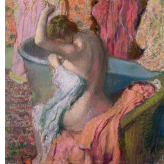
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2. Realism....also started in the Art world

In its specific sense **realism** refers to a *mid nineteenth century* artistic movement characterised by subjects **painted from everyday life in a naturalistic manner**; however the term is also generally used to describe artworks painted in a **realistic almost photographic way** (RHS; Grant Wood 1930: American Gothic)



In practice, realist subject matter meant scenes of peasant and working class life, the life of the city streets, cafes and popular entertainments, and an increasing frankness in the treatment of the body and sexual subjects (e.g. RHS, bottom; Edgar Degas 1892 "Woman drying")



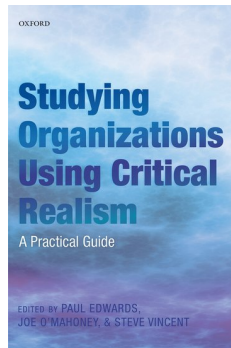
Realist view of Organisations

The philosophical doctrine of realism, like the postmodernist was first applied to the arts but has in recent years been taken up by organisation theorists.

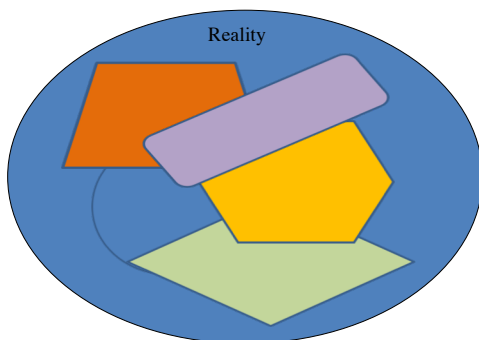
Also like postmodernists, **realists do believe that reality is socially constructed**.

But, unlike the postmodernists, **realists reject the notion of multiple realities**.

The essence of realism is that **there is only one reality and it exists even if we have not yet discovered it** (see next slide)



One TRUE reality....independent of our minds

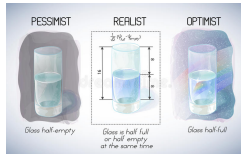


Realist view of Organisations

The realist perspective was developed in reaction to a liberal tradition that **realists called idealism**.

It is essentially a **pessimistic view of human nature**.

Classical realist theory is primarily a theory of survival.



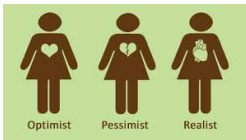
*Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and indeed all classical realists, share this view of the world – a world of **power & politics**. an arena of rivalry, conflict and even 'war' between opposing views.*

Their maxim: *the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept...* this is the safe rule-to stand up to one's equal, to behave with deference to one's superiors and to treat one's inferiors with moderation.

This is "reality" – operate to & within it.

Realist view of Organisations

The Realist perspective sees both the natural and social worlds as consisting of **complex structures** which exist even if we are not aware of them or aware of how they influence our behaviour.



For realists, events and patterns of events are generated or caused by mechanisms and powers that exist independently of the events they generate.

Therefore, realists do not deny the ability of human beings to shape their world, but they see **this ability as being limited by an ensemble of real and concrete structures, practices and conventions in society...adapt to them.**

Realism; A Summary

- An alternative to modernism and postmodernism.
- Reality exists and **can be discovered**.
- The social world is socially constructed **but exists independent of human design**.
- The reality is that events are brought about by causal mechanisms and causal powers.
- Organisations have both enabling and constraining powers.
- **Managers can exercise choice BUT within the limits imposed by reality.**



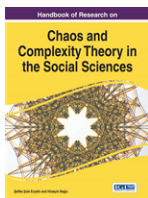
Realism; Criticisms

- It is neither one thing nor the other.
- Modernists criticize it for promoting social construction.
- Postmodernists criticize it for claiming there is only one reality.



"Watching a lot of reality shows doesn't make you a realist!"

Critical perspectives on organisation theory



4. Complexity Theory (& Social Complexity)

Social complexity, is a discipline of sociology. It is a conceptual framework useful in the analysis of society.

Much research is now being undertaken there.

Contemporary definitions of complexity **in the sciences** are found in relation to **systems theory**, in which a phenomenon under study **has many parts and many possible arrangements of the relationships between those parts** e.g. 'The behaviour of waves'

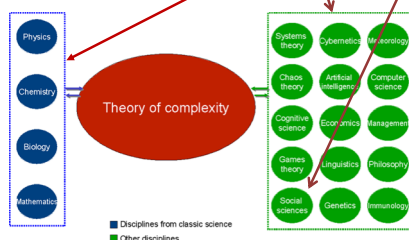
At the same time, what is complex and what is simple is relative and may change with time.

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3. Complexity Theory

Complexity, in contrast to the former perspectives that 'came from the arts', **arose from the natural sciences** before being taken up by social scientists.

It is an **umbrella term for a number of different theories**, ideas and research programmes that are derived from **many different disciplines** in the natural sciences. It, therefore covers a wide diversity of ideas. Thus it is better described as "Complexity Theories" (see below)



Critical perspectives on organisation theory

3. Complexity Theory

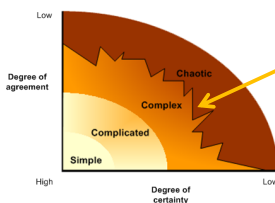
Complexity theories are concerned with how order is created in **dynamic non-linear systems** operating at "**the edge of chaos**" (e.g. Weather Systems which are constantly changing and where the laws of *cause and effect* appear not to apply)

In particular, those applying this approach to organisations maintain that **successful organisations need to operate at the 'edge of chaos' and can only remain in this position by the presence of appropriate order-generating rules.**



Hence some organisation theorists suggest that organisations are complex systems &, that, to survive, they need to operate at this "**edge of chaos**" b/c they need to continuously respond to changes in their environments through a process of spontaneous self-organising change.

So the "normal" rules cannot apply.



Edge of chaos?

i.e. A state of prolific, complex & continuous change

It is where an organisation
 • is poised b/w order & disorder
 • never settles into a stable equilibrium but never quite falls apart.

Why?

B/c creativity & growth are at their optimal when a complex system operates at the edge of chaos.

How can this happen?

By self-organisation – i.e. with the presence of "**order generating rules**" (the presence of these permits 'limited' chaos while providing 'relative order')

Applying complexity theories to organisations

Organisations that relentlessly pursue a path of continuous innovation, operate at the edge of chaos.

This is brought about by a process that resembles 'self-organisation'.



In these organisations, management & change take on a new dimension. It requires a fundamental shift in the role of management
i.e. the traditional role of order & control to achieve organisational objectives may not be appropriate.

Source: See McKinsey; "The five trademarks of agile organizations": <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations>
 McKinsey; How to create an Agile Organisation: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-create-an-agile-organization>

Applying complexity theories to organisations

Rapid changes in competition, demand, technology, and regulations have made it more important than ever for organizations to be able to respond and adapt quickly.

But according to a recent McKinsey Global Survey, organizational agility—the ability to quickly reconfigure strategy, structure, processes, people, and technology toward value-creating and value-protecting opportunities — **is elusive for most**.

Managers may need to

- “rethink hierarchy & control, learn the ‘art’ of managing & changing contexts, promote self-organising processes & learn how to use ‘small’ changes to create large effects”.
- Encourage experimentation & divergent views (even allow “rule breaking”) & give freedom to employees to ‘own their own power’, think innovatively & operate in “new patterns”.

Hopefully, we’ll look at these types of organisations in the workshop

Applying complexity theories to organisations

Moving to the New Organization Model

	Today	Future
Organization Structure:	Hierarchical business functions	Projects, squads, teams, shared services
Teams and Projects:	Teams formed slowly over time	Teams assemble and stop quickly
Jobs and Roles:	Job descriptions, job levels, job titles	Assignments, tasks, expert roles
Managers:	Managers “own” teams and people’s careers	Managers manage projects and “sponsor” people
Careers:	Jobs are “owned” by the manager and not shared	Jobs open in transparent marketplace
Flexibility and Space:	People “assigned” jobs by management	People sought out based on skills, work on multiple projects
Rewards:	People rewarded by level, tenure, experience	People rewarded by outcomes, reputation, sponsorship
Culture:	Inclusion, sustainability, diversity	Citizenship, collective thinking, shared values

Source: DeLoitte Bersin; Designing an Agile Organisation:

<https://blog.bersin.com/prediction-1-agile-organization-models-will-start-to-go-mainstream/>

Applying complexity theories to organisations

The key to this is a flexible, decentralised structure (called a “semi-structure”; sufficiently rigid to organise change BUT not so rigid that it cannot occur).

Thus organisations, in a highly competitive environments, can ONLY survive by continuously innovating & improvising – which relies on a few specific rules.

In such organisations, “change” is understood as an everyday event.

But the “type of change” is critical.

- Change involves ‘people’ & people are ‘unpredictable’ (unlike in the ‘natural world’). Thus with this unpredictability, “self organisation” may not occur, even in the presence of order generating rules
- The type of change is NOT incremental NOR transformational, but ‘somewhere in between’ – being continuous & based on ‘self-generating behaviours’ at a team/group level

Complexity; Criticisms

- Requires a major extension of organisational democracy – are organisations ready for this?
- Need to be wary of adopting a concept that is contentious and still developing in the natural sciences.
- Not clear whether its promoters see it as a **metaphorical device** or as a **mathematical approach**.

complex
theory

Complexity; Summary

- Derived from the natural sciences.
- Concerns the emergence of order in dynamic, non-linear systems, e.g. weather systems.
- Key concepts
 - Chaos and order
 - Edge of chaos
 - Order-generating rules.
- Implications for organisations
 - Need for continuous change and innovation
 - Need to promote self-organisation
 - An end to command-and-control management
 - Need for appropriate order-generating rules.
 - The need for “Agility”

Postmodernism, realism and complexity

The “choice” implications for organisations

- **Postmodernism** – offers **enormous scope for the emergence of alternative strategies and choices**, but it also stresses the importance of **culture, power and politics** in how the strategies are selected and legitimised and how choices are made.
- **Realism** – sees organisations’ room for manoeuvring and choice **as limited** by intricate structures in both the natural and social worlds which exist even if we are not aware of them.
- **Complexity** – organisations are required to **become far more democratic** than they are now. Choice moves from the few to the very many.

Postmodernism, realism and complexity**The Implications for organisations**

These three approaches differ significantly, but **what they have in common is that they open up the prospect that organisations have choices in what they do and how they do it.**

i.e. Rather than being the prisoners of organisational theories or contingencies, managers (potentially) have considerable, though by no means unconstrained, freedom of choice over the structure, policies and practices of their organisations, and even over the environment in which they operate.
