Organizational Discourse and New Organization Development Practices

Robert J. Marshak and David Grant*

School of Public Affairs, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016-8022, USA, and *Work and Organisational Studies, School of Business, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
Email: marshak@american.edu; d.grant@econ.usyd.edu.au

A new ensemble of organization development (OD) practices have emerged that are based more on constructionist, post modern and new sciences premises than the assumptions of the early founders. These include practices associated with appreciative inquiry, large group interventions, changing mindsets and consciousness, addressing diversity and multicultural realities, and advancing new and different models of change. We propose that the emerging field of organizational discourse offers sympathetic concepts and research that could add additional insights and theoretical rigour to the New OD. In particular, studies of organizational discourse based upon social constructionist and critical perspectives offer compelling ideas and practices associated with the establishment of change concepts, the role of power and context in relation to organizational change, and specific discursive interventions designed to foster organizational change.

Introduction

Recently, organizational change research has undergone a 'metamorphosis', one that encompasses a pluralism of approaches and a strengthening of the links between organizational studies and the social sciences (Pettigrew, Woodman and Cameron, 2001, p. 697). We contend that one possible outcome of this metamorphosis is that there may now be an emerging set of new organization development (OD) practices – what we refer to collectively here as 'New OD' (Marshak, 2006: see also Mirvis, 2006). Taken together, these practices emphasize a number of philosophical assumptions and associated methodologies that differ in varying degrees from key assumptions of those who founded the OD movement in the 1950s and 1960s. We further contend that the field of organizational discourse may offer sympathetic concepts, assumptions and approaches that could help advance thinking and practice in relation to these new/emerging aspects of OD.

This article is divided into four main sections. First, we briefly review and contrast some of the central philosophical assumptions and practices of 'Classical OD' and an ensemble of newer OD approaches and techniques that have emerged over the last 20 years or so. In the second section we discuss the new academic field of organizational discourse. We examine the extent to which many of the assumptions and characteristics of this field of enquiry, in whole or in part, seem consonant with many of these New OD practices. In the third section we explore the capacity of organizational discourse to provide an emergent theory and research base that might help inform and expand New OD practices. In the final section we provide some concluding comments.

Trends in OD

The future of OD, its present relevance and continued viability, have been the subject of considerable debate in recent years (Bradford and

Burke, 2005). Much of this debate has focused on whether or not the more traditional humanistic values espoused by the founders of the field are still relevant or should be challenged by a set of more pragmatic business considerations (e.g. Worley and Feyerherm, 2003). There are also concerns that OD has become overly tool and technique oriented versus theory based (e.g. Bunker, Alban and Lewicki, 2004).

Lost in the discussions about traditional versus pragmatic values, or relevance and viability, however, is the possibility that OD may now incorporate a range of newer practices that are not necessarily different from a values or viability perspective so much as from an ontological and epistemological one. Put another way, there may now be an emerging set of OD approaches and techniques which emphasize philosophical assumptions and resulting methodologies about social phenomena and social reality that are somewhat different from several of the key assumptions propounded by its founders. None of these practices alone encompasses all the differing assumptions. Taken together, however, they accentuate how newer practices have emerged to challenge many of the key assumptions about change underlying 'Classical OD'. Table 1 summarizes the main differences of emphasis between Classical and New OD practices.

Classical OD

The original formulations of OD included strong positivist orientations based in mid-twentieth century social science research methodologies. The whole idea of data-based change, e.g. action research (French, 1969; Lewin, 1947) and survey research methods (Cannell and Khan, 1984; Mann, 1969), presumes the existence and validity of an objective, discernable reality as contrasted with the subjective perceptions of organizational actors about that reality. This independent reality is then the subject of investigation or research so as to produce valid data and information that can be used to influence change. For example, one of Argyris's three core tasks of a change agent is the creation of valid data: 'First, it has been accepted as axiomatic that valid and useful information is the foundation for effective intervention' (Argyris, 1973, p. 17). This theme is echoed by Chin and Benne (1976) in their classic discussion of general strategies for effecting change in human systems. In line with modernist thinking (Cooper and Burrell, 1988), they believe that objective knowledge is discoverable through the scientific method which has historically assumed a transcendent and knowable reality independent of subjective perception. Thus they assert that: 'One element in all approaches to planned change is the conscious utilization and application of knowledge as an instrument or tool for modifying patterns and institutions of practice' (Chin and Benne, 1976, p. 22). Blake and Mouton also reflect this theme in their discussion of 'catalytic' OD interventions, suggesting that these 'assist the client in collecting data and information to reintegrate his or her perceptions as to how things are' (Blake and Mouton, 1976, p. 4).

Common to all of these formulations of Classical OD is a tendency to implicitly treat differences in how actors view a situation as 'misperceptions' that may need to be corrected or integrated in new ways. In the remainder of this

Table 1. Trends in OD

Classical OD (1950s onward)	New OD (1980s onward)
Based in classical science and modern thought and philosophy	Influenced by the new sciences and postmodern thought and philosophy
Truth is transcendent and discoverable; there is a single, objective reality	Truth is immanent and emerges from the situation; there are multiple, socially constructed realities
Reality can be discovered using rational and analytic processes	Reality is socially negotiated and may involve power and political processes
Collecting and applying valid data using objective problem-solving methods leads to change	Creating new mindsets or social agreements, sometimes through explicit or implicit negotiation, leads to change
Change is episodic and can be created, planned and managed	Change is continuous and can be self-organizing
Emphasis on changing behaviour and what one does	Emphasis on changing mindsets and how one thinks

section, we show that this is an objectivist orientation that philosophically differs from treating such differences as alternative and competing realities, which is more typically the case in many of the newer OD practices.

New(er) OD practices

From the 1980s onwards, constructionist and postmodern approaches have increasingly influenced the social sciences with ideas about multiple realities and the inherent subjectivity of experience (e.g. Hancock and Tyler, 2001; Linstead, 2004; Searle, 1995). Part of this movement includes the notion that if there are multiple realities then there can be no transcendent, objective truth to be discovered. Instead the issue becomes how agreements about the reality of a situation are negotiated among contending points of view (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). This also raises the issue of how power is used by proponents to help create or impose the resulting socially agreed upon or 'privileged' version of things (Clegg, 1989; Knights and Willmott, 1989). In addition to constructionist and postmodern orientations, new ideas about change dynamics, including chaos theory and self-organizing systems (Wheatley, 1992), have begun to influence how people think about change in organizations.

Many of these ideas have been incorporated into aspects of OD thought and practice in recent years, although perhaps without the specific intent to create a 'New OD'. We argue that there are at least five contemporary OD related practices that are based on or influenced by newer theories and assumptions subsequent to the classical formulation of OD in the 1950s and 1960s. These include practices related to appreciative inquiry, large group interventions to seek common ground, changing mindsets and consciousness to achieve transformational change, addressing diversity and multicultural realities, and models of change, such as complex adaptive systems theory, that differ from the classical 'unfreeze–movement–refreeze' linear change paradigm.

Appreciative inquiry. Initially developed by Cooperrider and his colleagues in the 1980s, appreciative inquiry seeks to effect change by focusing on organization members' positive experiences and appealing to their hopes and aspirations (Bushe and Kassam, 2005; Cooperrider and Srivastra, 1987). Interventions are based on constructionist assumptions and are intended to shift system member thinking to a more positive and generative consciousness in order to achieve transformational change.

Watkins and Mohr (2001), for example, contrast appreciative inquiry with traditional OD practices which they claim are based on a 'modernist', objectivist and scientific orientation. They assert that appreciative inquiry is based instead on social constructionist premises where reality is at least partially, if not completely, a result of one's mindset. The power of socially constructed mindsets is reflected in the claims advocates of appreciative inquiry make about the impact of the 'deficit-focused thinking' alleged to be part of traditional action research versus the 'positive-focused thinking' that forms the core of appreciative inquiry.

Common ground and social agreements. Another example of New OD practices are large versus small group interventions (Bunker and Alban, 2005). These intend to seek 'common ground' wherein the dominant approach is to get simultaneous agreement among multiple constituencies, all of whose points of view are considered legitimate versions of reality. While data are used in these approaches, the data are more for the purposes of representing multiple realities than for bringing objective 'facts' to bear on a situation in order to discover the 'best solution' or to correct 'misperceptions'. Instead, emphasis is placed on reaching new social agreements or adopting new mindsets, and therefore new realities, to guide future actions. 'Future Search is designed to help the group arrive at agreements about the future they want and actions to achieve it' (Lent, McCormick and Pearce, 2005, p. 61). The underlying power and political dimensions involved in multiple constituencies reaching common agreements are also beginning to be recognized by some researchers, if not practitioners. Analysing a case example of a search conference (SC), Clarke (2005, p. 42) comments that '. . . it was found that the most important outcome from the SC was its predominately political effects'. Thus large group interventions pay less attention than Classical OD to objective

diagnosis *per se* and more attention to processes that construct common social meanings and agreements necessary to effect change.

Changing mindsets and consciousness. In another stream of work, some OD consultants and academics advocate practices for promoting shifts in mindsets and/or consciousness as the principal method to address change dynamics rather than the more traditional focus on material processes, relationships, rewards and so forth (e.g. Adams, 2005; Senge *et al.*, 1994). For them, organizational transformation requires a change in consciousness, often starting with the leadership and extending throughout the organization. This orientation '... understands transformation as being primarily driven by shifts in human consciousness' (Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson, 2001, p. 7). In these approaches there is greater emphasis on psychologically oriented methods that might transform a leader's or system's consciousness than on the more social-psychological methods found in Classical OD.

Diversity and multicultural realities. In addition to considering the influence of socially constructed realities, consciousness and mental models, there has been increased interest by some OD practitioners in diversity and multicultural realities, including how various groups establish or reinforce exclusionary standards, practices and paradigms that may favour their own interests and reality (e.g. Cross *et al.*, 1994; Jackson, 2006). Miller and Katz (2002, p. 7) succinctly capture the essence of what is sometimes involved:

> Most organizations are filled with barriers – rigid structures, poor training processes, outmoded equipment, misguided incentive programs, and discriminatory promotion and assignment practices that keep people from contributing the full breadth of their skills, ideas, and energies to the organization's success. Expressed in conscious and unconscious behaviors, as well as routine practices, procedures, and bylaws, these barriers are typically rooted in the very culture of an organization.

Thus many New OD approaches to addressing diversity and multicultural dynamics include recognition of, and interventions to address, how power is used by dominant groups in the establishment of versions of reality and requirements that favour their group and interests over others. The emphasis on multiple realities and how power is used to privilege a dominant and often oppressive way of being helps to distinguish these approaches from more Classical OD.

Different models of change. Finally, and as several commentators have observed (e.g. Sturdy and Grey, 2003; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005), there has been an increasing interest in models of change that are based on assumptions quite different from those advanced in the early days of OD. They include, for example, shifting from thinking about change as being episodic to being continuous (Weick and Quinn, 1999); or even thinking in terms of continuous, transformational change rather than punctuated equilibria and episodic transformations (Marshak, 2002; Rindova and Kotha, 2001).

Some OD practitioners have also become more interested in ideas from the 'new sciences', such as complexity theory and self-organizing systems. For example, Olson and Eoyang (2001, p. 19) suggest that a new change paradigm is needed in OD because 'The use of rational planned change approaches, driven by leaders with the help of change facilitators, has fallen short even when bolstered by formal (and expensive) programs such as TQM and re-engineering'. They go on to claim that 'The emerging science of complex adaptive systems offers such a paradigm', and that 'It establishes a foundation for a new theory of change ...' (2001, p. 19).

To sum up, New OD practices, in combination, place increased emphasis on socially constructed realities, transforming mindsets and consciousness, operating from multicultural realities, exploring different images and assumptions about change, and forging common social agreements from the multiple realities held by key constituencies. These emphases, *in toto*, tend to lead to interventions and approaches which de-emphasize in varying degrees sequential, episodic and developmental change; objective diagnosis; and a focus on material processes, structures and rewards. Instead there is greater attention placed on transformational change achieved through shifts in individual and system consciousness, based in part on constructionist assumptions. The importance of power and political processes

in establishing new realities is also implicitly part of New OD given its set of underlying assumptions. However, as we will discuss later and especially in our concluding comments, we believe the role of power and political processes needs to be much more explicitly recognized and integrated into New OD practices.

New OD practices all also share one other important characteristic. Instead of attempting to solely leverage techno-structural or human processes for change, they implicitly focus on meaning making, language and 'discursive phenomena' as the central medium and target for changing mindsets and consciousness. In this regard they especially overlap with the new field of organizational discourse.

Organizational discourse

In organizational studies the term *organizational discourse* connotes an eclectic variety of perspectives based on a range of disciplines where the central focus is the role of language and discursively mediated experience in organizational settings (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). A discourse in these instances is generally taken to comprise a set of interrelated 'texts'. These texts are regarded as the discursive unit of analysis (Chalaby, 1996) and may constitute, for example, conversations and dialogue or narratives and stories. These can be spoken or written or take the form of other more abstract types of media. Organizational discourse analysis focuses on the production, dissemination and consumption of such texts and is now used to study many aspects of organizational and managerial phenomena (Grant *et al.*, 2004).

Although approaches to the study of organizational discourse encompass a range of ontological and epistemological positions, significant portions of the field embrace either or both a social constructionist and a critical perspective. We believe these two perspectives, in particular, resonate with many of the assumptions underlying New OD practices and could be used to extend their theoretical purchase and applied value. Specifically, they address the significance of language and other discursively mediated experiences in transforming social reality, influencing organizational behaviour, and shaping organizational members' mindsets. They also

emphasize postmodern thinking, focusing on the processes that construct common social meanings and agreements within organizational contexts while asserting that there is no single, objective reality; rather, there are multiple realities that might offer alternative understandings of organizational phenomena. Finally, they emphasize that power and political processes are often used to establish new realities as the established or favoured view of the world, thereby advantaging the views and beliefs of some organizational members over those of others.

The social constructionist perspective

The social constructionist orientation in organizational discourse places discourse at the centre of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and the ongoing social creation of reality. According to Mumby and Clair (1997, p. 181):

> Organizations exist only as far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organizations are 'nothing but' discourse, but rather that discourse is the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are.

What any particular group believes is 'reality', 'truth' or 'the ways things are' therefore is at least partially a social construct that is created, conveyed and reinforced through discourse in the form of theories, stories, narratives, myths and so on. This in turn reinforces or establishes organizational culture(s), structures and processes. Thus, how things are framed and talked about becomes a significant context, shaping how people think about and respond to any situation. Different groups or strata or silos of an organization might, of course, develop their own discourses about a particular issue through stories and narratives that define the way things are as they see and experience them. This can lead to competing versions of reality wherein no one version is 'objectively' correct. Attention to the prevailing discourses within an organization, how they are created and sustained, what impacts they may have on perception and action, and how they may change over time becomes, as a result, a central aspect of organizational discourse theory and research. Naturally this implies the possibility that there may be potentially multiple realities (different stories, different narratives,

different cognitive constructs etc.) in any given situation (Boje, 1995).

The critical perspective

The critical perspective draws attention to the ways in which contending constituencies and players use power and power processes to create, privilege and affirm discourses that advantage their interests and preferred view of the world (Fairclough, 1995; Hardy and Phillips, 2004). 'In this sense, organizations are conceived as political sites, where various organizational actors and groups struggle to "fix" meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests' (Mumby, 2004, p. 237).

Changing consciousness or mindsets or social agreements – e.g. about the role of women in organizations, or about hierarchical structures, or even about how change happens in organizations – would therefore require challenging or changing the prevailing narratives, stories and so on that are endorsed by those presently and/or historically in power and authority. The critical orientation's emphasis on how power and interests intersect to create the privileged versions of things helps us to understand that more than just 'awareness' may be necessary to find common ground or achieve a change in mindsets. Instead, power dynamics may be involved in establishing the story lines and alternative 'texts' associated with a different worldview.

In sum, the power of discourse to shape and convey the concepts that organize how we experience the world is an essential aspect of the social constructionist orientation. In turn, the ways in which power dynamics help to shape the prevailing or privileged discourse is a central concern of the critical perspective in organizational discourse. These two orientations, combined with a focus on the central role of discourse in the processes of organizing and of organizations, create an emerging social science field of great potential value to the study of organizational change and specifically to New OD.

Potential contributions of organizational discourse to New OD

It should be clear at this point that there is an overlap between the assumptions underlying the ensemble of approaches and practices labelled here as 'New OD' and a significant portion of the emerging theories and research associated with organizational discourse. Some of the core components that both have in common, in whole or in part, include

- a turn away from the more classical, objectivist sciences of the mid-twentieth century towards newer and alternative theories and orientations;
- an interest in how narratives, texts, conversations and other forms of communication influence and shape organizational processes, behaviour and change;
- attention to the influence of mindsets in shaping behaviour, and the ways in which discourse in turn creates and reinforces mindsets;
- the potential existence of multiple socially constructed realities; and finally,
- a growing appreciation that power structures may need to be addressed in order to challenge and change the 'story lines' that create and endorse the prevailing way things are experienced and understood.

Based on these areas of overlap, we believe organizational discourse can help inform New OD in three important and interrelated respects: first, by providing a related and supportive theory and research base concerning organizational change; second, by providing an understanding of the dynamics of power and discourse and how this impacts on change processes; third, by demonstrating and explaining how discursive practices create change by enabling participants to frame new shared meanings.

Theory and research base about organizational change

Organization discourse theories and approaches can be used to better understand the nature of organizational change in two significant respects: first, by drawing attention to the role of discourse in the social construction of our prevailing concepts about organization change, and second, by drawing attention to the role played by discursive contexts in organizational change (e.g. Marshak and Heracleous, 2005).

Change concepts. In the broadest sense, discursive practices and interactions bring certain concepts about change into being, such that they become the established way of thinking about change efforts (e.g. the need to first 'unfreeze' before 'moving'). As part of this process, discursive practices 'rule in' certain ways of thinking and talking about organizational change while also 'ruling out' other ways (Hall, 2001, p. 72). This can lead to outdated or constraining views of what change itself is and how it might be achieved. An example of this would be the difference between viewing change as a way to fix problems rather than as a way to cultivate new and affirming possibilities. To try to address this problem, some studies of organizational discourse have sought to move beyond conventional conceptions of change by proposing new language and metaphors that encourage alternative ways of thinking about the change process. For example, Marshak (2002) discusses change as 'morphing' while Sturdy and Grey (2003) consider change as a form of stability.

Others meanwhile have examined the role discourse plays in the social construction of specific organizational change initiatives and how people conduct themselves in relation to these initiatives. For example, Doolin's (2003) study of change in a New Zealand hospital demonstrated how a new information system provided users with a technical vocabulary that determined the meaning ascribed to particular events and social relationships within the organization. This played a significant role in legitimizing the economic and management discourses that were used to justify the need for change. These new discourses came to dominate the thinking and behaviour of organizational members. Doolin's study highlights how technostructural and discursive interventions can interact in ways that help shape mindsets about specific organization changes.

Discursive contexts and change. Studies of organizational discourse and change demonstrate how the negotiation of meaning surrounding any particular change incident unfolds not as a rational systematic process but rather through the complex interplay of both socially and historically produced texts that are continuously unfolding in a non-systematic, iterative and recursive manner (Hardy, 2001). These types of studies challenge the more sequential, linear models of change associated with Classical OD while being more attuned to the thinking that underlies some of the New OD approaches and practices.

Many of these context-sensitive studies of change identify and analyse specific, micro-level instances of discursive action and then locate them in the context of other macro-level, 'meta' or 'grand' discourses that exist within or external to the organization (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; O'Conner, 2000). They also recognize that 'discourses are always connected to other discourses which were produced earlier, as well as those which are produced synchronically and subsequently' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 276).

Several studies of change help highlight the importance of taking these context related factors into account. For example, Heracleous and Barrett (2001) examine the implementation of electronic trading in the London Market over a period of five years, across multiple stakeholder groups and at different discursive levels of analysis. They analyse the competing discourses and dynamic negotiations that impact on the process of implementation at the micro- and macro-levels. This approach enabled them to identify the deep structures including both cognitive understandings and emotive feelings that key actors had about the role and expected use of electronic trading. Their study highlights the need in organizational change to pay attention to the underlying mindsets and discursive arguments of stakeholder groups as well as the passionate resistance and emotional responses from users as they 'fear and distrust' the system and perceive a 'loss of control'.

In like fashion, Grant, O'Donnell and Shields (2004) consider the discursive contexts and dynamics associated with a major culture change project in the Australian Public Service. They show how a proposed culture change started first as a discursive concept among politicians and senior public servants, became a discursive object that was discussed and planned at the organizational level, and was then applied in the form of changed performance and reward structures. In this case, their findings showed that the proposed new motivational concepts and practices encountered significant barriers and had

been counterproductive. Employees did not embrace the new discourse and its associated changes. Instead they constructed a counter discourse that played upon the perceived violations of their psychological contract, and procedural and distributive justice. This research demonstrates how change related discourses at the macro-level can influence and be linked to micro-level discourses. Further, it demonstrates the importance of taking the social, historical and political contexts in which change may be taking place into account and how this might be achieved.

The dynamics of power and discourse and its impact on organizational change

Earlier we suggested that while New OD seems to implicitly recognize the role of power and political processes in organizational change, it needs to go further and explicitly recognize and engage with these important factors. Achieving this will involve an appreciation of the relationship between power and discourse and integrating this into New OD practices.

Several scholars have sought to examine the relationship between power and discourse in some detail (e.g. Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 2001). In doing so, they have drawn heavily on Foucault's (e.g. 1980) conception of discourse. However, perhaps one of the most informative ways of understanding the dynamics of this relationship and its effects on organizational change is to utilize a framework of analysis proposed by Hardy and Phillips (2004, p. 299):

> ... power and discourse are mutually constitutive: ... the power dynamics that characterize a particular context determine, at least partially, how and why certain actors are able to influence the processes of textual production and consumption that result in new texts that transform, modify or reinforce discourses. In other words, discourse shapes relations of power while relations of power shape who influences discourse over time and in what way.

Hardy and Phillips (2004, pp. 306–307) go on to assert that the ability of a particular group to produce and disseminate influential discourses will be impacted by whether members of the group are able to draw on

 (i) formal power (occupation of a formal hierarchical position that enables the holder to privilege their discourse);
 (ii) critical resources (the ability to use rewards, sanctions, expertise, access to organizational members higher in the authority structure, control of finances etc., in order to promulgate a discourse);
(iii) network links (social relationships and a capacity to constitute alliances with, incorporate, and win the consent of other groups that might otherwise oppose the discourse that is being promulgated); and
(iv) discursive legitimacy (the ability to produce a discourse that is authenticated by other people who by virtue of their number or position validate its dissemination and extend its reach).

They also point out that multiple actors in a variety of positions are involved in establishing the extent to which a particular discourse comes to dominate the meaning attached to a particular issue. Often there is a considerable struggle among these actors to establish a dominant meaning, such that discursive 'closure' is never complete, leaving space for the production of 'counter' discourses that may in turn come to dominate.

This framework of analysis offers the potential to help provide theoretical and research-based models and practices addressing how mindsets and meanings get established or challenged through discursive events involving power processes. Several empirical studies have already gone some way to achieving this. For example, a study by Grant et al. (2006) of the implementation of new technology at three organizations demonstrates how key stakeholders (consultants, management, employees and vendors) deployed competing discourses. Consultants and vendors depicted the changes along technologically deterministic lines suggesting that wholesale adoption would lead to cost savings, enhanced efficiency and more centralized management control. Drawing on a combination of formal power, critical resources, network links and legitimacy these actors were initially able to deploy their discourse with considerable success. This dominant discourse was successfully challenged, however, by employees who by virtue of their own sources of power deployed a counter discourse

that showed the new technology to be impractical and inefficient.

Studies such as these demonstrate that although some discourses related to a particular change initiative may seem to dominate, 'their dominance is secured as part of an ongoing struggle among competing discourses that are continually reproduced or transformed through day-to-day communicative practices' (Hardy, 2001, p. 28). Where discourses related to the change process shift in this way, they are also indicative of shifting meanings and associated mindsets. This helps explain why in some instances change processes that seem to be proceeding relatively successfully are later de-railed or suffer from 'fade out'. The importance of recognizing and managing power relations and the various discourses that surround them would seem to be essential to many of the approaches associated with New OD, such as work on diversity or forging common ground from among multiple stakeholders with different bases and relationships of power.

Discourse as a means to create change

So far we have argued that organizational discourse could provide a useful theory and research base for aspects of New OD practices, and second, that it could enable those using these new practices to better recognize and engage the power and political processes inherent in organizational change. These are important contributions, but they do not acknowledge the potential to use discourse itself as a tool or method by which to effect change in organizations. We believe that the field of organizational discourse also has an important contribution to make with respect to discursive interventions and organizational change. Indeed, several commentators have already observed that engaging in discursive activity such as conversation, narrative and dialogue in order to frame new shared meanings and change mindsets is a principal means to create change in organizations (e.g. Ford and Ford, 1995).

A number of studies illustrate the potential for discourse to be used in this way. These include the work of Gergen, Gergen and Barrett (2004) who have explored the transformative capacity of dialogue in organizations. Dialogue can create space for new meanings and generate shifts in attitude and behaviour among large or small groups of organizational members. This creates conditions conducive to effecting significant and beneficial organizational change. Gergen and his colleagues provide two examples of specific practices that can be used to facilitate such dialogue – the public conversations project and appreciative inquiry. In the case of the public conversations project (see Chasin *et al.*, 1996), opposing factions involved in the abortion debate in the USA were brought together in small groups over a period of time. Their dialogue was guided in specific ways to help ensure beneficial outcomes. At their first meeting participants were not allowed to discuss issues pertaining to abortion. In subsequent meetings their conversations with one another were allowed to focus on how and why they became involved in the issue, but not attempts to persuade or argue with the other side. They were also allowed to tell stories about events and experiences that had shaped their own views. Participants in this and similar projects reported that by following this method they were better able to understand the views of the opposing parties and not to over-react or be disparaging of those views.

In the case of appreciative inquiry, Gergen and his colleagues suggest that the success of this New OD practice largely rests on the ability to shape the dialogue among participants. This is done by carefully choosing the topic to focus on and the questions to be asked (see also Bushe and Kassam, 2005). The idea is to ensure that the dialogue focuses on positive processes, practices and other features of the organization, and to encourage participants to recount stories that embody and affirm these features. Barrett and Cooperrider's (1990) study of the Medic Inn case demonstrates the value of such an approach. The hotel's staff were given the task of transforming it from a one star facility to a four star facility. Although the hotel facilities were upgraded to meet four star standards, the service culture at the hotel did not change. To address the service culture appreciative inquiry was introduced which involved taking the entire staff at the Medic Inn to another four star hotel. Staff at the second hotel were asked to recount through stories and experiences what were the moments that led to their being energized, committed and most fulfilled in their jobs. Following this, staff at

the Medic Inn interviewed each other and sought to identify similar defining and positive moments. These were then used to draw up a list of aspirations for the hotel's possible future and to generate an action plan. Within four years the hotel had achieved a four star rating from Michelin for its service.

Another discursive based intervention designed to alter mindsets has been proposed by Oswick and his colleagues (Oswick *et al.*, 2000). This team of researchers advocate using 'dialogical scripting' as a means to effect behavioural and attitudinal change among small groups. Dialogical scripting requires a group or team to select a key critical incident and then use it as a springboard for producing a fictionalized narrative (i.e. a script) through a collective interactive process. The emphasis is on the dynamics of discourse and narrative more so than psychological factors as is found in psychodrama. This method offers a powerful and evocative means of enabling managers and professionals to reflect upon a common area of concern in order to develop new and deeper insights and understanding. In their study, Oswick and his colleagues applied this approach to a group of academics at a university who were finding it difficult to come to terms with a change in the leadership of their department and with it a change in workplace culture. In scripting a play around this issue, the group created a fictionalized reality and were thus able to detach themselves from the event in question. They also were asked to play the audience. This enabled them to see things from a different vantage point and become sensitive not only to their own role but to those of other key actors, notably the leader in question. Subsequently they were able to work with the new leader far more effectively than had hitherto been the case; they were better able to understand his position on a range of critical issues and were less inclined to over-react and be disparaging of him.

Finally, the work of Hardy and her colleagues demonstrates how conversation and narrative can be used to instigate changes on organizational strategy and behaviour in the form of inter-organizational collaborations (Hardy, Lawrence and Grant, 2005). This work is particularly relevant to those New OD practices that seek to engender common ground and social agreement among contending stakeholders. Drawing on a number of studies, these researchers suggest that inter-organizational collaboration can be understood as the product of sets of conversations among representatives of various organizations that (i) lead to cooperative, inter-organizational actions, (ii) produce innovative, synergistic solutions, and (iii) balance divergent stakeholder concerns. Further, they assert that inter-organizational collaboration emerges out of a two-stage process in which new meanings about a key issue are established and existing mindsets are significantly altered. In the first stage, participants engage in conversations that are intended to establish a collective identity among themselves. The second stage involves participants translating this collective identity into effective collaboration through further conversations that produce common and private constructions of the key issue. These conversations involve both assertive and cooperative forms of communication. Effectively facilitating this two-stage conversational process requires a diversity of skills, structures and processes. It requires careful orchestration of the conversations so as to create the space and opportunity for collaborations to develop. It also requires facilitation that engenders cooperative styles of talk amidst conflict and legitimates assertive talk despite a group's desire to 'get along'. At the same time, those facilitating must ensure that no one group dominates the conversation.

These types of studies demonstrate the ways in which discursive processes that recognize power dynamics can be used to facilitate or engender change, especially transformational change, in organizational systems.

Concluding comments

We believe there are important ways in which organizational discourse theory and research might be used to help create more informed and valuable practices consistent with New OD assumptions and approaches. Ideas and innovations from organizational discourse might be especially helpful in expanding understanding of the importance of conversation, context and contention as critical variables in socially constructing change. Incorporating theory and research from a discipline that is self-consciously focused on understanding discursively mediated experience as the core variable in organizational

change would also add an important philosophical base to a set of practices that is still attempting to differentiate itself from more Classical OD assumptions and approaches. A brief review of some of the key ideas about organizational discourse and change discussed in this article may help underscore our point.

Create change by changing the discourse

The application of New OD practices in many cases involves adopting a constructionist orientation. This orientation, in turn, requires change agents to be open to the possibility that a primary way to effect change in social systems is by changing the prevailing discourse. Changing the discourse involves changing the narratives, texts and conversations that create, sustain and provide the enabling content and context(s) for the way things are. This, in essence, adds 'discourse' as an important target and lever for organizational change, in addition to, for example, strategies, structures, rewards and processes.

Create shared realities through negotiated narratives

From a social constructionist perspective, change agents applying New OD practices should also pay particular attention to ways to help the involved parties negotiate and socially construct new shared agreements and mindsets about the 'reality' of a situation. This will primarily involve discursive interventions such as the inter-organizational collaboration project described above. They should also keep in mind that interventions to help negotiate agreement on a prevailing narrative may differ from interventions based on a more objectivist, educational orientation wherein more facts or information are provided to alter perceptions, create greater alignment and thereby reach agreement. Instead, and as noted next, power dynamics are involved and need to be explicitly recognized and managed.

Power processes are central to the creation and change of discourses

Drawing on aspects of the critical perspective, change agents need to understand how power is used to create, sustain and change the prevailing or privileged discourses or narratives guiding how situations are experienced. This means change agents who apply New OD approaches should explicitly recognize and attend to the power and political processes underlying the situations they address, and the methods they employ. From this perspective, change methods assuming consensual processes among presumed 'equals', facilitated by 'neutral' consultants, will, at best, 'misread' the underlying power dynamics. Instead, understanding how various forms of power and persuasion are used to help facilitate negotiated agreements becomes an ethical if not a practical imperative. This is true, even when the dominant approaches used by change agents are to help foster 'power equalization' among the participants.

A new professional discourse is needed

Finally, and building on our last point, we also believe that further development of New OD such that it increases its influence and relevance may require a professional discourse that is more accepting, if not embracing, of power dynamics. Premises and practices related to the uses of negotiation, power and political processes to establish socially constructed realities, agreements and mindsets are in stark contrast to those prevailing in most current forms of OD. Instead, most OD practices and practitioners tend to embrace collaborative and generative assumptions about change in human systems. These assumptions reflect the strong values in both Classical and New OD against uses or abuses of most forms of power and in favour of using rational, fact-based processes (e.g. Argyris, 1973; Bennis, Benne and Chin, 1961).

Despite the ambivalence towards power that has been a hallmark of most forms of OD, the implicit emphasis on reality and mindsets being socially negotiated highlights the need for theories of power and discursive processes to be more explicitly incorporated into New OD practices. Exactly what forms of power can be used in the New OD and by New OD practitioners to help facilitate the establishment of social agreements from among contending realities? When and how should these forms of power be used? These questions are inherent in most or all forms of New OD, but those practising and studying New OD are not paying as much attention to them as they should. In short, power

has been neglected in favour of less confronting and more 'optimistic' or 'positive' approaches (e.g. Cameron, Dutton and Quinn, 2003). Aspects of the critical perspective in organization discourse could be especially helpful in drawing attention and legitimacy to the darker side of socially constructed change. This will be a crucial issue for proponents of New OD practices to confront and explore.

References

Ackerman-Anderson, L. A. and D. Anderson (2001). 'Awake at the wheel: moving beyond change management to conscious change leadership', *OD Practitioner*, **33** (3), pp. 4–10.

Adams, J. D. (2005). *Transforming Work*, 2nd edn. New York: Cosimo.

Alvesson, M. and D. Kärreman (2000). 'Taking the linguistic turn in organizational research: challenges, responses, consequences', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **36** (2), pp. 136–158.

Argyris, C. (1973). *Intervention Theory and Method: A Behavioral Science View*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Barrett, F. J. and D. L. Cooperrider (1990). 'Generative metaphor intervention: a new approach for working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **26** (2), pp. 219–239.

Bennis, W. G., K. D. Benne and R. Chin (eds) (1961). *The Planning of Change*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Blake, R. R. and J. S. Mouton (1976). *Consultation*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Boje, D. M. (1995). 'Stories of the storytelling organization: a postmodern analysis of Disney as *Tamara*-Land', *Academy of Management Journal*, **38** (4), pp. 997–1035.

Bradford, D. L. and W. W. Burke (2005). *Reinventing OD*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bunker, B. B. and B. T. Alban (eds) (2005). 'Special issue on large group interventions', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **41** (1).

Bunker, B., B. Alban and R. Lewicki (2004). 'Ideas in currency and OD practice: has the well gone dry', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **40** (4), pp. 403–421.

Bushe, G. R. and A. F. Kassam (2005). 'When is appreciative inquiry transformational? A meta-case analysis', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *41 (2), pp. 161–181.*

Cameron, K. S., J. E. Dutton and R. E. Quinn (eds) (2003). *Positive Organizational Scholarship: Foundations of a New Discipline*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Cannell, C. and R. Khan (1984). 'Some factors in the origins and development of the Institute of Social Research, the University of Michigan', *American Psychologist*, **39**, pp. 1256–1266.

Chalaby, J. K. (1996). 'Beyond the prison-house of language: discourse as a sociological concept', *British Journal of Sociology*, **47** (4), pp. 684–698.

Chasin, R., M. Herzig, S. Roth, L. Chasin, C. Becker and R. Stains (1996). 'From diatribe to dialogue on divisive public issues: approaches drawn from family therapy', *Median Quarterly*, **13** (4), pp. 323–344.

Chin, R. and K. D. Benne (1976). 'General strategies for effecting change in human systems'. In W. G. Bennis, K. D. Benne, R. Chin and K. E. Corey (eds), *The Planning of Change*, 3rd edn, pp. 22–45. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Clarke, N. (2005). 'Transorganization development for network building', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **41** (1), pp. 30–46.

Clegg, S. R. (1989). *Frameworks of Power*. London: Sage.

Cooper, R. and G. Burrell (1988). 'Modernism, postmodernism and organizational analysis: an introduction', *Organization Studies*, **9** (1), pp. 91–112.

Cooperrider, D. L. and S. Srivastra (1987). 'Appreciative inquiry in organizational life'. In R W. Woodman and W. A. Pasmore (eds), *Research in Organizational Change and Development*. Stamford, CT: JAI Press.

Cross, E. Y., J. H. Katz, F. A. Miller and E. W. Seashore (eds) (1994). *The Promise of Diversity: Over 40 Voices Discuss Strategies for Eliminating Discrimination in Organizations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Doolin, B. (2003). 'Narratives of change: discourse, technology and organization', *Organization*, **10** (4), pp. 751–770.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.

Fairclough, N. and R. Wodak (1997). 'Critical discourse analysis'. In T. A. Van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage.

Ford, J. D. and L. W. Ford (1995). 'The role of conversations in producing intentional change in organizations', *Academy of Management Review*, **20** (3), pp. 541–570.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Brighton: Harvester Press.

French, W. (1969). 'Organization development: objectives, assumptions and strategies', *California Management Review*, **12** (1), pp. 23–34.

Gergen, K. J., M. M. Gergen and F. J. Barrett (2004). 'Dialogue: life and death of the organization'. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage.

Grant, D., M. O'Donnell and J. Shields (2004). 'The new performance paradigm in the Australian Public Service: a discursive analysis'. In T. Duvillier (ed.), *La Motivation au Travail dans Le Secteur Public (The Motivation of Work in the Public Sector)*. Paris: Harmattan.

Grant, D., C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (2004). 'Introduction – Organizational discourse: exploring the field'. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage.

Grant, D., R. Hall, N. Wailes and C. Wright (2006). 'The false promise of technological determinism: the case of enterprise resource planning systems', *New Technology Work and Employment*, **21** (1), pp. 2–24.

Hall, S. (2001). 'Foucault: power, knowledge and discourse'. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor and S. J. Yates (eds), *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*. London: Sage.

Hancock, P. G. and M. J. Tyler (2001). *Work, Postmodernism and Organization: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage.

Hardy, C. (2001). 'Researching organizational discourse', *International Studies of Management and Organization*, **31** (3), pp. 25–47.

Hardy, C. and N. Phillips (2004). 'Discourse and power'. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage.

Hardy, C., T. B. Lawrence and D. Grant (2005). 'Discourse and collaboration: the role of conversations and collective identity', *Academy of Management Review*, **30** (1), pp. 58–77.

Heracleous, L. and M. Barrett (2001). 'Organizational change as discourse: communicative actions and deep structures in the context of information technology implementation', *Academy of Management Journal*, **44** (4), pp. 755–778.

Jackson, B. W. (2006). 'Theory and practice of multicultural organization development'. In B. B. Jones and M. Brazzel (eds), *The NTL Handbook of Organization Development and Change: Principles, Practices, and Perspectives*. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

Knights, D. and H. Willmott (1989). 'Power and subjectivity at work: from degradation to subjugation in social relations', *Sociology*, **23** (4), pp. 535–558.

Lent, R. M., M. T. McCormick and D. S. Pearce (2005). 'Combining future search and open space to address special situations', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **41** (1), pp. 61–69.

Lewin, K. (1947). 'Frontiers in group dynamics', *Human Relations*, **1** (2), pp. 143–153.

Linstead, S. (ed.) (2004). *Organization Theory and Postmodern Thought*. London: Sage.

Mann, F. (1969). 'Studying and creating change'. In W. Bennis, K. Benne and R. Chin (eds), *The Planning of Change*, 2nd edn, pp. 605–613. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Marshak, R. J. (2002). 'Changing the language of change: how new concepts are challenging the ways we think and talk about organizational change', *Strategic Change*, **11** (5), pp. 279–286.

Marshak, R. J. (2006). 'Emerging directions: is there a new OD?' In J. V. Gallos (ed.), *Organization Development: A Jossey-Bass Reader*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Marshak, R. J. and L. Heracleous (2005). 'A discursive approach to organization development', *Action Research*, **3** (1), pp. 69–88.

Miller, F. A. and J. H. Katz (2002). *The Inclusion Breakthrough*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Mirvis, P. H. (2006). 'Revolutions in OD: the new, and the new, new things'. In J. V. Gallos (ed.), *Organization Development: A Jossey-Bass Reader*, pp. 39–88. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mumby, D. K. (2004). 'Discourse, power and ideology: unpacking the critical approach'. In D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Oswick and L. Putnam (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*. London: Sage.

Mumby, D. K. and R. P. Clair (1997). 'Organizational discourse'. In T. A. Van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse as Social Interaction*. London: Sage.

O'Conner, E. S. (2000). 'Plotting the organization: the embedded narrative as a construct for studying change', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **36** (2), pp. 174–192.

Olson, E. E. and G. H. Eoyang (2001). *Facilitating Organization Change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Oswick, C., P. Anthony, T. Keenoy, I. L. Mangham and D. Grant (2000). 'A dialogic analysis of organizational learning', *Journal of Management Studies*, **36** (7), pp. 887–901.

Pettigrew, A. M., R. W. Woodman and K. S. Cameron (2001). 'Studying organizational change and development: challenges for future research', *Academy of Management Journal*, **44** (4), pp. 697–713.

Rindova, V. P. and S. Kotha (2001). 'Continuous morphing: competing through dynamic capabilities, form, and function', *Academy of Management Journal*, **44** (6), pp. 1263–1280.

Searle, J. R. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Allen-Lane.

Senge, P. M., A. Kleiner, C. Roberts, R. B. Ross and B. J. Smith (eds) (1994). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies for Building a Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Sturdy, A. and C. Grey (2003). 'Beneath and beyond organizational change management: exploring alternatives', *Organization*, **10** (4), pp. 651–662.

Van de Ven, A. and M. S. Poole (2005). 'Alternative approaches for studying organizational change', *Organization Studies*, **26** (9), pp. 1377–1404.

Watkins, J. M. and B. J. Mohr (2001). *Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. E. and R. E. Quinn (1999). 'Organizational change and development', *Annual Review of Psychology*, **50** (1), pp. 361–386.

Wheatley, M. J. (1992). *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.

Worley, C. G. and A. E. Feyerherm (2003). 'Reflections on the future of organization development', *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, **39** (1), pp. 97–115.

Robert J. Marshak is Scholar in Residence in the AU/NTL MSOD Program at the School of Public Affairs, American University, Washington, DC. His primary research interests include organization development and change, covert processes, and organizational discourse. He has published in *Human Relations*, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Organizational Dynamics*, *Action Research*, *Strategic Change* and *Organization Development Journal*.

David Grant is Professor of Organizational Studies at the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney. His primary research interest is organizational discourse, especially where it relates to organizational change. He has published in a range of management and organization journals including *Organization Studies*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies* and *Journal of Applied Behavioral Sciences*.