

RAYMOND CALDWELL

Agency and Change in Organizational Theory

Mark Hughes

Brighton Business School/CROME, University of Brighton

m.a.hughes@brighton.ac.uk

Abstract

How we conceive our capacity for ‘agency’ in the world has enormous implications for how we think the possibilities and limits of our ability to manage change in organizations and society. For Raymond Caldwell, agency is the prism through which we think change. If we conceive ourselves as things, as ‘substances’ that simply think and act intentionally or rationally we will end-up with extremely limited epistemologies for understanding agency. For Caldwell the old models of knowledge and power, rationality and control, agency and structure in organizations have fallen apart. The idea of ‘distributed agency’ partly captures this reality by treating change as an ongoing process defined by practices; which in turn questions explanations of change that rely on intentional action or abstract notions of organizations as entities that change from one relatively fixed state to another. In sum, he treats agency as a practice and change as a process. But Caldwell’s recent work, partly under the philosophical influence of Whitehead, takes these ideas further by including the nonhuman in how we define distributed agency: agency is potentially everywhere in a social-material world in which the ontological divide between the social and the natural world no longer makes much sense. Always provocative, always challenging, Caldwell’s work is an important contribution to redefining the boundaries of how we think of agency and change in

organizations. After briefly noting some early influences on Caldwell's work the Chapter organizes his contributions into three major phases; agency and change, agency as practice, and change as a process. A key insights section then reflects on how his early contributions have influenced others. The Chapter concludes with legacies and new directions in Caldwell's search for a process-in-practice perspective on organizational change.

Key Words - Process, Practice Theory, Agency, Organizational Change

Introduction

Organizational change theory is an emerging field within the notoriously fractured fields and sub-fields of organizational studies. To write a history of organizational change theory, therefore, poses an enormous challenge, as Demers (2008) discovered, discordant pluralism subverts the search for synthesis. But any such history must include at least a chapter on "agency and change," Raymond Caldwell's specialist sub-field. Without an exploration of the possibilities of "agency," we cannot understand the possibilities and limits of change in organizations or societies. Through a sociological prism, Caldwell was able to capture profound changes in how we think of agency in relation to the roles of leaders, managers, practitioners and HR professionals as "change agents" in organizations. His work began by asking what agency was, and he has rightly chastised the coverage of change agency in organizational change theory as fifty years of "dismal reading" (Caldwell, 2006). Caldwell has consistently encouraged the unbounded exploration of the relationships between agency and change, and he has only been mildly perplexed by the idea that organizational change theory is not cumulative, or that it is in danger of falling apart (Caldwell, 2005). He therefore

remains a pioneer in challenging more orthodox accounts of organizational change and in encouraging a rethinking of the failures of organizational change practices.

This chapter provides an opportunity to better understand what has influenced him and to take stock of some of his key contributions, but also to learn about his insights, his still emergent legacy, and what new directions his work is taking. This review is informed by my own extensive reading of his work and a number of meetings with him over the last few years. In taking stock of Caldwell's contribution to the field of organizational change, I felt it essential to communicate with him directly about his work and meet with him to discuss it further. I have signposted his verbatim contributions in italics and quotation marks, as well as paraphrasing what I learned whilst writing this chapter and discussing his work. I certainly found it fascinating to understand the bigger picture of Caldwell's writing, and I hope you will share this fascination.

Influences and motivations – New beginnings

Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Caldwell spent his formative teenage years during the political conflicts and sectarian violence of 'the troubles' that began in the late 1960s. A brief visit to America in the summer of 1971 was the crucial point at which he decided he would study there, "no matter what." America was to be his escape from a world he describes as "celtically bleak but always tinged with light:"

It was easy to feel trapped in a nightmare of history in which everything violently changes and yet everything appears to repeat itself. The violence was the

continuation of an ancient quarrel that was dreary and bloody, but the events were new, they were not simply a repetition of the past.

Caldwell got to America. He took his first degree at Hampshire College, a newly established liberal arts college in Amherst, Massachusetts, which he described as an “experimenting,” “socially liberal,” and a “multidisciplinary learning” alternative to traditional undergraduate education. It was clearly something of a cultural shock, but it worked:

Whatever the philosophy really was or who it really appealed to, all I know is that it seemed to work for me. I found the place, at first, disconcerting and then exhilarating; you could push yourself as hard as you wished, in whatever direction you wished.

This liberal and alternative educational experience appears to have been very influential, shaping and influencing Caldwell’s thinking and subsequent writing. He developed an intense interest in social theory and philosophy, reading everything from the origins of modernity through to every possible version of postmodernism. Initially, he was attracted to the classical sociologists (Durkheim and Weber), but then progressed to cultural anthropologists, such as Levis Strauss. During these formative years, he read about structuralism and post-structuralism and the work of Foucault and Bourdieu, Marx and the Frankfurt School, as well as the work of Mead, Parsons, Habermas, and Giddens. After finding a pristine, hard copy of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* discarded by a fellow student, he read it intensely, and soon became fascinated decoding Wittgenstein’s cryptic and poetic aphorisms on language and metaphysics, which eventually inspired him to complete his undergraduate dissertation on Hegel, Weber, and Wittgenstein. Caldwell’s appetite for philosophically informed social

theory appears to have been voracious, and it helps us to partly understand what influenced his organizational change writing. More broadly, Caldwell has acknowledged, not only his educational experience, but the allure of the very idea of America itself, which created a space for him to embark on an enormously liberating intellectual journey.

I was able to absorb the practical virtues of the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism. I can still see some of the traces of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead in my work. I was especially drawn to Richard Rorty's version of neo-pragmatism with its poetic ethic and anti-reductionist vision.

Pragmatism taught Caldwell to reverse the traditional relation between theory and practice-- theory is practice. This emphasis upon practice was to become a recurring aspect of his work, and it may explain his enduring positive evaluation of the importance of practice and applied research.

After Hampshire, Caldwell embarked on a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics (LSE). Unbeknownst to him, he was apparently following a well-trodden path. "Hampshire ranks in the top 1% of colleges in the US in the percentage of graduates going on to complete a doctorate." His Ph.D. addressed the "rationalization" theme in Max Weber's work, which included exploring Weber's "developmental history" of the West, and his idea of bureaucracy as an "iron cage" which threatened individual freedom, rationality, and democracy. He was interested in exploring, not just Weber's ideas about bureaucracy and rationalization, but whether he had a 'theory' of development and change in Western societies, which had implications for how organizations change. This interest in Weber was furthered while a Research Fellow at Berkeley, enabling him to work with Reinhard Bendix, a central figure in

the development of their famous Sociology Department, and a key figure in the assimilation of Weber's work in America (Scaff, 2014). It is perhaps no surprise then, that Caldwell still retains a long-standing interest in the intellectual history of Weber's scholarship and interpretation, and continues to publish in this area (Caldwell, 2002, 2016). He also admits that Weber's legacy is still very much alive in his imagination:

Weber was partly my way into organizational theory; but he is probably the greatest and most profoundly misunderstood theorist in the hall of fame of classical organizational theory. Weber was not a proponent of bureaucracy as an 'ideal type' of mechanistic efficiency... In some sense I am still a reluctant Weberian in that I have not found a way to lay to rest Weber's ghost and the iron cage of rationalization.

This brief background note suggests some recurring aspects of Caldwell's work: a disregard for disciplinary boundaries, a preoccupation with theory as practice, a broad interest in the nature of social change, a concern with the genealogy of ideas, and a recurrent indebtedness to the legacy of sociological theory.

Key contributions – Agency and change

In engaging with Caldwell's contribution to organizational change theory, a series of discrete yet interrelated strands of thinking quickly become apparent. He has tried to summarize these contributions as a whole while remaining fully aware that all academic work is always incomplete:

My research is concerned with exploring how the concept of human 'agency' is theorized in organizational change research and how it is applied to the disparate contingencies of practice. I began my academic career as a sociologist, but my work is now thoroughly interdisciplinary, mainly because agency as a mode of practice and change as a process are hybrid constructs that do not fit neatly within disciplinary boundaries. My current research is concerned with thinking agency and change within 'practice theory' and 'process perspectives,' and how we can include nonhuman agency in definitions of human agency. My overall goal is to explore the possibility of a 'process-in-practice' perspective that brings together practice and process perspectives on how we think agency and change.

Caldwell also made clear the rationale for his focus on agency and change:

Agency is an increasingly problematic concept that crosses the boundaries between philosophy and social theory. Some would argue that it is no longer viable as a concept that can guide ideals of intention, rationality, individual autonomy, and freedom in a liberal democratic society. Others would suggest, however, that theorizing agency is an even more urgent task in a world of economic crisis, global inequality, terrorism, and the prospect of ecological disaster. Agency may not be located where we once thought it was, because we now know it is distributed, relational, shared, embodied and ecological. But one thing is certain: agency will determine how we think of change, and how we remake the world in our own image.

Caldwell's wide-ranging contribution to the exploration of agency and change raises important issues for the field of organizational change studies. There are ontological issues around the basic assumptions about the nature of reality: what is agency, what is change, and how do we experience a world that is always changing? Epistemological issues are raised, questioning basic assumptions about how we acquire knowledge of change. Methodological issues are then raised as to how the researcher goes practically about studying what they believe can be known. Finally, practitioner issues relate to what we need to know in order to somehow operate in the "real" world: how do we make a difference, or how do we make the changes that we wish, desire, or intend to happen?

To understand Caldwell's key contributions in addressing these questions, one needs to trace the genealogy of three important phases of his thinking: *Phase 1*—agency and change in organizational theory; *Phase 2*—thinking of agency as practice; *Phase 3*—thinking change as process.

Phase 1 - Agency and change in organizations *Agency and Change* (2006) is probably Caldwell's most important work in that it is key to his ongoing research questions. The overall ambition of the book was to shift the focus from "outmoded debates on agency and structure to new practice-based discourses on agency and change." Agency was a notoriously under-theorized concept in organizational studies, mainly because "organizations" were conceived as relatively stable structural entities. In organizational change theory, however, "change," rather than stability, is the central problematic, and an adequate exploration of change has to include agency. Whilst *Agency and Change* was primarily a theoretical enterprise, it was ultimately directed at rethinking and reinventing practice, and Caldwell envisaged a second volume. For a variety of reasons this did not appear, but many of his articles over the last few years are concerned with the issue of practice.

Because of its avowedly theoretical nature and philosophical undercurrents, *Agency and Change* was never going to be an easy read, and this was compounded by Caldwell's attempts to explore the Babel of competing "disciplinary discourses" on agency and change in organizations. He broadly classifies these discourses into four overlapping categories: 1) rationalist or social scientific discourses, which are concerned with intentional agency, expert knowledge and the instrumental management of organizational change as a linear or stage-like process; 2) contextualist or processual discourses, which are primarily focused on 'emergent' change, and the more bounded nature of managerial agency and strategic choice; 3) dispersalist or distributed discourses, which explore the growing challenges of managing change in more complex organizations in which knowledge, power, leadership, and learning are distributed to teams, groups, and other self-organizing actors (Caldwell includes complexity theory, the learning organization and communities of practice within this category.); and 4) constructionist or postmodern discourses, which seek to "abandon subject-object distinctions;" there are no objective scientific observers or autonomous actors, but only "socially constructed worlds of fragmented cultural discourses, practices and fields of knowledge in which the possibilities for agency are fundamentally problematic" (Caldwell, 2006, p. 7).

If *Agency and Change* takes its critical lead from a 'discourse' paradigm, the discourses are in the background, and there is no prospect of synthesis. What really frames the work is the journey it takes; it begins with an analytical overview of Giddens' work, and ends with a critical reappraisal of Foucault. In Caldwell's view, Giddens deserves special consideration for bringing agency back into sociological theory, particularly following the abstract "structural-functional" legacy of Parsons' (1951) social systems theory. Parsons was the most

forceful advocate of “functionalism” as a model of modernity, society and organizations, and his ideas still resonate with rational and managerial views of organizations as entities, *systems with processes*, that give primacy to stability, rather than change. Against this vision, Caldwell (2006) quotes Giddens’ affirmation of agency: “It is analytical to the concept of agency: (a) that a person could have acted otherwise and (b) that the world as constituted by a stream of events-in-process independent of the agent does not hold out a predetermined future”(p. 19).

In Caldwell’s reading, Giddens’ "structuration" theory was an early attempt to re-theorize "structure" as process, and agency as the practiced-based enactment of change:

Using a micro-interpretative perspective influenced by phenomenology, symbolic interactions, and ethnomethodology, and with some highly selective philosophical borrowings from Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Giddens sought to dispatch the individual versus society dualism that had plagued classical sociological discourses of social action and social order. Structuration theory was a sustained attempt to establish the relationship between agency and structure as one of relational identity or synthetic ‘duality;’ by neither privileging agency nor structure, Giddens sought to reject ontological dualism. Structuration refers to the processes of producing–reproducing social relations across time and space, and this requires an ontological shift, an identification of agency with the practices of structuring, which creates new possibility of change.

In Caldwell's view, however, Giddens' move to a more process-oriented theory of structuration was never fully realized. Ultimately, Giddens' attempt to incorporate time, temporality, and change into sociological theory was only partly successful (Abbott, 2016).

Caldwell was also critical of Giddens' exploration of the relationship between agency and practice:

Agency, for Giddens, is not identified with individual rational action, but an ongoing process of "praxis." While praxis suggests an affinity with Marx's idea that practice proves the truth of knowledge, Giddens argues, following Heidegger, that "the notion of agency is logically prior to subject-object differentiation," because it is always embedded in practice. This does not mean that agency as a category of individual action is completely de-centered into social practices. Rather, agency is redefined as "knowledgeability," a form of "doing," or "practical consciousness," and as intentionality, as something involving purposeful action and reflexivity, that may have unintended consequences. In this way, Giddens appears to dissolve the dualism of agency and structure by collapsing "structure" as process, and structure as system into temporal processes of practice: 'In structuration theory structure has always to be conceived as a property of social systems, "carried" in reproduced practices embedded in time and space' (Giddens, 1984, p. 170). Reinforcing this idea of structure as process, actors can reproduce or transform structures, "remaking what is already made in the continuity of praxis" (1984, p. 171).

In Caldwell's view, this formulation is opaque; we are never sure where structure and agency begins and ends. Nor is it clear as to what Giddens really means by practice and process, or agency and change:

Practice is a mediation category between agency and structure. It partly replaces individual intentional action with practice, and it partly allows structure to become a process defined by the production and reproduction of social practices. But Giddens cannot tell us how agency enacts change through practice.

If Giddens' classic examination of agency and structure was the natural starting point for an exploration of agency and change, a broader theoretical rationale for this shift has to be justified. Caldwell argues that Giddens was overcritical of Foucault's "defacing" of agency. Instead of conventional ontological dualities between individual and society, agency and structure, Foucault shifted the focus towards the possibilities of *agency and change*, effectively dispensing with the liberal individualist conception of agency as a choice, an idea still very evident in Giddens' work. Giddens and many critics of Foucauldian organizational theory have argued that Foucault had no concept of agency because he allowed autonomous "discursive practices" to become "subjectless." Caldwell challenges this orthodoxy by arguing that Foucault's rejections of humanism, rationalism, and a coherent moral self was not the abandonment of the notion of agency: "Far from destroying intentional agency, decentered agency allows new possibilities for resistance and the dispersal of agency and change in organizations and societies. Foucault's apparent destruction of the 'subject' is not the postmodern end of agency but its partial reinvention (2006, p. 124)."

This original and unorthodox reading of Foucault undoubtedly influenced Caldwell's focus on agency and change. Nevertheless, he felt that there was something missing from Foucault's work; he did not adequately theorize "agency" in relation to practice by more fully incorporating discourse into practice: "Discourse is nominal and material, a self-referential representation of meaning and a transformative instrument: words and things are inseparable because they have effects in the 'real world' of human practices. Despite this notion of the embeddedness of discourse, Foucault tends to absorb practice as discursive practices into discourse (Caldwell, 2006, p. 127)."

Phase 2 - Thinking agency as practice Phase 1 had arrived at a conceptual dilemma: if Foucault made the crucial link between agency and change within "discursive practices," why had his work failed to theorize "practice?" Caldwell argued that Foucault had no need for "a theory of 'practice' or a concept of theory into practice, because discourse is practice: 'theory does not express, translate or serve to apply practice: it is practice' (cited by Caldwell 2006, p. 127)." In Caldwell's view, this reading of discourse as practice was flawed, and he began to re-examine Bourdieu's classic work on the 'logic of practice,' which was often unfairly critical of Foucault. Bourdieu's work has had an enormous influence on the recent resurgence of "practice theory" in organizational studies, but in Caldwell's judgment, the most important recent contributions in this area have emerged from the work of Theodore Schatzki, whom as Caldwell notes, shares Bourdieu's deep ambivalence towards Foucault: "practice theorists do not like the theoretical connotations of 'discourse' because it suggests that 'saying' takes priority over 'doing.'"

In *Reclaiming Agency, Recovering Change? An Exploration of the Practice Theory of Theodore Schatzki* (Caldwell, 2012b), Caldwell begins to outline his thinking on "agency as

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practice.” Schatzki’s work returns to a central question of classical sociological theory: how do we theorize practices in relation to agency and change? If practices are primarily routine, habitual and normative events that happen, rather than purposeful actions, then how do they change over time? As Caldwell notes, this question has perplexed social theorists from Weber through to Bourdieu and Giddens, and it provides a unifying thematic in his own work.

In Caldwell’s view, Schatzki is “a central interlocutor in current debates,” because he provides new insights into the major intellectual influences on practice theory, most notably, the philosophical writings of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and the social theories of practice proposed by Bourdieu and Giddens. Caldwell also suggests that Schatzki’s (2002, 2010) attempt to conceive agency as “doing” and his “general proposition ‘that change comes about through agency’ raises fundamental questions of how agency and change can be theorized within the intellectual genealogy of practice theory” (2012b, p. 283). To address these questions, Caldwell’s article examines the differences between traditional action theories of rationality and the broader teleological perspective of Schatzki’s Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian analysis of “practical intelligibility,” rule-following, and the organization of practice, as well as his critique of Bourdieu and Giddens’ opposing concepts of agency and practice. Overall, Caldwell is sympathetic to Schatzki’s work, but highlights some key issues. He believes that Schatzki’s notion of ‘general understanding’ is one of the most opaque and poorly defined concepts in his discussion of what holds social practices together, and this is replicated by the neglected treatment of politics and power. While he shares Schatzki’s goal to break the links between reflexivity and intentional action by placing practices as temporal events ontologically prior to action and structure, he argues that this requires an explanation of how agency and change can be reconnected in a realistic social ontology of practice. Caldwell also detects traces of “ontological dualism” in Schatzki’s distinction between

practices and orders, and he is uncomfortable with the absence of a link between practice and learning (2012b, p. 292). Finally, Caldwell forcefully argues that “what is missing from Schatzki’s neo-Heideggerian ontology of practice is not only a notion of theoretical intelligibility, of practical knowledge and knowing that includes rational, cognitive or representational principles of shared understanding, but also an exploration of the power of language and discourse to redefine the possibilities of self, subjectivity, and agency” (p. 298). Caldwell, who had always been sympathetic to Richard Rorty’s almost Foucauldian version of pragmatism, was never going to accept Schatzki’s radical downgrading of the “power of language” to define who or what we are. Rorty may have underplayed the unreflective understandings of practice and agency, but he knew that the aim of philosophy and social theory is to “keep the conversation going” with the realisation that “human beings are creators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately” (Rorty, 1979, p. 378).

In Caldwell’s view, Schatzki’s work underplays the important critical legacy of pragmatism in framing his practice theory. He also does not engage with the legacy of process thinking that derives from Whitehead, and it is from this viewpoint that Caldwell takes issue with Schatzki’s limited exploration of materiality and nonhuman agency:

The idea of agency as doing, as a form of practice, has always been corrosive of philosophies of action and intentionality. But who acts, what acts, becomes even more problematic when the non-human and the material is included in the exploration of human agency. Schatzki attempts to overcome the post-humanist distrust the human derives from his fear that it will dissolve human agency into ‘the actions of nonhuman entities’ (2002, p. 201). However, his search for a

halfway house between humanism and post-humanism that includes human and non-human agency amounts to a weak defense against naturalism, rather than a reaffirmation of human agency.

Phase 3 – Change as process Whilst the idea of exploring change as “process” or “becoming” was an important theme of *Agency and Change* (Caldwell, 2006, p. 163), it was only really explored in depth when Caldwell engaged with Whitehead’s work over the last few years. At the time of writing this chapter, an article entitled *Thinking Agency and Change with Whitehead* is under review. This article is informed by an important and provocative attempt to separate thinking about “change” from the notion of “becoming,” while also radically extending how we think of human and non-human agency.

Whitehead’s process philosophy on thinking about organizations and change over the last decade has been significant in shifting the focus from stability to “continuous change,” from being to becoming:

All theories of organizational change have used some notion of ‘process’ in theorising how change happens, but recent Whitehead-inspired process perspectives on organizational change seek to mark a more radical shift in how process, change and agency are defined. Organizational change is not a stage, an outcome, or an episodic event in a ‘process’ of change defined against a background of stability or ordered organizational entities. Instead, change is the very condition of organizing. From this perspective, the idea that organizations as substantial or stable entities have primacy in understanding that change leads to a narrow definition of ‘process’ in terms of how entities, things, or events unfold

over time. From a process perspective, the world exists as flows, organizations are processes, not things, and 'reality' is in a ceaseless process of becoming.

Caldwell also draws attention to the implications of this reading of becoming:

The process perspective not only conceives organization as process, it conceives human agency as process. For Whitehead, the self cannot be separated into mind and body entities (Whitehead, 2010, p. 26). The self is not the negative self-image of 'nature;' a fixed substance or determinate entity. Nor is the self an entity defined or determined by 'social' structures 'out there' which imposed social behavior. Instead, the self becomes and subjects 'are' within processes of becoming. In other words, agency has to be conceived as a process, not as a set of fixed substances to be discovered in nature or as cognitive entity inside our heads. There is no unchanging nature, there is no unchanging self.

Caldwell argues, however, that theorizing agency and change in this way is highly problematic:

The status of subjectivity, self and agency as a conceptual domain has been a recurring concern in Whitehead research and scholarship, but this has rarely been examined in relation to 'change.' To explore becoming as a process is to explore the 'process of experience,' of how we as subjects experience the reality of the world and nature as process, yet paradoxically, becoming as process turns subjectivity and agency into process; there appear to be no enduring entities, objects or things within the world.

Caldwell also argues that Whitehead's process metaphysics has created immense difficulty in theorizing agency and change, partly because his work has been misunderstood: 'change' and 'becoming' are not the same for Whitehead, and to conflate them is very confusing:

Becoming cannot be defined as change because the most irreducible entities in Whitehead's process metaphysics of process are 'actual occasions' which do not change. Paradoxically, 'becoming' is an unending process, but we cannot identify 'change' with underlying conditions, stages or end-states, nor can we identify 'changing' with the actualization of some sort of potentiality within something--changing things, objects or entities. For Whitehead, the 'illusion of change' occurs in a world of space and time defined by substance metaphysics. Becoming is process, and so something that 'changes' has no intrinsic attributes, it perishes instantly into the immanence of becoming.

In Caldwell's re-reading of Whitehead, the notion of becoming is about how we experience the world as process: "The world becomes within the relational and unifying process of experiencing actual entities, they are the world, we are that world." Becoming, therefore, has to be identified with how we experience the world as process rather than abstract theoretical notions of 'change' in societies, organizations, or any other entities.

Key insights: Reflecting upon agency and change

This brief summary of the three key phases of Caldwell's work indicates that it is evolving and moving in new and uncharted directions. However, much of his currently influential work on "change agency" and changing HR roles is associated with phase 1, and so we may have to catch-up with the new work before he embarks on yet another phase. Certainly Caldwell's early agency and change writings were the most influential in illuminating my own thinking. The first edition of my textbook (Hughes, 2006) was published without any significant coverage of "change agency." Today, it feels like a glaring omission, but all I can say in mitigation was that I was not the only organizational change textbook author guilty of this omission. In the second edition (Hughes, 2010), I addressed the omission by including a chapter on change agents and agency, framed in terms of Caldwell's early writings. More recently, my organizational change interests have focused upon the leadership of organizational change (Hughes, 2015). I have recently questioned existing explanations of leading change, and instead, encourage a greater emphasis upon agency as part of a research-informed approach to leading change (Hughes, 2016). My research has also been influenced by Caldwell's (2003b) criticisms of change manager/change leader differentiations as either/or false dichotomies; we require a combination of change management and change leadership. Whilst management, and organization studies subsequently witnessed a shift from management towards leadership (Ford and Harding, 2007), there are reasons to believe that the organizational change - change leader versus change manager - dualism has been overplayed (Sutherland and Smith, 2013). I would finally like to acknowledge that Caldwell's HR writings, particularly Caldwell and Storey (2007), informed the writings of my chapter on the interface between HR and managing change (Hughes, 2010). Caldwell's interdisciplinary work built a bridge between two different yet related fields of study. In his

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view, 'HRM' is a strategic approach to managing change and strategy implementation that uses the instrumental processes, tools, and techniques of 'people-management' (e.g., recruiting, training, and monitoring employee performance) to achieve desired business performance outcomes. This meant that 'HRM' and 'change management' converge; they focus on ensuring that people have the capacity and motivation to adapt to change.

In reviewing Caldwell's early HR work, the twin themes of agency and change constantly surface, as does his sociological indebtedness to the work of Weber (Caldwell, 2001, 2003a). But despite the influence of Caldwell's HR-orientated work, he confided that "John Storey once described my HR work as 'a small tributary' rather than the main river." The HR work clearly needs to be understood as an outcome of Caldwell's broader sociological interests in organizational change. This is certainly evident in what is probably his most influential HR article (2003c, p. 948), which started with a broad sociological exploration of "changes in the nature of managerial work" and their profound and disconcerting impact on the roles of HR managers and other functional specialists. The article also examined HR professionals in Weberian terms as an aspiring "occupational status group" managing the tensions and ambiguities of role change, as well as coping with competing claims to occupational legitimacy in changing organizational contexts. This is a factor generic to all professions in their attempts to maintain autonomy or power through "jurisdictional claims" over the provision of specialist expertise, and in this way, the research echoed Abbott's (1988) classic sociological work on the professions.

The HR-orientated work undoubtedly enabled Caldwell to develop an international profile as an HR researcher with an increasing specialization focus on the organizational transformation of the HR function and the emergence of new, change agent, HR roles, including HR strategic

and leadership roles in the Boardroom. This work was often critical of the strategic ambitions of HR practitioners in implementing HRM, but what gave it considerable force was the rich empirical evidence base (Caldwell 2004, 2011). The following references demonstrate that this work is continuing to impact upon ongoing debates (Truss, 2008; Wright, 2008, Alfes et al, 2010; Wylie et al, 2014; Marchington, 2015). Wylie *et al* (2014) in their exploration of change agency in an occupational context, provides an excellent summary of Caldwell's HR work which helps to reposition it within the context of a recurrent, and some would argue unsuccessful, attempt by HR professionals to "overcome occupational insecurity by establishing a strategically significant role within organizations" (p. 95). They also argue, following Caldwell (2003c), that "change agency is better seen as replaying rather than resolving the ambiguity of HRM's role and identity in organisations" (p. 95). Similarly, Gerpott (2015) revisits the legacy of role conflict, but gives it a new twist by categorizing the "contradictory HRM demands into tensions of (1) identity, (2) learning, (3) performing and (4) organizing," and he argues that the "implementation of the business partner model resolves these tensions in the short-term by addressing the opposing forces separately. Yet, these resolution strategies are not sustainable and threaten the long-term impact of HRM" (p. 214). This position echoes the concerns expressed by Caldwell (2003c, 2008) regarding the long-term future of Ulrich-style HR roles and the move towards a more strategic HR function.

Over the last few years, a shift away from the early HR-orientated work is clearly evident when reviewing Caldwell's recent work. I learnt that this arose from a combination of factors: the fall-out from the financial crisis of 2007-08 which, in his view, "shredded the resource-based theory of the firm;" a growing sense of disappointment with the efficacy of HR competency frameworks; and the increasing challenges to HR in performing a strategic role while affirming its role as an employee champion (Caldwell, 2008). All of these factors, as

well as others, are discussed further in Marchington (2015), who argues that HR has become obsessed by its strategic business contribution, with the result that it has lost its connection to a more inclusive, ethical vision of employee engagement and progressive HR practices: “Unless HRM reasserts its independence, it is likely to wither both in academic and practitioner circles” (Marchington, 2015, p. 176). Caldwell is perhaps a little more sanguine:

HR professionals are undoubtedly masters of role reinvention. But they did not live-up to the promise of change agency or their role as employee champions. We need to focus less on the rhetoric of what they say and more of what they do. The future of HR research should be focused on the ethnography of practice.

Caldwell’s early writings on “change agency” also continue to influence the field of organizational change studies, and this is illustrated through citations taken from the past decade. His influential article on ‘*Models of change agency*’ (2003a) was important in breaking the hold of expert-centered models of the change agent, by opening a debate on distributed or dispersed models of change agency. These ideas have been developed by Buchanan et al (2007) in their study of “distributive change agency” and Charles and Dawson (2011) in their account of change agency and the improvisation of strategies. Caldwell’s (2003a, 2008) consistent criticisms of competency-based notions of change agent roles was also a precursor to the increasing focus on practice approaches to leadership and change management (Carroll et al, 2008). Raelin and Cataldo (2011) have recently developed these ideas in their account of middle management in the context of organizational change, and Raelin’s (forthcoming) account of reframing “leadership-as-practice” draws directly on Caldwell’s work. Caldwell’s pioneering exploration of Foucault is also replayed by Cummings et al (2016) in their recently published rethinking of Kurt Lewin’s legacy for

change management. Like Caldwell they use Foucault to analyze the “canonization” of Lewin’s legacy as the originator of the belief in planned change as a linear process, facilitated by change agents (Caldwell, 2005, 2006). For Cummings et al (2016), Foucault offers new possibilities for a “counter-history” that enables us to think differently about the history of organizational change.

In briefly revisiting Caldwell’s early work, a theme of locating/repositioning managers, leaders and HR practitioners is apparent in terms of their competing claims to power and knowledge, expertise and strategic influence. Essentially there appear to be four recurring categories of agency in Caldwell’s early work: change leaders, change managers, change consultants, and change teams. Even though this distributed model has been influential, Caldwell, true to his own critical spirit, has questioned its utility. It originally emerged as a useful, analytical framework for *Agency and Change*, and Caldwell wrote a draft of the whole book following these categories, but decided to consign the manuscript to the dustbin after submitting it to the publisher.

I was never happy with the framework and the publisher was surprised when I then proposed to send them a completely new book, which thankfully they agreed to publish as a ‘monograph.’ However, some of the original material did resurface. I wrote a very long chapter on Senge for the aborted first book which I later turned into two articles. Similarly, my article (2009) on middle managers as change agents was an updated version of a chapter in the original version of the book that never appeared.

Caldwell has taken our thinking about “distributed change agency” in new directions, but this focus now appears to have been overtaken by new challenges:

The era of the change agent as expert, of purely instrumental knowledge and leader-centric change management is over. We need forms of distributed learning that extend into the deepest reaches of organization and embed us in the world. We need human agency that allows us all to practice our capacity to learn and to be part of the human and not so human world we inhabit. If I had one wish, it would be to define an ecological conception of agency that by its very definition would change how we see the world and how we seek to change it.

Legacies and new directions – A process-in-practice perspective

Caldwell’s inquisitiveness and interest in how philosophy and social theories can help or seriously rethink organizational change shows no signs of abating, and his mature work has grown in its theoretical ambitions. In this concluding section, two themes are explored in terms of Caldwell’s recent attempts to reconcile process and practice thinking about agency and change, which I suspect will become phase 4 of his work. As with most of Caldwell’s writing, it reflects an evolution in thinking, rather than a break with previous ideas.

In *Agency and Change* Caldwell constantly returned to the issue of how change as ‘process’ and ‘organization’ as an entity or system that changes could be reconciled. One solution intimated in the book, but never fully explored, was to turn ‘structure’ into process and

theorize agency as practice. Caldwell now seems to have gone down this path by seeking to find a reconciliation between process perspectives and practice theory.

The problem with the process perspective is that it can diffuse any notion of agency; process thinking is better at thinking change while practice theory is better at reclaiming agency—and both seriously underplay Whitehead’s radical injunction to distribute agency to the non-human; it is not just about ‘social’ actions or interacting human agents.

For Caldwell, the call for a process metaphysics of “becoming” in organizational change theory is an attempt to overthrow “being” by a metaphysical reversal: there is only becoming. In his view, this project marks a shift from epistemology towards ontology: “knowledge as substance and organization as entity are replaced by knowing as process and organization as organizing.” This is clearly not envisaged as a “relatively minor alteration in ontological emphasis;” a weak program designed to enable the process perspective to open-up new research horizons. Nor is it positioned as a corrective exercise in overcoming the disjunctions in which epistemology and ontology ‘drift’ out of alignment with the result that “entities are discussed as if they were processes and processes discussed as if they were entities” (Thompson, 2011, p. 757). The overall intent is not to maintain or manage a territorial coexistence between entity and process thinking: substance and being are to be replaced by process and becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002, 2011).

Caldwell is clearly perplexed by this ontological divide:

Is there any possibility of reconciliation between entity and process thinking in organizational change theory? Being as 'substance' appears to reject becoming, while becoming as 'process' denies being or relegates it to the outcome of process. Being tends to be conceived as static present-oriented and representational, while becoming is associated with change, potentiality, anti-representational thinking and the future. These ontological positions seem irreconcilable -or are they?

In answering this question, Caldwell believes that the legacies of Heidegger and Whitehead are central to the choice posed between an event-ontology of practice and a process-ontology of becoming:

They both seek to escape from substance metaphysics, from any ontological commitment to a permanent, unchanging and unitary world of Being. Being conceived as 'substance' appears to deny becoming. But for Heidegger, Being-in-the-world includes becoming within being; change within stability, process within practice. In contrast, Whitehead appears to argue that stability is an illusion, time is relational, being is becoming. Whitehead's ontology of process resolves subject and object, the human and nonhuman into the indivisible relationality of all entities as they become; there is no search for Heidegger's disclosure of Being-in-the-world, or 'being for us.' Being is not a fixed entity out there; it is always the immanent and timeless repetition of becoming that creates something always different, something always new.

In Caldwell's view, Heidegger's work inspired Schatzki's (2011) more realist "event-ontology" of organizing, which favors "neither fluidity over stability nor stability over

development” (p. 12). Instead, change happens as practices of doings, sayings, and other events in “any given swath of space-time;” as such, it always occurs as a “mix of change, stability, fluidity, and continuity” (Schatzki, 2011, p. 12). In contrast, Tsoukas and Chia (2002, 2011) appear as the natural inheritors of a Whiteheadian process philosophy; becoming and change constitute reality, organization is the outcome of change and the process of organizing.

Practice and process theories of organizations do, of course, share many ontological affinities.

Caldwell lists many of them:

They are less concerned with a substantive or entitative views of organizations, and more interested in organizing, changing, and becoming; they prefer a flat ontology without hierarchical concepts of scale, order or structure; they subsume epistemological questions of knowledge into ontological categories of practice and process; they prefer a bottom-up micro-focus on organizing; they appear to reject representational thinking and naive epistemological realism; they seek to steer away from post-modernist or hyper-modernist theories as well as the grand narratives of western modernity and the debilitating legacy of constructionism; they are anti-structuralist, anti-positivist, but not anti-humanist; they are opposed to the idea that theory defines practice - practice is theory, process is practice.”

Crucially for Caldwell, they seek to treat agency in a new manner; rather than a focus on individual actors, subjectivity, or the outmoded agency-structure dichotomy, human agency is distributed and dispersed within processes of becoming or is ‘carried’ within social practices.

There are, however, in Caldwell's view, major differences between a more realist event ontology of practice, in which change and stability coexist within practices as happenings or doings that are indeterminate until they occur, and a process ontology of 'organizational becoming,' as a continuous process of organizing and changing that is immanent within process (Schatzki, 2010). In one case, change and stability are ontologically located in the reality of "social" practices, while in the other case, change or process are treated as ontologically prior to order, stability, or the idea of organization as an entity.

This ontological difference, Caldwell maintains, partly explains why process research is somewhat ambivalent in how it theorizes 'practice' and change:

Becoming is primarily concerned with unpredictable event-like 'processes,' not the repetitive continuity of practices. To suggest that the 'doings' or practices of individuals or organizations as entities might define how change happens appears to be a return to the notion that things or entities are substances that change. There is no substratum or representation substance by which we can define 'organizations' or 'individuals.' But if 'change' is the 'condition of possibility of organization,' this raises important questions of how practices within processes unfold and how they can be carried within processes that are both constantly changing and stable. From the practice perspective, organization and organizing are modes of 'practice,' so continuity and change are coexistent or co-emergent. In contrast, Whiteheadian process perspectives do not derive from a social ontology, so they do not define how 'change' emerges within the vital and indivisible process of becoming--there is only the 'becoming of continuity.'

Caldwell insists that these important differences need to be addressed:

The alternative is to become locked into the self-contractions of becoming as a 'process' ontology of 'change' that radically rejects the representational thinking of substance metaphysics and sociological realism, but still treats organizations as relatively stabilized representational entities that are the outcome of organizing. By comparing and contrasting process and the practice theories of change, it may be possible to establish where they are mutually reinforcing and fundamentally incompatible.

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In terms of further reading, my own personal recommendation would be to start with *Agency and Change* (Caldwell, 2006). It is a difficult read, but it brings together Caldwell's passions about the value of philosophy and social theory in critically advancing organizational change theory, and it is bursting with research questions. If, however, one wants to explore the three phases of Caldwell's work, then his separate articles on Foucault, Schatzki and Whitehead are useful signposts (2007, 2012, forthcoming 2018). Finally, two insightful articles on Senge published in 2012 are also worth highlighting, because they cover an aspect of Caldwell's work on 'system thinking' which preoccupied him in *Agency and Change*, and which I suspect may reappear, given his long-standing interest in complexity theory as a theory which allows for self-organizing disequilibrium and system change, simultaneously (Caldwell, 2006, p. 99).

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