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Citation for published version:

Amis, J & Greenwood, R 2020, 'Organisational change in a (post-) pandemic world: Rediscovering interests and values', *Journal of Management Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12663>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/joms.12663](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12663)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Management Studies

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Organisational Change in a (Post-) Pandemic World: Rediscovering Interests and Values

John M. Amis^a and Royston Greenwood^{a,b}

^a*University of Edinburgh*; ^b*University of Alberta*

Keywords: COVID-19, interests, organisation change, pandemic, values

Faced with the existential threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations have been forced, almost universally, into programmes of rapid and radical transformation. In many cases, this has caused a significant rethink in how work should be carried out; in virtually all cases, there will be further major changes ahead for those organisations that survive. In this essay, we consider the implications of the pandemic for the study of organisational change and argue for a shift in the role of interests and values from the periphery to a more central position in our theoretical and practical change management models.

Interests, Values and Change

The forced changes that have seen massive dislocation of workforces, disrupted supply chains and large-scale unemployment, have resulted in a shift in how many people see and value work. What has also become starkly apparent is that the structures of advantage and disadvantage that characterise organisations (Amis et al., 2020) have become more pronounced during the pandemic (Bapuji et al., 2020). Of course, we can argue with justification that it was forever thus with those in power contouring organisation structures and processes to best suit their interests. What is different now, however, is the broader societal shift in questioning of whose interests *should* matter and the consequences of that for enacting organisational change.

The role of interests in organisational change was formalised by Hinings and Greenwood (1988, p. 54) as ‘a motivation to enhance or defend a particular distribution

Address for reprints: John M. Amis, University of Edinburgh Business School, 29 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9JS, UK (John.Amis@ed.ac.uk).

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of organisational resources'. In this and subsequent research, interests were primarily defined in terms of what mattered for subunits and occupations rather than individuals. Dissatisfaction with resource allocation – interests – was seen as a precipitating driver for change. This stream of work also showed how interests are inherently linked to values and the use of power, and how it is those most privileged in the current system whose interests will be satisfied.

Despite the demonstrated centrality of interests to change outcomes, explicit investigation has been notably under-represented in the academic change literature. While research elsewhere, such as by critical theorists, has developed insights into structures of oppression and inequities of power, the lack of systematic integration of such work into theories of change has largely limited consideration of interests to those of often vaguely defined 'stakeholders'.

The lack of attention to interests has been mirrored by a corresponding reluctance to consider the role of values. Selznick's classic work on the Tennessee Valley Authority placed a central importance on the role of values, but this again has been lost to much of the modern organisation scholarship. Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., Gehman et al., 2013; Kraatz et al., 2010; Oreg and Berson, 2011), values have either been ignored or conflated with and subsumed by organisation culture. Yet, values are immensely consequential to understanding how organisations change and the speed at which they will do so (Amis et al., 2002). This is not just an abstract academic exercise: providing a central role to values is critical to understanding how organisations will be able to change in response to, and more fundamentally, to address, our most significant societal issues, such as climate change, species extinction, inequality, and health crises, notably of course the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations and the values that guide them – such as prioritising shareholder return over environmental degradation – are centrally implicated in the manifestation of these 'grand challenges' and will be equally important in driving the organisation changes that will be required to rectify them. On a more local scale, decisions pertaining to fairness and equity, health and safety, markets and marketing, and corporate malfeasance are similarly value-led.

As we intimate above, while values and interests have been side-lined in recent scholarship, this has not always been the case. Towering figures such as Blau, Gouldner, March, Perrow, Simon and, of course, Selznick, demonstrated the importance of these ideas (see, e.g., Hinings and Meyer, 2018). The pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of considering whose interests matter and what values should be foregrounded. Not only are employees, local residents, and other stakeholders now acutely aware of how organisations have been structured to advantage some groups over others, it is also apparent that what many people value has fundamentally shifted. This is something that will have to be accommodated as organisations seek to cope with and emerge from the pandemic.

For example, organisations have, in many cases, become increasingly polarised between groups of well-paid knowledge workers and managers who are able to work from home, and lower paid front-line staff who are often in positions that require them to go in to work. It is also these lower paid workers who are disproportionately losing their jobs. Thus, there is recognition that many of the poorest paid in our society are doing the riskiest work while those with greater seniority, and remuneration, remain protected at home or in their socially distanced offices.

Further, those who are less well-off and are having to work from home often do so in more difficult circumstances than their wealthier counterparts. This may entail working from bedrooms or kitchen tables with sub-optimal technology while living in denser housing developments. Also apparent is that women, already disadvantaged in the workplace, have taken on a disproportionate responsibility for childcare and home-schooling during the pandemic. This can lead to increased levels of stress and lower productivity than their male counterparts, which in turn may further damage their career prospects. In other words, the pandemic has not only widened organisation-based disparities, it has also revealed the structural nature of inequality in stark ways that are harder to ignore.

What is also apparent is that the pandemic has altered what people expect from their places of work. The difficulty is that these shifts in expectations are not homogeneous. For example, many commuters now working from home have welcomed the increased time available to spend with family members (e.g., McCurry, 2020). Others, who have their main social interactions and friendships through work, have reported suffering from isolation and mental health issues. Thus, while some may want to maintain a reduction in the time spent in the office, others will be anxious to get back. Further, those with no choice but to go into work will have become more attuned to the differentiation in working conditions, health risks, opportunities for advancement, and remuneration.

Change Implementation

These considerations point, among other things, to the emerging recognition of the need to rethink how organisations are designed. It is our contention that the shifts in practices and experiences caused by the pandemic, and the subsequent re-evaluation of 'what matters', will lead to the need for new organisational designs, or at least a reimagining of how existing designs will work most optimally. This opens up important new lines of scholarship, not only in terms of understanding the orchestration of revised designs and associated ways of operating but also to understand if and how the inequalities that have been deepened during the pandemic can be reversed.

The changes associated with the pandemic are not being implemented in a vacuum but rather in an environment that has become widely sensitised to inequity of treatment and opportunity. For example, the #MeToo movement has led to fundamental change in organisations ranging from Hollywood film studios to the British Broadcasting Corporation. The Black Lives Matter and similar campaigns have led, among other things, to changes in hiring practices, the renaming of buildings, and the decolonialisation of university and high school curricula. More parochially, Google was forced into policy changes following employee activism against sexual harassment in and the development of drone technology by the firm. These movements and the changes that they have driven have spotlighted attention not just upon specific inequalities and illegalities, but also to the means by which individuals can mobilise organisation members, and others, to greater alignment with subordinated interests and values. It seems inevitable that failure to recognise this paradigm shift will threaten pandemic-driven change initiatives.

Conclusion & Future Directions

The complexity of implementing change in a COVID context should not be downplayed. The opacity regarding the timing, availability and effectiveness of treatments and vaccines, the severity and duration of economic downturns, and the implementation and relaxation of lockdown and social distancing rules has intensified the ambiguity usually associated with change processes. While change is rarely linear, the oscillations, reversals and fluctuations in pacing and sequencing that usually characterise change (Amis et al., 2004) will be more pronounced than ever as organisation leaders contend with exacerbated levels of uncertainty. With such significant external pressure, values and interests may seem insignificant or too difficult to accommodate, but the consequences of disregarding them will be potentially grave for those seeking to implement or fully understand how change takes place.

The ideas developed here lead to multiple avenues for change research. At a general level, we think there are opportunities to bring insights from other disciplines into how values and interests can better inform our theories of change. Along with this, there are three sets of questions that strike us as particularly important. We have argued that changes are likely to be driven, or at least influenced, by the surfacing of interests and values previously suppressed or subordinated. It follows that a central question that needs pursuing is whether such change actually happens, and how it does so. To the extent that it does not, how are the pressures for change resisted? What, in other words, are the change mechanisms that result in the realigning of interests and values, as compared to the processes that deny such change? A second set of questions focuses upon the possible emergence of new organisational designs. Will these new arrangements become the norm and, if so, how will this affect the design and functioning of organisations? Further, how will pace, sequence, linearity and other dynamics influence change implementation? A third set of questions turns from what we study, to *how* we study. The questions raised in this essay likely will need researchers to get ‘inside’ organisations, but doing so in a time of social distancing will require the development of innovative approaches to data collection and analyses.

Organisations are grappling with how to implement radical changes to respond to their new operating contexts. For scholars, this brings an opportunity to more fully understand the links between values, interests and the dynamics and outcomes of radical change. It is a moment not to let pass.

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