

Blurred lines: resistance from a convention perspective in complex organizational settings

*Abstract submitted to the 9th Organization Studies Summer Workshop and Special Issue
Resistance, resisting, and resisters in and around organizations*

Widar von Arx
Lucerne School of Business, Switzerland
widar.vonarx@hslu.ch

Nada Endrissat
Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland
Nada.endrissat@bfh.ch

Resistance in organizations is a topic of sustained interest. Whether it is seen as everyday or epic, as productive or deviant, as individual or collective phenomenon, scholars usually agree that acts of resistance are meaningful to the actors and in line with their personal values and beliefs (Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Courpasson, Dany & Clegg, 2012; Ford et al., 2008). Much of the early work has built on labour process theory, focusing on the struggles of shopfloor workers to negotiate better working conditions. Other studies highlight the discursive practices of resistance by looking at how employees sustain valued identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1998), craft new identities (Thomas & Davies, 2005) or employ strategies of distancing to resist control of identity (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Recently, the attention has shifted towards more ‘productive’ forms of resistance where employees influence managerial decision making in the best interest of the organization (Courpasson et al., 2012, see also Ford et al. 2008). While all of these studies illustrate important facets of resistance, we believe that there is potential for further exploration of the dynamics of resistance, particularly in complex organizational settings where power and control are diffuse and objectives multiple.

We offer a perspective on understanding resistance and strategic change by drawing from the notion of convention as summarized by Gomez and Jones (2000). Conventionalist theory has recently spurred attention particularly in the context of strategizing and institutional work (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2007; Cloutier & Langley, 2013; Dansou & Langley, 2012). The notion of convention is interesting because it provides a (social-cognitive) framework for understanding the role ‘hidden knowledge’ plays for resistance. Conventions are non-justified beliefs that reduce uncertainty and provide the basis for decision-making due to their taken-for-granted nature. These ‘rational voids’ give “meaning to individual choices by proposing criteria for rationalization which need no justification in themselves” (Gomez & Jones, 2000: 698). These non-justified beliefs are surrounded by a protective belt of signs that represent symbolic meaning which exists and can be addressed explicitly.

The important implication of studying resistance from a convention perspective is that resistance can take place on two different ‘levels’ or ‘scenes’: on the scene where people know what they are fighting for (the explicit, protective belt scene) and the scene where knowledge is ‘hidden’ and ‘non-justified’ (the rational void scene); this is where the lines are blurred and resistance takes on a different quality than has previously been discussed.

To make our argument we draw from a longitudinal in-depth case study of strategic change in a large University hospital in Switzerland. Our initial research interest lay in understanding the dynamics of large scale change in pluralistic settings, where the existence of loosely coupled professional systems (Weick, 1976) are characterized by knowledge-based work, professional autonomy, diffuse power, and multiplicity of objectives (Denis et al., 2007).

We contribute to knowledge by outlining the different trajectories and practices that resistance can take, depending on whether it refers to change in the protective belt or to change in the rational void:

Changes in the protective belt

Within the protective belt, we typically see first order change driven by adherence to the existing paradigm (Lakatos, 1975; Kuhn, 2012). The subject of the change as well as resistance against it is *obvious*. Different interests and ideologies within the organization lead to different perceptions, but the arguments for change are empirical, such as adverse cost-benefit ratios or the improvement of customer-friendly processes.

Here, the mechanism of change and resistance is usually *power*. The front between the “pros” and the “cons” runs along typical lines like hierarchy, departments or professional communities. Depending on their different negotiating power, people can be *forced* to accept the change. Typical practices involve rational managerial tools like benchmark or SWOT analysis, power practices like shifting resource allocation or establishing time pressure.

Changes affecting the rational void

Changes affecting the rational void imply a second order change (Bartunek & Moch, 1987), whose cultural importance is often, however, neither intended nor recognized by the management. These changes affect prioritization rules between competing organizational requirements, rules of development (e.g. the tradition of ongoing specialization in medicine), the definition of power rights and relationships between the professionals. The mechanism of resistance against this kind of change resembles a latent and underlying, *non-justified process without conscious representation of a final state*. Because the competing rational voids are “incommensurable”, it is difficult to compare the two approaches based on rational arguments (Kuhn, 2012) instead they are compared on the basis of *attractiveness*, i.e. to which extent they are able *to reduce uncertainty*. Members of the community cannot be forced to follow, but need to commit themselves to one of the alternatives. A change in the rational void therefore necessarily involves *persuasion* or a *conversion*. Typical practices include routines which issues are open for problematization, rules how careers are developed, standards of quality criteria and ways of network creation.

We specify and discuss the resistance practices and trajectories and provide implications for the management of change in protective belts and rational voids.

References

- Ashforth, B.E. & Mael, F.A. (1998). The power of resistance. Sustaining valued identities. In: R.M. Kramer & M.A. Neale (Eds.), *Power and influence in organizations* (pp. 89-119). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Bartunek, J. M., & Moch, M. K. (1987). First-order, second-order, and third-order change and organization development interventions: A cognitive approach. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 23(4), 483-500.
- Cloutier, C. & Langley, A. (2013) The logic of institutional logics: Insights from French pragmatist sociology. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 22(4): 360-380.
- Courpasson, D., Dany, F. & Clegg, S. (2012). Resisters at work: generating productive resistance in the workplace. *Organization Science*, 23 (3),
- Dansou, K. & Langley, A. (2012) Institutional work and the notion of test, *M@n@gement*, 15(5): 502-527.
- Denis, J.-L., Langley, A., & Rouleau, L. (2007) Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames. *Human Relations*, 60 (1): 179-215
- Fleming, P., A. Spicer. (2003). Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity and resistance. *Organization* 10(1) 157–179.
- Ford, J. D., L. W. Ford, A. D'Amelio. (2008). Resistance to change: The rest of the story. *Acad. Management Rev.* 33(2) 362–378.
- Gomez, P.-Y. & Jones, B. C. (2000). Conventions: an interpretation of deep structure in organizations. *Organization Science*, 11(6): 696-708.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. (2012) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. University of Chicago Press.
- Lakatos, I. (1975). Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes. In *Can Theories be Refuted?* (pp. 205-259). Springer Netherlands.
- Thomas, R. & Davies, A. (2005). Theorizing the micro-politics of resistance: New public management and managerial identities in the UK public services. *Organization Studies*, 26(5): 683–706.
- Weick, K. E. (1976). Educational organizations as loosely coupled systems. *Administrative science quarterly*, 1-19.