POWER, SOCIAL INFLUENCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: THE ROLE OF NETWORK POSITION IN CHANGE IMPLEMENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational scholars have long recognized the political nature of the change process (Pettigrew, 1973; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). To implement planned organizational changes, i.e., premeditated interventions intended to modify organizational functioning (Lippitt, 1958), change agents need power and influence over other organizational members to overcome their potential resistance to change and persuade them to adopt new practices (Kanter, 1988; Van de Ven, 1986). Change implementation can thus be conceptualized as a power and influence process, in which power is the potential to obtain favorable outcomes in social relations as a result of asymmetric dependence on, or control of, valued resources (Emerson, 1972); and influence is the alteration of an attitude or behavior by one actor in response to another (Marsden & Friedkin, 1993). Whereas scholars have investigated the role of network position in knowledge acquisition and transfer (Hansen, 1999; Tsai, 2002), and the generation of new ideas (Burt, 2004), the impact of an actor's network position on her ability to affect change in the organization has not been systematically analyzed, with the exception of Ibarra (1993).

In this study, we provide a systematic treatment of the hitherto underspecified link between informal structural sources of power and influence, and organizational change. To that end, we identify properties of a change agent's social network that are especially germane to the acquisition of power and influence, and then specify mechanisms and boundary conditions through which these structural properties help to explain the success or failure of organizational changes initiated by actors occupying given positions in the organization's informal structure.

THEORY

Three structural features of a change agent's network in an organization have clear conceptual links to power and influence: prominence in the task-advice network, affective closeness to influential organizational actors, and the presence of structural holes in the change agent's network.

Prominence in the Task-Advice Network

An actor derives prominence from being the recipient, rather than the sender, of network contacts. The distinctive structural feature of this form of centrality is the exchange asymmetry that occurs whenever benefits received cannot be reciprocated (Blau, 1964). Those who are perceived as providing more help and advice than they receive tend to be held in higher esteem

than those who seek help more often than they provide (Homans, 1961), who may undermine their status and reputation as work partners (Flynn, 2003).

The disproportionate influence of actors occupying prominent positions in the task-advice network hinges on two related mechanisms. First, advice giving allows them to expose other actors to their attitudes, with repeated activation of persuasive arguments operating as a basic pathway to attitude formation (Weiss & Pasamanick, 1964). Second, prestige increases the legitimacy of their attitudes in the eyes of other organizational members (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986), enhancing their influence. We thus argue that, in work organizations, prestige in the task-advice network provides change agents' with a distinctive ability to change the attitudes and behaviors of other organizational participants (Marsden & Friedkin, 1993).

Hypothesis 1: A change agent's prestige in the organization's task-advice network increases the likelihood of successful change implementation.

Affective Closeness to Potential Resistors and Endorsers

The second structural feature of an actor's network with power and influence implications is the affective content of network ties. Network scholars have typically highlighted the informational benefits of strong affective bonds (Hansen, 1999). In the context of organizational change, however, the benefits of emotional closeness may not only be informational but also political. We posit that the affective content of network ties can serve as a basis for influencing potential endorsers or resistors of the change by leveraging the affective value that the relationship has in their eyes, thus relying on liking as an influence mechanism (Taylor, 1978).

Hypothesis 2a: Affective closeness to potential endorsers of the change initiative increases the likelihood of successful change implementation.

Hypothesis 2b: Affective closeness to potential resistors of the change initiative increases the likelihood of successful change implementation.

Although we expect the affective cooptation of either potential resistors or endorsers to facilitate organizational change, we also submit that the distinction between potential resistors and endorsers as targets of affective cooptation is theoretically significant. By definition, potential resistors and endorsers are organizational actors likely to hold, respectively, negative and positive attitudes toward the change. Psychological research has provided extensive documentation for the tendency of negative stimuli, whether objects, people or events, to induce stronger physiological, cognitive, affective and behavioral activity than positive or neutral stimuli (Taylor, 1991). To the extent that the asymmetrical effects of positive and negative events stimulate the opposition of resistors more than they motivate the support of endorsers, the affective cooptation of resistors may increase the likelihood of successful change implementation more than the affective cooptation of potential endorsers.

Hypothesis 3: Affective closeness to potential resistors of the change initiative increases the likelihood of successful change implementation more than affective closeness to potential endorsers.

Structural Holes and Divergence from the Institutional Status Quo

While a sizable body of work has documented the effects of bridging structural holes on a range of outcomes (Burt, 2005), including an actor's creativity (Burt, 2004) and adaptability to organizational change (Gargiulo & Benassi, 2000), the role of structural holes in change implementation has not been investigated directly. We argue that, in the context of change implementation, the effects of structural holes in the change agent's network are contingent on the extent to which the change initiative diverges from the institutional status quo in the field of activity. Changes that diverge from the institutional status quo are likely to elicit greater resistance from a greater number of organizational constituencies (Battilana, Leca, & Boxenbaum, 2009). In this context, the information and control benefits of structural autonomy take the form of structural *reach* and *tailoring*. Reach concerns the change agent's social contact with the variety of constituencies that the change project would affect, and information concerning the needs and wants of each of these constituencies, and how to best communicate to them how they would benefit from the project. Tailoring concerns the change agent's control over when and how to use this information to persuade diverse audiences to mobilize their resources in support of the change project. Being the only connection among otherwise disconnected others, the broker has the opportunity to tailor the use of information to each network contact and adjust his or her image according to each contact's preferences and requirements, while minimizing the risk that potential inconsistencies in how the change is presented and communicated would become apparent, delegitimizing the change agent.

Hypothesis 4: The more a change initiative diverges from the institutional status quo, the more structural holes in a change agent's network of contacts in the organization increase the likelihood of successful change implementation.

METHOD AND RESULTS

To test our model, we use data on 68 organizational change initiatives at the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom in 2004-2005. Our participants were the 68 clinical managers (i.e., actors with both clinical and managerial responsibilities) who initiated and implemented the change initiatives in our sample. The clinical managers worked in different organizations within the NHS. They had attended an executive education program conducted by a European business school. When applying for the program, applicants were asked to provide a description of a change project they would be required to begin to implement within their organization after attending the second week of the program.

The data collection process occurred over a period of 12 months. Data on the participants' demographics and professional trajectories were obtained from their curriculum vitae. Data on their social networks were collected during the first week of the executive program, when participants were asked to fill out an extensive survey concerning the content of their social network ties both in their organization and in the NHS. The participants started implementing their change project when they were back in their organizations after the second week of the program. After twelve months of project implementation, we administered a telephone survey to the participants to collect information about the outcome of the change projects that they implemented, focusing on the degree to which the change projects had been institutionalized in the organization. For each change project, we corroborated the information

provided by the change agents with data from phone interviews with two informants working in the same organization as the participants. Table 1 describes the measures of all variables.

Insert Table 1 about here

The results of OLS regressions predicting the degree of institutionalization of the change initiatives support all our predictions. The prominence of change agents in the organizational task-advice network and their closeness to members of the organization with the potential ability to derail the change significantly influenced the likelihood of successful change implementation. In addition, the presence of structural holes in the change agent's network enhanced the effective implementation of organizational changes that diverged from the institutional status quo. Jointly, these structural features of change agents' network position produced a 38-percent increase in the power of our model to predict the degree of institutionalization of the 68 planned organizational changes in our sample.

CONCLUSION

The notion that the structural position of change agents affects their ability to implement change in organizations is well established, but research on organizational change has been focused on the influence of change agents' position in the organization's formal structure at the expense of a consideration of the change agent's informal position in organizational networks. Our findings bring the networks of change agents at the forefront of research on organizational change. Paraphrasing Padgett and Ansell (1993), to understand change implementation "one must penetrate the veneer of formal structures, groups, and goals down to the relational substrata of peoples' actual lives." Rank and formal authority may well influence change processes in organizations, but the informal channels of influence change agents rely on to build coalitions, overcome resistance, and shift attitudes toward new ideas emerge from our research as essential elements of a comprehensive model of organizational change.

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Table 1. Measurement of dependence and independent variables

Variable	Measure
Degree of institutionalization of change	Average score from 3 survey items administered after one year of project implementation: (1) On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how far did you progress toward completing the change project, where 1 is defining the project for the clinical strategists program and 5 is institutionalizing the implemented change as part of standard practice in your organization; (2) In my view, the change is now part of the standard operating practice of the organization; (3) In my view, the change was not adopted in the organization (reverse coded). Cronbach's α = .60. Measure validated with interviews with two key informants per initiative coded by two independent raters, and with data from detailed case studies of 8 initiatives.
Prominence in task-advice network	Two items from network survey: (1) "During the past year, are there any individuals in your Primary Care Trust / Hospital Trust / Organization (delete as appropriate) from whom you regularly sought information and advice to accomplish your work? (Name up to 5 individuals)"; and (2) "During the past year, are there any individuals in your Primary Care Trust / Hospital Trust / Organization (delete as appropriate) who regularly came to you for information and advice to accomplish their work? (Name up to 5 individuals). Some of these may be the same as those named before)." Prominence measured as the difference between the number of received advice ties and the number of sent advice ties.
Closeness to endorsers and resistors	Two items from network survey: (1) "For your change project, are there any individuals in your organization Primary Care Trust / Hospital Trust / Organization (delete as appropriate) whose <u>endorsement</u> of the project will significantly increase its chance of success?"; (2) "For your change project, are there any individuals in your PCT / Hospital Trust / Organization (delete as appropriate) whose <u>active resistance </u>to the implementation of the project can derail it?" We calculated the mean level of affective closeness to these potential resistors and endorsers, respectively, based on the following survey item: "How close would you say you are with this person?" accompanied by the explanatory "(Note that "Especially close" refers to one of your closest personal contacts and that "Very distant" refers to the contacts with whom you do not enjoy spending time, that is, the contacts with whom you spend time only when it is absolutely necessary). Participants answered this question using a 7- point scale ranging from "especially close" to "very distant," with 4 as the neutral point "neither close nor distant."
Structural holes	Burt's (1992) constraint measure. Alter-to-alter contacts were measured with a survey item asking respondents to indicate how much two alters knew each other, using a three-point scale, with 1 indicating "not at all", 2 "somewhat" and 3 "very well."
Divergence from Status Quo	Based on coding of change initiatives descriptions by two independent raters, we used Battilana's (2007) measure of (1) the degree to which

	change projects diverged from the institutionalized model of professionals' role division, and (2) the degree to which change projects diverged from the institutionalized model of organizations' role division.