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PERSONALITY, AFFECT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Published studies of the relationships between personality, affect and organizational change have been overwhelmingly quantitative while clinical and psychodynamic approaches have seldom been relevant to organizational change. We used semi-structured interviews to explore the 'middle ground', by researching how participants in change believed aspects of their personalities contributed to their responses, particularly on an affective level. Traits such as openness to experience, resilience, pragmatism, change self-efficacy and locus of control, influenced participants' perceptions of how they reacted to organizational change. The findings point to the important role qualitative research into personality can play in improving understanding of emotional responses to organizational change.

INTRODUCTION

Personality is one of the many factors that underlie people's cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to organizational change. Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) influential Affective Events Theory identifies disposition as a key element in responses to organizational events, such as changes. Organizational change can evoke emotions as staff assess positive and negative outcomes and the processes that deliver them (Fineman, 2003; Huy, 2002). Lay people often refer to people not wanting to move out their 'comfort zones' (Wanous, Reichers & Austin et al., 2000; Bareil, Savoie & Meunier, 2007) and the academic literature in various branches of psychology is replete with models of personality that include a reluctance or propensity for change (e.g. McCrae & Costa, 1987; Digman, 1990).

Extant empirical literature appears to be almost exclusively quantitative, as it is in other organizational applications of personality theory, or emerges from studies where

personality is not the main subject of investigation (e.g. Ablett & Jones, 2007). This chapter therefore seeks to break new ground in presenting the results of an exploratory qualitative study of personality, affect and organizational change. We begin by presenting and defining concepts in personality and affect, then examine how they influence reactions to organizational change. Given the extremely rare appearance of qualitative studies in this field we outline why we have used an idiographic approach and how it supplements other avenues of research. Thus our aim is not simply to document how personality affects responses to organizational change but more to investigate how people *believe* their own traits influenced their responses to specific changes. The limitations of our unique study are discussed together with future research directions.

PERSONALITY AND AFFECT

The literatures on emotion and personality provide intersecting constructs and authors in both fields have pointed out that there is a vast array of competing definitions (e.g. Russell, 1980; Hofstee, 1994).

Affect is an overarching term for emotions, moods and temperament (Frijda, 1993; Weiss, 2002; Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Fisher, 2002). Emotions can be seen “primarily as intrapersonal states, such as feelings, states of arousal, or activation of certain motor patterns” (Frijda, 2000, p. 61) and are triggered by specific stimuli (Lazarus, 1991). Mood is more diffuse in nature, less intense, longer in duration and not necessarily derived from a specific event or stimulus (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Mood can be state, which is brought about by an event or series of interactions, or trait, which is derived from personality, and the latter can influence the former (Meyer & Shack, 1989; Plutchik, 1995; Barsade, Brief & Spataro, 2003). Temperament is concerned with one’s nature and has a stronger biological basis (Bates, 2000). There are distinctly different conceptual approaches to the study of emotion and

related terms, such as the evolutionary (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000), cognitive (Lazarus, 1991), neurophysiological (Feldman Barrett, Mequita, Oschner & Gross, 2007), sociological (Craib, 1995) and psychodynamic (Gabriel, 1998) and most have to some extent embraced the study of personality. Dispositional affect can influence how people feel at any given moment and specifically when an incident or event takes place (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Fisher, 2002).

Personality, too, has been studied from a number of perspectives, which Leary (2005) lists as the psychodynamic, learning, humanistic, cognitive and biological. While concepts and definitions of personality, disposition and temperament, which are rich in emotional language, have been contested for decades (Hofstee, 1994), some researchers have used the terms interchangeably or have provided definitions that are very similar. The first concept, personality, has been defined as "the most important ways in which people differ in their enduring emotional, interpersonal, experiential and motivational styles" (McRae & John, 1992, p. 175) and a debate that has ensued for decades whether it is based on heredity or environment or both (House, Shane & Herold, 1996; Mullen, 2006). The second, dispositions, according to House et al. (1996, p. 205) are:

> psychological, as opposed to physical or other objectively assessed characteristics of individuals - personality characteristics, need states, attitudes, preferences and motives…Dispositions are generally viewed as tendencies to respond to situations, or classes of situations, in a particularly predetermined manner.

They claim that dispositions vary in temporal stability, whereas Eliasz (1994, p. 289) states that "Dispositions are exclusive determinants of given aspects of behaviour *across situations and over time"* [italics in the original]. The third construct, temperament, in the view of Allport (1937, p. 54):

> refers to the characteristic phenomena of an individual's emotional nature, including his susceptibility to emotional stimulation, his customary strength and speed of response, the quality of his prevailing mood, and all peculiarities of fluctuation and intensity of mood; these phenomena

being regarded as dependent on constitutional makeup and therefore largely hereditary in origin.

Temperament, is generally considered to have a much stronger biological or neurophysiological basis (Bates, 2000) and is therefore less amenable to change, but, as Eliasz (1990) has argued, it is not a fixed property and is to some extent subject to psychological and situational influences.

In research in organizational psychology little distinction is usually made between the various personality constructs. Of more concern in various branches of psychology (including the organizational) are the number and structure of personality traits. Whereas Cattell (1956) identified 16 separate traits, Eysenck (1991) listed three superordinate traits, extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, with all other traits subsumed under one of these headings. The most widely accepted model of personality is the Big Five (Digman, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987; McCrae & John, 1992) which includes all traits in one of five broad categories: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism.

The Big Five model has been used in various organizational applications, such as performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991), selection (Moy & Lam, 2004), emotional intelligence (Vakola, Tsaoussis & Nikolaou, 2004) and leadership (Judge, Bono, Ilies & Gerhardt, 2002). Notably, it has also been used to research organizational change (e.g. Vakola et al., 2004) and has focussed on isolating and testing relevant personality traits that influence individual responses.

Dispositional affect has been one of the cornerstones of emotions research for the last three decades, with various circumplex models identifying a range of moods that have two or three axes, with all having one for pleasantness/unpleasantness and one for what is variously termed intensity, arousal, engagement or activation (Watson & Tellegen, 1985; Larsen, Diener & Lucas, 2002; Russell & Feldman Barrett, 1999). The first two models also have axes for positive and negative affect. Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988, p. 1063) maintain

that trait positive and negative affect are dominant features of the study of affect and "roughly correspond" with the traits of extraversion and neuroticism in the models of Eysenck (1991) and the Big Five (Digman, 1990; McCrae & John, 1992). Positive affect is the propensity to feel "enthusiastic, active and alert" while negative affect is the dispositional tendency towards "anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, fear and nervousness" (Watson et al., 1988, p. 1063). Mood, both trait and state, and personality have been shown to contain similar structural elements (Meyer & Shack, 1989).

PERSONALITY, AFFECT AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The main research question that arises in this study is what role personality and its related constructs play in how people experience organizational change, and specifically its affective aspects. In particular, we seek to identify whether personality encourages people to drive, accept or resist change, which traits are particularly relevant, and most specifically, how individuals understand their own dispositional responses to organizational change. The last point is particularly important because if people understand how they are predisposed to respond to change they might develop appropriate coping mechanisms (Lazarus, 1993).

Our first point of departure is the Big Five model, given its widespread acceptance in personality research. After that we will identify a number of specific individual traits, contained within the Big Five, which have been found to be relevant to organizational change. One of the Big Five factors, openness to experience, is a concept that virtually defines adaptation to change (McRae, 1994) and Watson and Clark (1997) specifically identified a predilection for change in people with positive affectivity. From a conceptual standpoint the other four factors may also be relevant to organizational change. For example, people high in extraversion tend to make their views of change known and might gain useful influence; agreeableness and conscientiousness indicate that people will likely demonstrate goodwill in

accepting change and perform at their best in making it successful; and people high in neuroticism tend to experience anxiety and stress over change. The Big Five model has been tested empirically in the context of change by Vakola et al. (2004), who found positive correlations between acceptance of change and extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness, and a negative relationship with neuroticism. Brennan and Skarlicki (2004) found conscientiousness to be a contributing factor to the way survivors of downsizing continued to perform and Moon, Kamdar, Mayer and Takeuchi (2008) reported conscientiousness being related to taking charge, a construct which includes initiating change.

A number of empirical studies have focussed on other dispositional variables. In a study of managers, Judge, Thoresen, Pucik and Welbourne (1999) found seven personality factors predicted reactions to change, which they grouped into two main categories. Positive self-concept includes locus of control, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and positive affectivity, while risk tolerance includes openness to experience, tolerance of ambiguity and risk aversion. In particular, tolerance for ambiguity and positive affectivity were strongly correlated to self-reported ability to deal with change. Wanberg and Banas (2000) revealed that self-esteem, optimism and perceived control were related to acceptance of change. Avey, Wernsing and Luthans (2008) found that a combination of hope, efficacy, optimism and resilience led to positive emotions and support for change. A number of researchers have reported self-efficacy, and more specifically change-related self-efficacy, to be a significant variable (Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Jimmieson, Terry & Callan, 2004; Herold, Fedor & Caldwell, 2007; Holt, Armenakis, Feild & Harris, 2007; Rudisill & Edwards, 2002). Lau and Woodman (1995) found a significant relationship between locus of control and the formation of change schemata but little impact of dogmatism. In developing and testing a dispositional resistance to change scale, Oreg (2003, 2006) found four major relevant personality factors: need for routine, emotional responsiveness, short-term focus on outcomes and cognitive

rigidity. Cross-cultural studies have confirmed the validity of the scale (Oreg, Byast, Vakola, Arciniega, Armenakis, Barkauskiene, et al., 2008; Arciniega & González, 2009). Kruglanski, Pierro, Higgins and Capozza (2007) demonstrated that the need for closure and a predilection for locomotion (action) are additional personality traits that influence ability to cope with change. Rudisill and Edwards (2002) note that self-efficacy and locus of control play a part in determining how employees react to being laid off, but maintain that limited research has been done. Brennan and Skarlicki (2004) found that angry hostility moderated survivors' perceptions of the fairness of downsizing. Organizational justice perceptions have also been related to other aspects of personality, such as trust propensity, risk aversion, morality (Colquitt, Scott, Judge & Shaw, 2006) and locus of control (Lilly & Virick, 2006), but seldom in the context of change. Pragmatism, which is a hallmark of the Myers-Briggs model (Myers Briggs, Kirby & Myers et al., 1998), persuades people that they need to make the most of whatever occurs, but does not seem to have been empirically investigated in the context of change. Of the many traits listed by the researchers above, two in particular appear most frequently, locus of control and change self-efficacy.

Several others traits have attracted considerable research interest. For example, although not specifically mentioned in the Big Five, empathy was found to correlate with agreeableness by Del Barrio, Aluja and Garcia (2004). Empathy is considered to be a process by Carl Rogers (1975, p. 3), who defined it as "perceiving the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto." It has also been identified as an ability in some of the emotional intelligence literature (Kellett, Humphrey & Sleeth, 2002; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) and a trait in the personality literature (Munro, Bore & Powis, 2005; Del Barrio et al., 2004) and some of the emotional intelligence (EI) literature (Vakola et al., 2004; Van der Zee & Wabeke, 2004). Carney and Harrigan (2004, p. 194) caution that interpersonal sensitivity is an ability and is

ot the same as the trait of empathy - sensitive people may understand what emotions others are experiencing and why, but not “feel what they feel”.

Of particular relevance is the literature on dispositional cynicism which “results in anger, bitterness, resentment and manipulation” (Abraham, 2000, p. 271). Cynicism can be a trait that influences a person to view events in a negative light and construe the motives of those orchestrating them as self-serving and untrustworthy. Dispositional cynicism must be distinguished from organizational cynicism (Dean, Brandes & Dharwadkar, 1998) and management-related cynicism (Stanley, Meyer & Topolnytsky, 2005), both of which emerge from perceptions of injustice or the incompetence, laziness or lack of integrity of others (Wanous et al., 2000; Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). Cynicism is also different to scepticism, which is a cognitive evaluation of the likelihood of the success of a venture (Stanley et al., 2005). According to Wanous et al. (2000) people who have high negative affectivity are inclined towards cynicism.

Organizational change represents a specific context in which various types of cynicism can arise. Stanley et al. (2005) reported dispositional cynicism to be one of a number of cynicism constructs that played a role in resistance to change. Wanous et al. (2000) used an instrument that included dispositional cynicism towards change and concluded from their empirical study that cynicism was more of a learned response that a dispositional one. Oreg (2003, 2006) developed and tested a tool specifically for measuring dispositional cynicism as a source of resistance to change and found considerable evidence of this form of cynicism in several studies.

It should be emphasised that while personality can play a key role in adaptation to change other variables may be more influential for some people and for some types of change. For example a person who is high in neuroticism, and therefore possibly predisposed against change, is nevertheless likely to react somewhat positively to an organizational change that

lowers stress levels or delivers valued outcomes. Similarly, even those who show significant levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experience will probably resist a change that is clearly unfavourable and unjust (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Bareil et al., 2007). In one recent study Bareil et al. found dispositional discomfort with change to be the dominant factor in 23 per cent of their sample, with the balance primarily affected by situational factors, such as espoused reasons for change and perceived impact on workload, organizational effectiveness and customers. Kruglanski et al. (2007) found that organizational climate, specifically one geared to change, also played a significant role. Oreg (2006) reported on a range of non-dispositional variables within the individual and organization that contributed to responses to change, such as trust in management, job security and power.

Another relevant construct, emotional intelligence (EI), has been a controversial part of the debate on personality. Whereas Mayer and Salovey (1997) and their supporters (e.g. Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Jordan, 2005; Law, Wong & Song, 2004) have taken the position that EI is the *ability* to understand and manage emotion, the approaches of Goleman (1995) and Bar-On (1997) have included other concepts, such as personality. A third group of researchers (e.g. Van der Zee & Wabeke, 2004; Tett, Fox & Wang, 2005; Petrides & Furnham, 2003) consider trait EI to be a very different construct to ability EI. Trait EI, according to Tett et al. (2005), is a constellation of characteristics, categorized as self orientation, other orientation and emotional sharing, and which are not related to any Big Five dimensions or positive and negative affect.

The focus of employee disposition has mostly been on recipients or managers of change. When people initiate change themselves they will naturally be supportive of it since they have 'psychological ownership' of the change (Dirks, Cummings & Pierce, 1996). Thus even if people have a predilection to avoid or resist change, they may think, feel and behave differently when they conceive of and lead a change. According to Caldwell (2003) change

leaders are high in creativity, integrity, risk taking, adaptability and openness to new ideas. On the emotional front they tend to be excited, enthusiastic, passionate and hopeful about the change they are leading, but need to address the frustration, anxiety and disappointment that may accompany various stages (Huy, 2002; Day, 2004). Innovative people are characterized by "the desire for autonomy and social independence, a high tolerance of ambiguity in problem solving and a propensity for risk taking" (McAdam & McClelland, 2002, p. 88). Conscientiousness is a trait that can also lead people to initiate change (Moon et al., 2008).

The research evidence clearly indicates that personality does play a part in the way people respond to organizational change but very few studies have been done that explain why people responded the way they did.

METHODOLOGY

Methodological approaches to the study of personality have been fraught with controversy. Every form of empirical research produces different types of insight, and according to Engler (2003, p. 22), "the growing openness of personality theorists to more effective methods contrasts with the perpetuation by some other psychologists of a narrow view of science." This optimistic view has arisen from "the ceasefire in the paradigm wars" (Mingers, 2004), the "science wars" (Mahoney, 2003) and the "personality wars" (Hogan, 2007).

At one end of the spectrum of empirical research into personality is quantitative work conducted within a dominant positivist paradigm. This work aims to "predict, modify and control behavior" (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999, p. 6). From an epistemological perspective the positivist approach assumes that reality can only be *measured* with instruments that have been judged valid and reliable (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Leary, 2005) or from experiments and observations "typically conducted in an academic setting" (Engler, 2003, p. 6). Psychometric

approaches to personality are able to produce some evidence as to *what* traits are helpful in explaining responses to organizational change. Studies which relate to organizational change have focussed on the broad Big Five dimensions (Vakola et al., 2004) or more specific constructs such as change self-efficacy (e.g. Jimmieson et al., 2004) and resilience (e.g. Oreg, 2003) and are useful in revealing relationships between traits and behavioural responses. These studies, however, are not able to provide insight into *why* people thought, felt and behaved in reaction to a specific element of an organizational change. Nor are they able to adequately explain *how* different personality and contextual factors operate simultaneously in the way people respond to change. For example, did a person rely on dispositional resilience and/or extraversion to deal with an unfavourable change, insensitively and autocratically led? And what part did the ability to manage conflict and power issues at various hierarchical levels contribute to the response? Did the person act in certain ways *because* of a personality trait, or *despite* it?

At the other end of the research spectrum is the clinical approach (Engler, 2003). Theories of personality, including those developed by the founders of psychiatry, psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, such as Freud, Jung and Rogers, and their followers, rely on case histories and observations made through extensive counselling and therapy sessions with a host of clients or patients (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999; Westen, Burton & Kowalski, 2006; Leary, 2005; Engler, 2003). Because this type of research is subjective in nature, Shaver and Mikulincer (2004, p. 23) suggest that what they term the eclipse of psychodynamic theories of personality was partly because "it was difficult to create valid measurement techniques and obtain unambiguous empirical evidence for psychodynamic propositions." According to Winter and Barenbaum (1999, p. 7), "Mainstream psychologists ignored or criticized biographical and case study methods and were (at least initially) quite hostile towards psychoanalysis." Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether diagnostic approaches of

this nature would adequately inform research into organizational change since the clinical literature is mostly focussed on people who have psychological problems and who have sought or been referred to professional help.

As organizational proxies to psychotherapeutic work, employee counselling and coaching sessions might shed light on personality as it relates to organizational change and thus extend the change literature. But, while theoretical treatments of the psychodynamics of organizational life (Carr, 1998; Gabriel, 1998) and organizational change (Carr, 1999, 2001; French, 2001) are evident, empirical qualitative expositions of this nature are rare (Vince, 2006) and seldom relate personality to the experience of change.

Personality traits occasionally do emerge in qualitative organizational research that was not explicitly designed to investigate the nexus between personality and change. For example, Ablett and Jones (2007) interviewed nurses on their experiences in cancer wards and found hardiness to be a trait that helped them cope with the rigours of their jobs and yet some of them, from a dispositional perspective, claimed to be uncomfortable with change. It is surprising that no qualitative studies of personality seem to exist in the organizational psychology literature, and therefore none in relation to organizational change. Many other aspects of organizational life, and in particular, emotional responses to change, have been researched with qualitative approaches (e.g. Wolfram Cox, 1997; Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2006; Kiefer, 2002; Vince, 2006).

The ‘middle ground’ in the spectrum of empirical research in personality is therefore mostly vacant, particularly in the field of organizational change. Whereas both poles of research, the quantitative and clinical, place the investigator in the position of making sense of the data, the advantage of a middle ground approach stems from its emphasis on an idiographic focus. This approach to research “stresses the importance of letting one’s subject unfold its nature and characteristics during the process of investigation” (Burrell & Morgan,

1979, p. 6). In personality studies it "has continued to thrive" (Winter & Barenbaum, 1999, p. 14) and is enjoying a "resurgence of interest" (Engler, 2003, p. 287). According to Leary (2005, p. 19) "the viability of any theory in personality psychology lies in the degree to which it can explain the realities of individual lives."

Our study makes a valuable contribution to the literature by providing rich descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) of participants' realities - showing how individuals believe aspects of their personalities shaped their reactions to organizational change. While lay people will be unlikely to have a scholarly appreciation of constructs of psychology, and have been described as "naïve psychologists" (Russell, 1980, p. 1162), it is precisely their understanding of their own personality traits, and their application to organizational change, that we seek to reveal. People make sense of organizational change in many ways, including reflection on their personality traits, and idiographic accounts help researchers understand how people do this.

We contend that the phenomenological 'reality' of the individual's experience of change, and how this might be related to personality, can be addressed through interviews. We do, however, respect the concern of Westen and Gabbard (1999, p. 6), given in the context of psychoanalytical approaches to personality, of the

> tendency of many researchers to take patient self-reports of their personality as an index of who they are, rather than as compromise formations that reflect an amalgam of their efforts to perceive themselves accurately, to regulate their self-esteem…to manage guilt or shame, and so forth.

More rounded analyses of personality would result if a combination of different methods were used, such as testing, observation and interviews (Hofstee, 1994; Kelle, 2006; Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Plano, Petska & Creswell, 2005), to research personality issues in organizational change. However, for our single-method study, we take the position that a focus on each participant's 'reality' offsets the potential loss of rigour and objectivity

otherwise afforded by employing psychometric instruments, psychotherapeutic analysis or the observations of others.

As part of a larger research project on emotions and organizational change we interviewed 24 people in Auckland, New Zealand, from a variety of industries, organizations, functional departments and hierarchical levels. The participants comprised 13 men and 11 women, 16 European, two Maori, three Asian and three of Pacific Island background. They could be loosely classified as change leaders, change managers or change recipients, although these distinctions are not always clear cut in the literature, nor are they always easy to make in practice (Caldwell, 2003). Semi-structured interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and one of the questions specifically asked was: "In terms of your personality how do you usually react to change?" Comments by participants in other parts of the interview also focussed on aspects of their personality. Some comments were directly related to change, others more indirectly. All comments on personality were highlighted on the transcripts and collated in a table.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We will first analyse participant responses in light of the broad dimensions of the Big Five model, as noted in the literature review, and then highlight a number of individual traits that have been signalled elsewhere in the change literature and therefore merit special mention here.

The most important Big Five characteristic in dealing with change is openness to experience, which produces cognitive reactions that in turn lead to emotions of varying levels of intensity (Watson & Clark, 1997; Vakola et al., 2004). Most participants claimed that they were comfortable with change, or positive about it, whereas B said it was "exciting", Q found it "energising", S remarked "I love change, I thrive on change" and L indicated that she was "quite comfortable working without structure…and in an environment where things are flying

at you". Tolerance for risk and ambiguity are hallmarks of people who adapt well to change (Judge et al., 1999).

The comments of some participants reflected some ambivalence and also the pragmatism that Myers Briggs et al. (1998) identify as a personality trait. If change was beneficial, particularly to them, but also to the organization or other people, they naturally embraced it more willingly. C commented:

> I am quite relaxed about making change…I don't make change easily. I won't sort of chop and change every five minutes but I will make change. Everything I do is considered and if change is necessary I will make it…I guess also I was reasonably pragmatic…there were changes to be made and there were a lot of options and I guess I got on, things started to work.

He said that he had lived in the same house, and until recently had been in the same company, for over 30 years and was content with that. In one sense he noted that he was out of his "comfort zone" in terms of moving to an a new organization, but in another way he was "in the comfort zone because of…things I can do in my sleep, same products, same people, same people I was dealing with outside this company." Similarly, D confessed, "I always say I hate change and yet when I look back on my life I do tend to go for things that require change…I do dislike change but once I've been through the pros and cons and I think it is a good idea then I move on". J remarked, "My attitude to change is that it's expected and it's going to happen anyway so it's not the change, it's how we respond to the change…I find change to be natural and expected". V commented, "I think change is something that we just live with". This does not indicate a submissive or agreeable nature, but rather a cognitive orientation - which is neither optimistic nor pessimistic - that what cannot be influenced should not become an emotional bugbear. People who lack cognitive rigidity (Oreg, 2003) are likely to accept change when the necessity arises. Presumably, the affective and behavioural components of attitudes to change will likewise alter but some discrepancy or ambivalence can be expected (Piderit, 2000).

The second Big Five trait of relevance is conscientiousness, with a number of participants saying that when change was required, regardless of their thoughts or feelings, they did what was necessary, several claiming that it was the "professional" approach to take. Managers, in particular, were adamant that even when they disapproved of a change they felt it was incumbent on them to do what was expected of them in implementing it. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) have defined normative commitment to change as a felt obligation. P said she was "disciplined" and that her "role as public servant is to implement government policy". L deprecatingly remarked that "up until that point in my life I've always done what is expected of me pretty much. I've always been very conscientious." R revealed, "I don't like to fail…and I don't like to promise something and not deliver." Quantitative studies (e.g. Vakola et al., 2004) have shown that conscientiousness leads to acceptance of change and even to initiation of it (Moon et al., 2008).

Agreeableness is a characteristic that indicates that people will be pleasant when dealing with others and trusting, warm, kind and considerate (McRae & John, 1992). Of special note is L's reference to how she views her relationship with others affected by change: "I do care a lot about people's feelings and I don't like to hurt people" and she remarked about the way a rival for her position had been treated by management: "I felt sad. I constantly checked…and reflected to make sure I had not contributed to any more bad feelings that she was already having." O also took responsibility for supporting a colleague who found change traumatic, and showed that sympathy can be altruistic but also beneficial to a person's own wellbeing:

> I seriously had concerns for her health and she's a very shy, quiet person and her father had died actually, which probably compounded the situation…it meant that I could focus on someone other than myself and care for her and provide support for her…that feeling of helping is good.

Extraversion is a quality that enables people to voice opinions and feelings and can be used to influence change initiatives or in some ways help a person cope with the change. Most

respondents, particularly those in management positions, commented that they had debated the changes, and often argued against them, with their colleagues and superiors. Extraversion was detected more from what most participants said elsewhere in the interview than any comments they made about their personality traits. M, however, was more explicit: “I am a pretty open person…I tend to be a vigorous debater” and he confronted his boss about aspects of the change even though the latter was known to frequently lose his temper. B claimed, “If it’s change I don’t like then I announce that I don’t like it” and E believed his extraversion helped him respond to others’ emotions during change.

The last of the Big Five variables is emotional stability which is more commonly referred to as its opposite, neuroticism, and which is characterized by such traits as being calm, at ease and relaxed, versus being worried, nervous and highly strung (McCrae & Costa, 1987). None of the participants spoke directly about these traits and it is difficult to gauge this aspect of the Big Five. However, they did provide some insight when specifically asked the question how they had managed their emotions. Most believed that they had done well to control their emotions, even under difficult circumstances. Some exercised control as a protective mechanism, others because it was expected of them as “professionals”, particularly if they were managers, and acting professionally was a reflection of their self-identity (Fournier, 1999). Being able to control one’s emotions may be a sign of the *trait* of emotional stability but could also be taken as evidence of an emotional intelligence *ability* (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). While some respondents admitted that they had had been unable to regulate the display of emotion when they would prefer to have done so, one cannot take isolated incidents of control, or lack of it, to be representative of a personality trait.

In addition to the Big Five, a number of researchers have identified other personality traits (that in one form or another are found within one of the five factors) that are of special relevance to organizational change. Two of these are closely related: locus of control, the

belief that one can influence events (Rotter, 1990) and self-efficacy, the belief one has the ability to deal with certain types of situation (Bandura, 1977), such as change (Herold et al. 2007; Judge et al., 1999). Several respondents made it clear that the more control they had over change the more comfortable they were with it: "It all depends on whether I'm the architect of change or whether I'm having the change imposed on me" (A); "It's better if I'm driving it" (R); "I think I'm good with change to be honest. I like to initiate it, so I guess that's an issue and because I wasn't in control of part of that process and probably felt too far from the loci I suppose, which is something I learnt about myself" (O). These findings support the results obtained in a number of empirical studies that locus of control and change self-efficacy strongly predict people's ability to cope well with organizational change (Judge et al. 1999; Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Jimmieson et al., 2004; Herold et al., 2007). People with a high internal locus of control tend to have the confidence (self-efficacy) that they can deal with the cognitive, emotional and behavioural challenges of an organizational change, and most of our participants believed they had the ability to cope with change. E spoke of some people who focussed on what he termed was a "circle of influence" and those who focussed on a "circle of concern" and that change often moves certain types of people from the former to the latter. They "love to spend their time worrying about what is beyond their ability to influence, so it depends on personality." People with a high internal locus of control need the added capacity to know when they can influence events and when they cannot. A noticeable emotional reaction of those with a high internal locus of control was frustration when confronted with situations where they were unable to exert their usual influence. H noted:

> Well, I tend to get quite frustrated and I show frustration, I find it very difficult to withhold…to not be frustrated. So to go to this environment…there's some absolutely ridiculous things happening and…if I think something is ludicrous, I find it very difficult to not show my frustrations…But no, as far as change goes, I'm normally quite comfortable.

Another trait shown by many respondents was empathy (Munro et al., 2005; Del Barrio et al., 2004) and some of the comments were made in answer to a question as to how others (peers and subordinates) were coping with change. The comments by L and O, which were referred to earlier in the findings on agreeableness, are also indicative of empathy, which Del Barrio et al. (2004) found correlate. Participants in our study were keenly aware of how change was impacting on others, and the positive and negative emotions others were manifesting. G referred to the "trauma" and "anxiety" that accompanies downsizing. C spoke of the "shock, dismay, real concern" when redundancies were announced but also noted some staff were "happier" and "somewhat pleased" at the prospect of redundancy pay. He reported that "With people who were obviously upset you had to try and sort of gauge how they felt…and you treated each person differently." Some of the change leaders specifically mentioned the term empathy to characterize some of their own responses to the emotions of others and pointed out that support needed to be provided:

> I've been through nine organizational restructures in my 20 years of employment…What I think it helped me most with though is actually having some empathy and understanding for individuals who are in that situation. Until it's personal it's actually quite hard for people to kind of really understand what it means. (N)

> Recognising the pain they're in you want to give them the best opportunity to get that out …I find myself empathising with them…absolutely empathising with the situation they're in whether they're frustrated and angry… so I try very hard not to take it personally. (Q)

> I have empathy for people's situations. I've personally been made redundant from my employer twice so I know the impact it can have. (W)

Optimism is an aspect of positive affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1997; Judge et al., 1999) and was specifically identified by a number of participants as a way they tended to view organizational change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). People who are optimistic about change are likely to support it or at least look for positive elements. "I am a natural optimist",

said Q, "optimistic about the way people behave but never surprised by the way they behave." Some participants tended to focus on outcomes for self. For example B and K were made redundant and reflected in the interviews that this helped them kick-start their own businesses. F moved into a new functional discipline within the same organization and started a satisfying new leg of his career. Some participants were optimistic that some changes would benefit customers, colleagues or others. Optimism is also partially dependent on change self-efficacy (Herold et al., 2007; Avey et al., 2008). People who are convinced that a change will turn out well for them may partly believe this because they have the confidence to succeed at something new and partly because they think they have the capacity to deal with the emotional consequences. But as C explained, a positive attitude could not always be maintained: "I tried to be as positive as possible with various staff I had to work with and talk to in terms of the change….at most times I tried to remain positive and look at a positive outcome…It became difficult at times."

Resilience is a quality that helps people manage difficult situations, including those arising from change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Oreg, 2003; Avey et al., 2008). H remarked, "I consider myself quite a resilient person…I'm used to having lots of things on the go…and being quite resilient." However, after being demoted from the most senior management position following a takeover, she noted that "this time I didn't seem to have the resilience." Resilience may be a crucial factor in coping with change or even develop as a result of dealing successfully with change. Q, a change leader, observed that people in the company were "battle-hardened" and that "change happens all the time, get over it even when it's happening to you, [being made] three or four times redundant in a life isn't an unusual thing." Cole, Bruch and Vogel (2006, p. 467) specifically found that psychological hardiness, which incorporates elements of "commitment, control and challenge", contributed to resilience, predicted lower cynicism and produced more positive emotions. Yet, as H showed, when

control is missing, hardiness may not be sufficient in dealing with the stress of a certain type of change. In their studies of nurses in cancer wards, Ablett and Jones (2007) found hardiness to be a helpful trait even though some nurses claimed not to like job-related change for various reasons.

The need for closure is one variable that Kruglanski et al. (2007) reported to be relevant in coping with change. V found that the extended period in which he fought a case of unfair dismissal was draining and that he reflected that “there’s only so much emotional hurt that you can go through and uncertainty and it was almost like closure, just knowing that it was over and that I could move on.” Change is often accompanied by uncertainty which triggers anxiety (Kiefer, 2005; Jordan, Ashkanasy & Härtel, 2002) and the ending of a process, even one with negative outcomes, may bring relief. It is difficult to assess whether V’s need for closure was dispositional or situational, but it does seem likely that many people would find it difficult to cope with events of the nature that he encountered. People who suffer the agony of waiting to see if their name is on the redundancy list (Paterson & Härtel, 2002) also want closure since there are both practical and psychological implications. O decided to pre-empt this and found another job. Impatience is a different dispositional variable and several respondents claimed to be frustrated with the slow pace of change, particularly if they were leading it. However, none of them indicated that this was a personality trait of theirs.

Cynicism was evident in a few of the participants who were change recipients, although they did not specifically use the term. F remarked on one aspect of the change, “They'd recognized somehow that people were actually important in this process. Good gracious me.” At the end of her interview B commented on organizational change in general, not the specific change she had mostly talked about:

> I don’t think I can consider an organizational change in any positive way in terms of the impact that it had on the organization afterwards. In terms of the individual...I think sure there are big

> costs…it just ends up by being for the individual such a tough thing…It's never about adding more stuff, it's about taking away…and it's always pitched positively and people always know that's a crock.

It has been shown that cynicism about organizational change can arise from previously failed change initiatives (Connell & Waring, 2002; Reichers et al., 1997; Abraham, 2000), or where change outcomes are unfavourable (Oreg, 2006) and injustice is perceived (Chawla & Kelloway, 2004; Brennan & Skarlicki, 2004; Oreg, 2006). This can lead to resistance to change or at least lack of engagement in it (Reichers et al., 1997; Connell & Waring, 2002; Stanley et al., 2005). It is not easy, however, to gauge in a multi-faceted interview, whether the cynicism of interviewees was dispositional, situational or both (Stanley et al., 2005; Abraham, 2000).

To summarise, personality clearly can play a key role in how people respond to change and in different contexts different traits become salient. However, the cognitive, affective and behavioural demands of a change may exceed people's coping mechanisms. The quote from H above on the limits to her resilience is a case in point. Dealing with the emotional aspects of change requires considerable levels of emotional intelligence (Jordan, 2005) that goes outside of the dispositional elements advocated by the trait approach to EI (e.g. Tett et al., 2005) and focuses on ability (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The ability to deal with the technical aspects of the change is not only based on the trait of self-efficacy but also on experience and skill. Thus, while disposition may provide a foundation for individual responses to change, it has to operate in tandem with a wide range of factors that lie within the individual, the change leaders and managers, and the organization. Oreg (2006), for example, showed that while resistance to change may be partly dispositional contextual factors may be equally influential, and the readiness model of Holt et al. (2007) numbers dispositional factors among many others.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH STUDY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We sought to use an idiographic approach in uncovering how dispositional elements contributed to 24 participants' experiences of organizational change and based our analysis on comments they made in various parts of a one-off interview. In so doing we have contributed to the extremely thin qualitative literature on personality, affect and organizational change.

We certainly make no claim, however, that a single interview, only part of which was devoted to personality, in any way resembles a thorough investigation of personality. None of the researchers in this study are qualified psychologists and no attempt was made to produce a personality profile of the participants. For example, we could not answer the speculative questions of the nature posed by Gabriel (1998, p. 310): "When does…healthy skepticism end and paranoid anxiety start? When does healthy pride become narcissistic self-delusion or megalomania?" However, interpretivist approaches allow the researchers to make reasonable inferences from the statements made by participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). We mostly explored their own reflections of how personality contributed to their responses to change and in some cases made our own observations. Our point is that their comments provide a meaningful way in which experiences of change can be reported within a qualitative research framework. As a future line of research, in-depth, semi-structured interview studies, dedicated to dispositional responses to various organizational changes, should provide deeper veins of material. In addition, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods with the same participants would provide greater insight than a single method could. Not only would this approach reveal more about the individual personality, it would also uncover degrees of convergence between participants' perceptions of their own personalities and objective measures, and how different traits influenced responses to organizational change.

A second limitation of our research was the use of self-reports, an issue which penetrates literature on personality (e.g. Hofstee, 1994; Petrides & Furnham, 2000; Westen &

Gabbard, 1999) and emotion (e.g. Diener, 1999; Feldman Barrett, 2004). Self-reports, whether quantitative or qualitative, may suffer from loss of memory, inaccurate perception and interpretation, self-serving bias (Gomm, 2004; Tett et al., 2005; Jimmieson et al., 2004) and impression management (Alvesson, 2003). For example, interviewees, particularly change leaders and others in management positions, may wish to look good in the eyes of the interviewer, or simply bolster their self-image. As an additional method, using the observations of other people who work with the participant would provide a fuller picture of a personality even though others may not have the insight or knowledge to make accurate observations of behaviour, let alone of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Hofstee, 1994).

A third limitation is the inadequate distinction we made in the findings between trait mood and state mood, particularly as they interface with the construct of personality (Meyer & Shack, 1989). Barsade and Gibson (2007, p. 44) suggest that "There have been more studies examining dispositional affect, but this may be because dispositional affect is easier to measure than mood, and much easier than measuring discrete emotions." Over a decade ago House et al. (1996) called for a clearer distinction between the terms used in dispositional research while Russell and Feldman Barrett (1999, p. 816) have complained that "Vague and undefined terms, especially in theoretical writing and secondary resources, make the psychological literature on emotion a nightmare." Yet it seems that confusion, or at least multiple interpretations, still reign. In future interpretive studies of organizational change interviewers could explore whether people believed that their affective states during a specific change were more influenced by discrete emotions, moods or dispositions. While the differences in these constructs have been discussed earlier, it is conceivable that during the period of a change, which could endure for months, a person's affective experience would cover all three categories. In the current study, for example, one of the participants, B, got "absolutely furious" at the injustice of one event, experiencing what Russell and Feldman

Barrett (1999) would term a prototypical emotional episode, experienced negative moods on various occasions as difficulties accumulated, and also seemed to manifest (in the interview) dispositional cynicism. The complex relationships between these constructs, their impact on behaviour and the relevance of contextual factors, could be better mapped from extensive interviews, as well as in future quantitative studies of organizational change.

A fourth limitation, and one which we scarcely touched on, concerns the valence and intensity of emotional experience during change, and how these might be influenced by dispositional elements. Although there are conceptual differences between their approaches, the circumplex models of Watson and Tellegen (1985), Russell and Feldman Barrett (1999) and Larsen et al. (2002), plot these dimensions on axes of valence/pleasantness and arousal/intensity/activation. The question that arises in the context of organizational change is to what extent personality traits impact on the valence and intensity of emotional experience. Discrete positive and negative emotions, such as elation, excitement, contentment, anger and anxiety, were reported by participants in our study, and at various levels of intensity. Were these simply the outcomes of contextual factors or did they have dispositional foundations? One-off incidents do not reveal much about personality and an in-depth research study would better reveal patterns of cognition, affect and behaviour that are more characteristic of personality.

A fifth limitation is the lack of attention we gave to the role of personality in emotional responses to perceptions of the fairness of change. Past research has identified the impact of personality in perceptions of justice (e.g. Colquitt et al., 2006; Lilly & Virick, 2006), and specifically in the context of change (Brennan & Skarlicki, 2004; Moon et al, 2008). Elsewhere in our interviews in the broader study of emotions and change, respondents made comments about various experiences of fairness and unfairness and how they triggered affective responses. However, personality dimensions specifically related to perceptions of

fairness, such as trust propensity, risk aversion and morality (Colquitt et al., 2006), and locus of control (Lilly & Virick, 2006) were not directly investigated. The perceived fairness of change has been found to contribute substantially to emotional responses to change (e.g. Paterson & Härtel, 2002; Brotheridge, 2003; Matheny & Smollan, 2005), but the relationships between fairness, personality and emotion have been under-explored.

Finally, differing levels of understanding of personality, and insight into their own traits, and those of others, seemed to influence participant responses, but were not explored. People who have reflected on their own personalities - and particularly those who have been guided in doing so - are often able to cope with change in productive ways if they can harness their strengths and address their weaknesses. One respondent in the current study, G, was even aware of his personality profile in terms of one well-known model (Myers Briggs et al., 1998) and how it affected his response to an organizational change: “I'm not that demonstrative…if you look at me in my Myers-Briggs profile I am an INFP, which is really strange for an HR manager but you learn that extravertiveness.” He provided some examples of how he thought his personality helped him deal with organizational change. “So that was how I was using my emotions. If somebody was angry I could empathise with the anger and I'd walk them through it. If somebody was denying that they needed to worry about getting a job, I'd say well, you know what's going on in life.” Levels of previous exposure to theories of personality, emotion and change, whether in academic or training courses, or through informal reading or discussion, is another subject for further empirical investigation.

In conclusion, people’s responses to organizational change have been shown, in the reflections of the respondents in our study, whether “naïve psychologists” (Russell, 1980, p. 1162) or not, to be at least partly influenced by dimensions of their personalities. People who have insight into their own dispositional responses to change should be better prepared to deal with change. Similarly, managers who understand the personalities of their staff should be in

good position to facilitate change. It should also be emphasized that while personality may shape an individual response to a specific change the exigencies of that situation may be more influential. Extremely difficult conditions may defeat even those high in resilience, self-efficacy and optimism.

The overwhelming number of quantitative studies of personality and change, and the insights from psychodynamic approaches, should be supplemented by a range of qualitative studies that investigate how individuals make sense of their own responses to organizational change, and those of others, and to what extent they believe personality plays a role. We join with other researchers (e.g. Kelle, 2006; Hanson et al., 2005; Hofstee, 1994) who believe that a combination of different methods, can contribute to the development of a more holistic understanding of human nature. To date the qualitative field of research into personality, affect and organizational change has scarcely been unearthed and therefore this 'middle ground' promises to be very fertile.

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