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REFLECTIONS: HOW STUDYING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE LOST ITS WAY

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Bio

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Abstract

The assumption that organizational change tends to fail continues to stand unchallenged. This is an unsatisfactory situation that impedes not only the evaluation of such change but also studying its management and leadership. The enduring prevalence of this flawed assumption illustrates a failure of scholarship rather than practice. Although failure claims appeared plausible implying objective research and critical scholarship at work, the supporting evidence always eluded the proponents. This paper turns its focus to explaining how and why change and transformation have been and continue to be depicted as failing. Seven hopes for future evaluating organizational change are identified and discussed. These include undertaking further historiographies and moving away from change either tending to succeed or to fail dualisms, towards embracing dualities. As well as, greater acknowledgement of the contextual, processual and dynamic nature of evaluating organizational change. Organizational change lost its way in not appreciating that it was managing change which was depicted as failing. Constructing the authority of change leaders; initially, required the authority of change managers to be corroded. The attribution of failure to managers and success to leaders is currently missing from change agency and change evaluation debates.

Introduction

I have unsuccessfully searched for the evidence to substantiate change and transformation failure tendency claims in general, and in particular claims that 70% of all change initiatives fail (Hughes, 2011). Almost a decade later, failure rhetoric remains academically fashionable, and my concerns have been echoed in an editorial of this journal when identifying six illusions arguably resulting in the academic field of organizational change being stuck in a quagmire:

70% of all change fail: Apart from the obvious but more technical questions regarding how to define change and how to measure success/failure, this illusion has been identified as unsubstantiated by Hughes (2011). Still, many articles, books, change leadership development programmes and sessions, and change initiatives start with this unchallenged assumption. (By, 2020, p. 3)

For this end of career reflection, my focus shifts to explaining how and why change and transformation are depicted as failing. Such narratives of failure appeared at a similar time to a shift in change agency from managing change to leading change. Storey et al (2017) warned about a new guise of leadership that disparages management and equates leadership with instigating change. I shared similar concerns in reviewing over thirty-five years of literature potentially informing a shift from managing change to leading change (Hughes, 2016a). I warned to Spector's (2016) critical appraisal of discourses on leadership. He identified ideal types as being confused with real types, arguing that leadership discourses frequently depicted idealized concepts as empirical realities.

It is important to acknowledge that the account of organizational change history shared in this *Reflection* is not the only history, it is one account of history. Understanding the historical and socially constructed origins of the emergence of failure narratives is informative. Grint's (2005, 2008) social constructionism informs my framing of how organizational change lost its way. He highlighted a common assumption that successful leaders respond to the demands of the specific situation.

But when a crisis occurs the successful leader must become decisive, demonstrate a ruthless ability to focus on the problem and to ignore the siren calls of the sceptics and the cynics. (Grint, 2005, p. 1468)

The change and transformation failures highlighted between 1990 and 2000 (discussed subsequently) were the problem. Leading change becomes a response to the problem of failure and implies success. However, Grint (2005) creatively having surfaced this common assumption argues that a context or situation is actively constructed by the leader, leaders, and/or decision-makers in legitimating particular forms of action. Legitimation is evident in the role change failure rhetoric played in the construction of change leadership (discussed subsequently).

In understanding the contemporary development of leadership, Grint (2008) wanted academics to go back to the future, rather than forward to the past. He (2008, p. 116) wanted us '...to see how those futures are constructed by the very same decision-makers and consider the persuasive mechanisms that decision-makers use to make situations more tractable to their preferred form of authority'. In terms of 'decision-makers', he appears to have been interested in authority figures in organizations. In this *Reflection*, I broaden this to explain academic involvement in shifts in the authority of decision-makers. The construction of leading change required the depiction of managing change as failing. I believe the unchallenged failure assumptions which By (2020) highlighted can be explained as legacy issues arising out of a shift from managing change to leading change. This contentious line of reasoning requires further explanation.

I will explain the construction of organizational change as failing today, through employing a reverse chronology. I am not interested in the 'forward to the past' question: why does change tend to apparently fail? I am more interested in 'going back to the future' to understand why managing change was depicted as failing. Hence, this *Reflection* is organized around chronological milestones (2018/2021, 2011, 1990-2000 and the 1980s). The next section is *Forward to the past - Framing the*

process of failing. This section illustrates change being actively and explicitly framed as tending to fail by Schwarz et al. (2018). They called for papers on the theme *Organizational change failure: Framing the process of failing.* In their call, they claimed that change tends to fail. The call resulted in a Special Issue of *Human Relations* being published in 2021 (subsequently referred to as the S.I.). Appreciating how organizational change lost its way begins with acknowledging the current prominence of change failure assumptions.

Searching for evidence in support of change failure assumptions takes us forward to the past in revisiting old debates. However, I want to go back to the future by reversing the chronology to explain how organizational change was framed as failing. The reverse chronology begins with, *Ten years ago - Do 70% of organizational change initiatives really fail?* (Hughes, 2011). In revisiting my 2011 paper, I show how Schwarz et al. (2021) perversely invoked Hughes (2011) as the author who claimed that change fails, and I discuss my attempts to have the S.I. misrepresentations corrected. Misunderstanding and misrepresenting my contribution was illustrative of evaluating change losing its way.

Thirty years ago - Organizational change and transformation are failing takes us back to what I regard as the change and transformation failure origin stories. In this section, I revisit three influential *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) articles (Beer et al. 1990; Kotter, 1995 and Beer and Nohria, 2000a). The titles of these articles certainly framed change and transformation as failing. But, reading these articles reveals something subtler. Managing change was being depicted as failing. However, this was tempered with the implication that leading change would succeed.

Why would professors from a prestigious business school depict change and transformation as failing between 1990 and 2000? Answering this question takes us back further to, *Fifty years ago - Let's get rid of management!* This was an era when the inability of USA businesses to compete with Japanese businesses was explicitly blamed on management. The awkward question asked at this time was - what have managers been doing wrong? The concise answer was managing not leading. They never claimed that change and transformation failed, they claimed that it was the management of change and transformation which was failing.

The penultimate section is *Back to the future - Framing organizational change evaluation differently.* By way of discussion, I answer the following questions. How did evaluating organizational change lose its way? What are the implications for evaluating organizational change in the future? This reflection concludes on why organizational change lost its way and why it matters. On a more personal note, I lament organizational change scholarship losing its way.

Elton's (1986) differentiation between research as gathering new knowledge and scholarship as critiquing existing knowledge, profoundly shaped my academic identity. Research and scholarship are not mutually exclusive. However, I chose to exclusively critique what universities and journals offered in the name of organizational change knowledge.

Forward to the past - Framing the process of failing

Schwarz et al. (2018) called for papers on the theme of *Organizational change failure: Framing the process of failing.* Their call resulted in an S.I. being fully published in 2021. I acknowledge unsuccessfully submitting to this S.I. My submission questioned the emergence of change failure tendencies through looking at failure narratives historically.

The call was broader than the organizational change failure title suggested, with Kibler et al. (2021) engaged neither with organizational change theory nor research. The editors' breadth of interest contrasts with my narrower concern that evaluating organizational change has lost its way. Specifically, the assumption that change tends to fail which was integral to their call requires problematizing. A verbatim extract from the S.I. *Call for Papers* (Schwarz et al., 2018) illustrates how they chose to frame the process of failing.

After all, given its consequences, although organizational research has long been concerned with the features of and mechanisms for how organizations change, it is equally well-acknowledged that large scale organizational changes tend to fail (often invoking Beer and Nohria, 2000 in doing so).

The Beer and Nohria (2000b) book drew internationally renowned experts to a conference at *Harvard Business School* (HBS) to break the code of change. However, the experts who contributed chapters to the book did not empirically confirm or disconfirm that large scale organizational changes tend to fail. Their focus was on how organizational change theories and practices might move forward (break the code of change). Professor Beer writes about unconscious collusion between three groups of actors; managers, academics, and consultants:

The paucity of knowledge about change can be traced to differences in goals and values and to an unconscious collusion among these actors to leave unexamined the how of organizational change: the processes, values, skills, and context that underlie success and failure. (Beer, 2000, p. 435)

Other internationally renowned experts, were raising similar concerns to Beer (2000) at this time. Pettigrew et al. (2001) famously mapped the challenges for future organizational change and development research. They acknowledged that researching reciprocal relationships between change processes and performance outcomes was a notably difficult research area (this is still the case, please see Hughes, 2019 for further discussion). If even Beer of Beer and Nohria (2000b) explicitly acknowledged the 'paucity of knowledge' underlying success and failure, what knowledge underpinned the 'well acknowledged' *Call for Papers* claims of Schwarz et al. (2018)?

Between the Schwarz et al. (2018) *Call for Papers* and the Schwarz et al. (2021) editorial, the supporting Beer and Nohria (2000b) reference was dropped. It had to be dropped as I had highlighted that the change failure claims of Beer and Nohria (2000a, 2000b) were without evidence (Hughes, 2011). Paradoxically, Schwarz et al. (2021) then swapped their original change fails reference (Beer and Nohria, 2000b) for four references to Hughes (2011). I will discuss this paradoxical swap in the next section.

Despite the Schwarz et al. (2021) editorial shift, two S.I. contributions invoked Beer and Nohria (2000a) in support of change failure tendencies. Vardaman et al. (2021) were subtle but did cite Beer and Nohria (2000a) in support of their claim that change is difficult to accomplish. Hay et al. (2021, p. 181) also referenced Beer and Nohria (2000a) when they shared with *Human Relations* readers, 'some have estimated that about 70% of change initiatives fail'. This citation rekindled a question from a decade earlier for this reader.

Ten years ago - Do 70% of organizational change initiatives really fail?

In explaining how organizational change lost its way, I briefly revisit my contribution to this debate. I then place on record how I believe that my contribution was misrepresented and my futile attempt to challenge this. This misrepresentation was personally troubling, although very illustrative of the active framing by academics of the process of change failing.

In Hughes (2011) I revisited five high profile instances cited in support of notions that 70% of all organizational change initiatives fail. In the first half of the paper, I highlighted the absence of either research or theory in support of these claims. Beer and Nohria (2000a, p. 133) offered neither empirical evidence nor literature to support 'the brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail'. Potentially, there was a 'halo effect' with academics anticipating the change failure evidence being in Beer and Nohria (2000b). It was not, Beer (2000) even acknowledged the paucity of knowledge around success and failure.

In the second half of my paper, I was concerned about how challenging it would be to evaluate organizational change in an academically meaningful manner (please see Pettigrew et al., 2001). I critically questioned inherent organizational change failure/success rates. I highlighted the ambiguities of change, the context-dependent nature of change, competing perceptions, temporal aspects, and organizational change measurability. Even ignoring the power and politics of research access, we see the illusory nature of the existence of a body of change failure knowledge.

To avoid doubt, I neither claimed that organizational change tends to fail nor that evidence exists in support of such an illusion. I feared for my sanity when faced with the doublespeak of knowledge power employed by the Guest Editors and their editorial office supporters. Consequently, I thank Heracleous and Bartunek (2021) in the S.I. for acknowledging that Hughes (2011) made abundantly clear that change failure claims were without evidence. Hughes (2011) was a big moment in my little academic life, regardless of the actions of the Guest Editors or the powerful *Human Relations* editorial office.

Challenging assumptions underlying existing studies is risky, as it means questioning existing power relations informing a field of study, with the potential to upset colleagues, reviewers, and editors (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). Regardless, I felt obligated to contact the *Human Relations* editorial office seeking a correction to what I perceived to be a damaging misrepresentation. I requested an 'impartial review' of the two papers (Hughes, 2011 and Schwarz et al., 2021) to establish if I had/had not been misrepresented? I intentionally did not go into detail. I hoped that the review would be impartial with regards to my framing of the request and that of the Guest Editors. I had naïvely hoped that the editorial office would treat disputants equally in line with espoused values of the journal and the *Tavistock Institute*.

After reading Hughes (2011), rereading the *Special Issue* editorial and conferring with the Guest Editors, my request for a correction was refused. They stated, '...your paper is cited as context for the wider debate about change failure – the SI editorial does not appear to me to directly attribute to you specific opinions which are contradicted in your 2011 paper.'

I encourage readers to read the whole S.I. for themselves. However, to aid exposition in this paper, Box 1 includes two of Schwarz et al's (2021) four editorial citations to Hughes (2011). Am I being cited as context for the debate? Or does the S.I. editorial directly attribute to me specific opinions which are contradicted in my 2011 paper?

Page 160 - Central to this outlook is that organizational research has long been concerned with the features of and mechanisms for how organizations change, while at the same time acknowledging separately that large-scale organizational changes tend to fail (Hughes, 2011).

Page 167 - We do so recognizing that, even though the majority of change initiatives fail in some way (Hughes, 2011), there is perpetual interest in successful firms and success stories (Bledow et al., 2017).

Box 1 – Change failure attributed to Hughes (2011) or context for the debate?

My question was rhetorical, but in this instance, your objectivity is more insightful than my subjectivity. For myself, 'context for the wider debate' might contrast Hughes (2011) with other academics who believed change tends to fail. I am not sure you can call it a 'wider debate' when I am the only reference cited. I felt crushed by the power asymmetry of the editorial office conferring with the Guest Editors against myself. The other part of the editorial office refusal rationalization was couched in terms of the importance of multiple interpretations. Multiple interpretations yes, but power resides in particular interpretations (Czarniawska, 1999). I do not want to be accused of misrepresenting the espoused position *Human Relations* favours. So, I will share verbatim the other part of their attempt to rationalize the refusal.

My response to you is coloured by the view that it is inherent in social sciences for multiple interpretations of work to be possible. Particular papers will often be read by others in ways that the original author does not agree with – this is all part of legitimate debate – because multiple interpretations of any article are always possible. In other words, trying to establish an “impartial view” of whether or not an author has been misrepresented is unhelpful in my view.

Despite favouring social constructionism, I do not share the extreme post-truth position espoused by the *Human Relations* editorial office. Something has profoundly gone wrong when my scholarship highlighting an absence of evidence can be cited as the presence of evidence. Why bother with critical management/leadership studies if critical intent can now be framed as appreciation? We cannot, and more importantly, should not reverse the critical intent of scholarship. We diminish and devalue scholarship by allowing such erroneous interpretations. In parallel, evidence-based/research-informed management is privileged as facts less open to interpretation.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to accept their misunderstanding of my request for an ‘impartial review’, the ethics of their decision to confer with the Guest Editors or their reasoning invoked to justify their refusal. I believe that the scholarship of the editorial office and the Guest Editors were deficient. I wrote again to the editorial office expressing concerns. I never received another reply from the editorial office. I think this is what young people call ‘ghosting’ and apparently, it is very fashionable. The Guest Editors successfully framed me as the author who claimed change tends to fail. This was nothing in comparison with a whole field of study losing its way in misunderstanding the emergence of change failure assumptions, which I am now going to explain.

Thirty years ago - Organizational change and transformation are failing.

Progressive forward-looking agendas neglect the origin stories of change failure narratives. We need to go back if we want to understand the power of particular interpretations (Czarniawska, 1999). Only going back to the future do we understand how these futures were actively constructed and made more tractable to preferred forms of authority (Grint, 2008).

Between 1990 and 2000, *HBR* published three very influential articles (Beer et al. 1990; Kotter, 1995 and Beer and Nohria, 2000a). Their rhetorical titles in isolation would have informed the assumption that change and transformation were failing. Remember the paucity of knowledge about change at the end of this decade had been acknowledged (Beer, 2000). Although these practitioner magazine articles lacked the rigour of papers in peer-reviewed academic journals, they had a global reach and influence on both academics and practitioners. Two of these articles (Kotter, 1995; Beer and Nohria, 2000a) cited neither original research nor theory in support of their failure explanations. Only Beer et al. (1990) drew on original research into companies for their article.

At this time, but in a very different part of the world, Czarniawska (1999) encouraged narrative knowing amongst critical scholars. She explained how narratives make connections between the exceptional and the ordinary. Organizational researchers examine the ‘body’ of an organization to make a diagnosis and prescribe a ‘cure’ for whatever ailed an organization. She encouraged scholars to ask; what was the exceptional moment revealing everyday reality, what was the diagnosis of the problem and what was the prescription for solving the problem? The three articles are revisited in terms of their exceptional moment, diagnosis of a problem and their problem-solving prescription. The titles of papers/articles play a role in framing academic debates (please see Haggan, 2004 for further discussion and further references). The three article titles are used as sub-section titles to make them explicit in this discussion.

Why change programs don't produce change (Beer et al., 1990) Their title captures the exceptional moment; the realization that programmatic changes of that era did not create the change anticipated. They revealed companywide change programmes were proving to be the greatest obstacle to revitalization, labelling this ‘the fallacy of programmatic change.’ Their case study research

explained why change programmes didn't produce change. However, they prescribed a solution. Ask yourself why would they offer a solution if they believed that change and transformation were doomed to fail? They argued that the theory of change guiding these change programmes was fundamentally flawed. These programmes addressed one or, at best, two of the factors required for corporate revitalization. Their six steps for effective change included mobilizing commitment to change through joint diagnosis of business problems and developing a shared vision of organizing and managing competitiveness.

Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail (Kotter, 1995) Again the title of Kotter's (1995) article is unequivocal in framing failure thinking. The exceptional moment which Kotter (1995) highlighted to readers was that the transformation efforts he was watching were failing. He didn't make such failure claims in the body of his article.

A few of these corporate change efforts have been very successful. A few have been utter failures. Most fall somewhere in between, with a distinct tilt toward the lower end of the scale. (Kotter, 1995, p. 59).

Again Kotter (1995) diagnosed the problem and subsequently prescribed a solution (Kotter, 1996). Successful cases went through a series of phases (eight steps), requiring time and skipping stages created an illusion of speed rather than a satisfactory result. In his subsequent book *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996/2012), the eight errors were reversed into leadership steps for successful transformation (please see Hughes, 2016b for a critical review of Kotter, 1995 and 1996).

Cracking the code of change (Beer and Nohria, 2000a) The exceptional moment was that about 70% of all change initiatives failed (discussed earlier). They acknowledged that organizational change remained challenging to achieve, with few companies managing the process as effectively as they liked. They drew on 40 years of experience studying the nature of corporate changes to highlight two archetypes/theories of change. Their favoured prescription was combining Theories E and O (hard and soft approaches), which they illustrated through a story about successful change at ASDA (a UK supermarket).

The titles of these accounts published in the influential *HBR* would have fuelled failure assumptions. In fairness to the authors, a careful reading reveals them implying something subtler than organizational change, and transformation tends to fail. This subtlety was either never acknowledged or lost over time.

Fifty years ago - Let's get rid of management!

The headline titles of the three articles in the previous section implied change and transformation failure between 1990 and 2000. However, this is difficult to reconcile with '...the infectious American enthusiasm for the future and the belief that it will be better than the past...' (Pettigrew, (2003, p. 318). Grey (1999) noted contemporary discourses at the end of the nineties writing managers out, not according to managers great status and even attacking them as the source of corporate ills. In this section, I historically explain why managing change began to be depicted as failing.

Tichy and Devanna (1986, p. vii) argued that '...a new type of leadership at the middle and senior levels of our corporations is desperately needed.' In introducing their book, *The Transformational Leader*, they referred to the anxieties USA corporations experienced between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s. They referred to this era in USA corporate history as '*the gathering storm*'. They quantified the decline in productivity through the trade deficit of \$69 billion in 1985, growing to \$150 billion in 1986. The emerging 'Japanese miracle' of the late 1970s and 1980s raised significant challenges for Western management practitioners and theorists (Spector, 2014; Salmon, 2017).

The response of USA corporations to 'the gathering storm' was to turn against management and towards leadership. Harry Gray funded a full-page *Wall Street Journal* advertisement during the late

1970s and early 1980s. Gray was the CEO of United Technologies, and his advertisement (reproduced in Bennis and Nanus, 1985) proclaimed 'let's get rid of management'. The advertisement was illustrative of growing doubts about the utility of management in the face of significant economic and political challenges. However, it wasn't just practitioners who critically questioned the utility of management.

Hayes and Abernathy (1980) professors at *Harvard Business School* posed an awkward question - what exactly have American managers been doing wrong? Zaleznik (1977) and Kotter (1988) often cited in support of a shift from management to leadership also appear to have been answering the awkward question. Neither Zaleznik (1977) nor Kotter (1988) stands up to rigorous critical scrutiny (please see Hughes, 2016a for further discussion). However, what is revealing, is that Zaleznik (1977) and Kotter (1988) openly cited billionaires requesting a shift from managing to leading in business organizations. Zaleznik (1977) cited the USA billionaire J.D. Rockefeller (1973) who was concerned that tried and proven ways of doing things were favoured; consequently, he wanted a shift to leadership. Kotter (1988, p. 1) cited another USA billionaire H. Ross Perot on the first page of *The Leadership Factor*.

Mr. Perot is also a man of strong convictions. Central among them is a belief that effective leadership is an enormously important factor in the world today, and yet a factor that is all too often missing. Commenting on the U.S. economic situation recently, he framed that conviction in the following way: "Our country cries out for leadership at the business level and the political level. Lack of leadership is the biggest problem we have in making this nation competitive."

The 'gathering storm', was not about USA corporations losing faith in organizational change and transformation. In the face of extreme economic challenges, they lost faith in managers managing change to deliver successful change and transformation. For change leaders to have the executive authority, corporations and USA billionaires (such as Rockefeller and Perot) requested, would require a shift in epistemic authority.

Professional knowledge, certified by a university and legitimated by association with scientific objectivity, informs fundamental power relations (Jacques, 1996; Cummings et al., 2016). Power resides not in the difference between fact and fiction but in a convincing interpretation convenient for negotiating meaning (Czarniawska, 1999). The declarative powers of managers place them in a privileged position to introduce new discursive templates (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). However, the shift from managing to leading which had been requested raised epistemic questions:

How do you shift the change agency at that time invested in change managers to change leaders, whilst maintaining their 'privileged position'?

How do you attribute failure to managers and success to leaders?

Framing the process of failing required the activities of managers to be contrasted with those of leaders (please see Fairhurst, 2005 for further discussion about contrast as a tool in framing). The concept of corroding authority (Lincoln, 1994; ten Bos, 2000) explains academic involvement in facilitating the shift from change management to change leadership. For ten Bos (2000), staging leadership was always an exclusionary activity with authority constructed and corroded on different stages.

It wasn't possible exclusively to construct the authority of change leaders; initially, corroding the authority of change managers was just as important. Corrosive discourses result in audiences holding someone/something in diminished regard, with authority crumbling when audiences turn irreverent (Lincoln, 1994). Academics had the epistemic authority to inform the development of the executive authority of change leaders. This was because these speakers command confidence, respect and the trust of their audience (Lincoln, 1994).

The framing of managing change and transformation as failing and encouraging a shift to leadership is evident in the articles of Beer et al. (1990); Kotter (1995) and Beer and Nohria (2000a).

Without strong leaders, units cannot make the necessary organizational changes, yet the scarcest resource available for revitalizing corporations is leadership. Corporate renewal depends as much on developing effective change leaders as it does on developing effective organizations. (Beer et al., 1990, p. 165)

The title of this article implied change and transformation tended to fail, but the body of this article said something very different. It promised that with the development of effective change leaders change and transformation would be successful.

Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail (Kotter, 1995) as well as, celebrating leader agency, denigrated management, for example:

a paralyzed senior management often comes from having too many managers and not enough leaders. (Kotter, 1995, p. 60)

...management had a sense of direction, but it was too complicated or blurry to be useful. (Kotter, 1995, p. 63)

Subsequently, Kotter (1996) denigrated management in *Leading Change*, even claiming universities taught management because it was easier to teach than leadership. The transformation failures highlighted in Kotter (1995) were reversed in Kotter (1996) when he encouraged a leadership solution to deliver successful organizational change and transformation. Ask yourself, if he believed that transformation efforts were doomed to fail, wouldn't it be futile to prescribe leading change?

Again, whilst Beer and Nohria (2000a) shared their 'brutal fact' that 70% of all change initiatives fail, a year later, Beer (2001, p. 239) wrote 'fundamental change will not occur unless everyone has the commitment and skills needed for effective implementation.' Anyone taking the time to return to Beer and Nohria (2000a) will learn that change management was depicted as failing, not organizational change.

...few companies manage the process as well as they would like. (Beer and Nohria, 2000a, p. 133)

...managers end up immersing themselves in an alphabet soup of initiatives. (Beer and Nohria, 2000a, p. 133) and

...too often, managers try to apply theories E and O in tandem without resolving the inherent tensions between them. (Beer and Nohria, 2000a, p. 134).

However, they made a significant semantic switch from managers to leaders, when they referred to their solution for delivering successful organizational change.

Leaders need to crack the code of change. (Beer and Nohria, 2000a, p. 133)

In the three featured articles, change wasn't depicted as failing, it was managing change which was the critical target. The context/situation was actively constructed legitimating particular forms of action (Grint, 2005). Problematizing the change failure of managers provided legitimation for the leading change solution.

Back to the future – Framing organizational change studies differently

In this short discussion, I pose two questions in drawing together this wide-ranging narrative and in the hope that organizational change studies might find its way.

How did organizational change studies lose its way? The empirical challenges of research-based evaluation of organizational change outcomes were underestimated. Pettigrew et al's (2001) challenges are just as relevant today as they were two decades ago. Advances in contextual and

processual approaches to organizational change studies have been considerable (please see, Langley et al., 2013). However, they do not make change evaluation any easier. Instead, they highlight the academically spurious nature of either failure or success tendency dualisms in the S.I.

If we take the long view, the very public appetite to get rid of management and move towards leadership was apparent. Newspaper advertisements in the late seventies and early eighties proclaimed let's get rid of management. Awkward questions around what have managers been doing wrong (Hayes and Abernathy, 1980). USA billionaires (Rockefeller and Perot) calling for a shift from management to leadership. Article titles between 1990 and 2000 certainly framed change and transformation as failing. They were the right message at the right time for USA corporations, probably bringing realism to theory and practice. But was change and transformation failure the critical target? Or was it the management of change and transformation?

In Hughes (2016a) I was interested in the shift from managing change to leading change. Initially, I assumed this was an empirically driven shift. However, taking the long view explains leading change as being socially constructed (please see Grint, 2005, 2008). I explored the persuasive mechanisms that decision-makers used to make organizational change more tractable to their preferred form of authority. Change manager authority was being corroded through accounts of failure. Through contrast, change leader authority was constructed with a revised assumption that leading change succeeds. We need to look at the attribution of failure to managers and success to leaders. It is currently missing from change agency debates, side-tracked by the emergence of change failure assumptions.

What are the implications for organizational change studies in the future? The danger when a field of study loses its way is that until shortcomings are acknowledged nothing changes. I remain hopeful about the advance of organizational change studies and Box 2, contains my hopes for evaluating organizational change in the future.

Hope 1.	Explore further and more deeply the historiography of evaluating organizational change over the last five decades.
Hope 2.	Evaluate organizational change in very particular contexts, acknowledge these unique contexts and resist a tendency to generalize to all organizational change.
Hope 3.	Accept that the processual and dynamic nature of organizational change and change outcomes makes meaningful evaluation problematic.
Hope 4.	Move away from a change either tends to succeed or to fail dualism, towards embracing dualities. For example, successes and failures will be inherent within a specific organizational change.
Hope 5.	Focus more on developing and employing innovative evaluation methodologies, rather than assuming that we know how to evaluate organizational change and that evaluation is being undertaken.
Hope 6.	Stop searching for the evidence that all change fails, your quest is methodologically, epistemologically and ontologically futile.
Hope 7.	Question an implicit assumption in the 1990 to 2000 failure framing that leading change tends to succeed.

Box 2 – Hopes for organizational change studies in the future

A low point in organizational change studies was highlighted by Burnes (2015) when he revisited one of the earliest papers (Coch and French, 1948) published in *Human Relations*. His concern was that Coch and French's (1948) basic argument that resistance did not arise from the individual was lost. He warned about influential literature being cited without being read and even cited in support of

misinterpretations. I followed his encouragement and took the long view in understanding how evaluating organizational change lost its way over five decades. I would encourage others to explore the historiography of emerging change failure claims (Hope 1).

Early applied accounts suggested one best way to manage organizational change (change tends to succeed). The academic rejoinder to this was that there was no one best way (Burnes, 1996). Generalizing about change (success/failure) tendencies does not take debates forward. The evaluating of organizational change outcomes in very specific contexts is encouraged. We need to acknowledge the unique nature of findings and resist the temptation to generalize to all organizational change (Hope 2). Contributions to the *S.I.* (De Keyser et al., 2021; Hay et al., 2021; Heracleous and Bartunek, 2021; Vardaman et al., 2021) are exemplars of contextualized research evaluations of organizational change.

Tsoukas and Chia (2002) warned about a prevalence of synoptic accounts of organizational change in perceiving change as an accomplished event (for example, organizational change tends to fail). Subsequently, there have been further advances in processual accounts of organizational change (Langley et al., 2013). Hope 3, encourages those who favour a synoptic account to acknowledge the processual and dynamic nature of organizational change and importantly the dynamic nature of change outcomes (Pettigrew et al., 2001).

Hope 4, acknowledges that a greater appreciation of dualities over dualisms goes in tandem with the advance of processual studies. Farjoun (2010) wanted us to conceptualize stability and change, not as a dualism, but as a duality. This requires moving away from claims such as those depicted in the *S.I.*, that change tends to fail. Instead of framing the debate as a dualism, we have to embrace dualities. Successes and failures will be inherent within a specific organizational change. We need to move away from failure and either/or success, towards both failure and success. In understanding organizational change success and failure dualities I recommend; Sutherland and Smith (2013); Thomas et al., (2016) and Hagebakken et al. (2020).

Pettigrew et al. (2001) warned about the difficulty of relating organizational change processes to performance outcomes, but the knowledge gap was filled with failure assumptions. Hope 5 is to assume less that we know how to evaluate organizational change and that regular and consistent evaluations are undertaken. It may be more fruitful to focus on developing and employing innovative evaluating organizational change methodologies. A fascinating exemplar is De Keyser et al's (2021) dialectical approach. They employed a projection exercise using 50 images with participants asked to select images that best represented their perceptions of how the organization managed changes.

Attempts to fill the change tends to fail evidence gap (the Schwarz et al. 2018, *Call for Papers* framing) should be abandoned (Hope 6). The search for the universal all change fails evidence is methodologically, epistemologically and ontologically futile. Academic concepts such as 'organizational change', 'organizational leadership' or 'human resource management' do not fail. In certain contexts, certain activities at certain times fail, but such instances neither support nor encourage the generalizations of the *S.I.*

Storey et al, (2017) warned about a new guise of leadership that disparages management and equates leadership with instigating change. However, the shift from managing change to leading change did not appear to have been driven by research (Hughes, 2016a). Hope 7, encourages questioning implicit assumptions that leading change succeeds. Grint's (2005) differentiation of command, management and leadership is pertinent. Command as providing answers, management as organizing processes and leadership as asking questions. His differentiation offers a counterpoint to the dominant and dominating discourses today about the exclusive need for change leaders.

Conclusions – On being scholarly

Schwarz et al. (2021) in concluding hoped to stimulate debate around the emergence of change failure. In terms of this debate, I have challenged misrepresentations of my contribution. Origin stories of emergent change failure assumptions are currently missing and we require further historiographies. This *Reflection* has been ambitious in its historical coverage, disruptive in challenging failure assumptions and contentious in questioning organizational change orthodoxy. Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) warning about the risks of questioning existing power relations and potentially upsetting other academics is accepted. I conclude concisely on how organizational change lost its way, before reflecting on organizational change scholarship also losing its way.

Unchallenged change failure assumptions still impede organizational change studies (By, 2020, p. 3). Origin stories informing the emergence of these assumptions took us back ten years, revisiting Hughes (2011) and my challenging of failure assumptions. This wasn't far enough. Thirty years ago, the titles of three articles (Beer et al. 1990; Kotter, 1995 and Beer and Nohria, 2000a) framed change and transformation as failing. However, these authors depicted managing change as failing and encouraged leading change. I had to go back further to fifty years ago to understand this shift. USA corporations and billionaires explicitly requested a shift from management to leadership. Organizational change lost its way in not appreciating that it was managing change which was depicted as failing. The attribution of failure to managers and success to leaders is currently missing from change agency debates. The shift from management to leadership has been very lucrative for business schools, in terms of research, teaching and development income. A sceptic might regard the ongoing persistence of problematic change failure necessitating leadership (please see Grint, 2005) as obscuring further inquiry into the shift from management to leadership. This *Reflection*, concludes with how organizational change scholarship also lost its way.

In being scholarly (please see Elton, 1986), my mental model was always around how organizational change could aid the effective delivery of health and education services. I wanted workshop participants, in different sectors, to know what knowledge in universities and journals, regardless of either institutional or journal status, they should critically question. I wanted practitioners to become scholars, naively believing that academic knowledge used knowingly could change their worlds.

Hughes (2011) was published against a backdrop of many prestigious business schools and elite journals making change failure claims, similar to those in the S.I. I perceived the 'smoke and mirrors' of these claims and their statistics as a breach of trust in what organizations and societies expected of academics. I was urged not to write the 2011 paper and one of the reviewers even recommended rejection. Thankfully, my courage to question existing knowledge and orthodoxy was published.

...management researchers have lost sight of, or strongly downplayed, the most overriding goal and ultimate purpose of management studies, namely to create and produce original knowledge that matters to organizations and society. (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013, p. 140)

Alvesson and Sandberg (2011, 2013) encouraged a shift away from gap-filling research towards more assumption challenging critical scholarship. The title of this *Reflection* acknowledged how much I valued their contribution. Today, their contribution is sadly reminiscent of tumbleweed. Tumbleweed rolling through a knowledge landscape of very shiny and enterprising new university buildings. A landscape populated by academics increasingly contorted and corrupted by academic journal rankings.

Marshall's (2016), *Handbook for Leaders in Higher Education*, was intriguing given her close involvement in the delivery of university leadership development. The handbook prescribed Kotter's (1996/2012) eight steps for senior managers and vice-chancellors in UK universities describing it as a 'classic'. She was entitled to her interpretation. My annoyance was that a knowledge landscape encouraging rigorous research failed to encourage critical scholarship into leading change visited on universities and other organizations. My scholarship (Hughes, 2016b) questioned both the knowledge and ethical credentials of Kotter's (1996/2012) 'classic'. Thankfully, the paper was published in

Leadership, although, even in this critical journal one reviewer recommended rejection, explicitly and pejoratively labelling me as a Taliban scholar.

Similar, to that little boy in *The Sixth Sense* film seeing dead people everywhere, my burden is that I see idealized concepts depicted as empirical realities (Spector, 2016) everywhere. It is a repeated failure by academics to acknowledge idealized concepts being disseminated by business schools and journals as empirical realities which haunts me. Cannot audiences reasonably assume that business schools and journals have applied scholarship to what they disseminate?

Beer and Nohria's (2000a, p. 133) claim that 'the brutal fact is that about 70% of all change initiatives fail' has subsequently been asserted on many business school courses, in many journals and publications. For example, readers of the S.I. were informed that 'some have estimated that about 70% of change initiatives fail' (Hay et al, 2021, p.181). Yes, Hay et al (2021) in the *Human Relations* world of multiple interpretations are entitled to interpret the literature however they choose. However, cannot readers assume that journals have applied scholarship to what they disseminate, didn't this use to be nested within peer review?

Questioning academic change failure claims (Hughes, 2011; By, 2020) was awkward for Schwarz et al's (2018) *Call for Papers* and how they wanted to frame the research-based emergence of change failure in the subsequent S.I. However, this does not excuse completely misrepresenting Hughes (2011) in the S.I. to fit the frame. The undeniable quality of the research in the S.I. does not negate the need for undertaking competent scholarship. The research and scholarship contribution of *Human Relations* over past decades is also undeniable. However, this does not negate the need today for those with editorial office responsibilities to employ competent scholarship and impartiality when investigating claims of misrepresentation.

Today, very clever academics build lucrative careers disparaging the practices of practitioners as failing. They delude themselves that the unchallenged assumptions they disseminate advance social science. When idealized concepts masquerade as empirical realities, neither society nor science is served. They frame a citation about the absence of evidence, as a citation confirming the presence of evidence to maintain their delusion. Powerful academics confer amongst themselves, hiding their activity behind the multiple interpretations of legitimate debate. A debate in which only the interpretations of the powerful prevail. The downside of doublespeak and 'smoke and mirrors' are failures to create and produce knowledge that matters in any possible way to organizations and society. Perhaps, it is time for those academics obsessed with highlighting failures to look closer to home.

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