Pragmatic regimes, discourses and organisational change: Juggling the generic and the particular

Karin Garrety
Ph: +61 2 4221 3565
karin@uow.edu.au

Richard Badham
Ph: +61 2 4221 3634
rbadham@uow.edu.au

Viviane Morrigan
Ph: +61 2 4221 3004
viviane@uow.edu.au

Simon Down
Ph: +61 2 4221 3565
viviane@uow.edu.au

Centre for Change Management
School of Management, Marketing & Employment Relations
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Fax: +61 2 4221 4439

Paper for APROS 2003
Asia-Pacific Researchers in Organisation Studies
International Colloquium
Oaxaca, Mexico
on
7-10 December 2003

Theme:
New World: Translating the Past, Narrating the Present
& Organising the Future

Sub-Theme:
Discourse Analysis and Management Practice
Convenors: David Knights & Ola Bergström

Many organisational theorists now accept the proposition that ‘realities’ (forms of organisation, structures, cultures) do not exist unproblematically ‘out there’, but are discursively constructed through talk and text (Grant et al 1998; Chia 2000; Hardy 2001). Despite widespread acceptance of this idea, however, many aspects of the means through which this feat is accomplished remain mysterious. To what extent are our notions of ‘reality’ the outcomes of creative human agency? To what extent are
they shaped and constrained by pre-existing structures of meaning? How can transient statements and claims be made enduring, so that they can influence beliefs and actions across time and space? How can people be persuaded, through discourse, to alter their habitual ways of thinking and behaving?

In many ways, these questions tap into long-standing debates in the social sciences about the relationships between agency and structure, and micro and macro levels of social analysis. To date, theorists in the field of organisational discourse have not engaged with these debates to any great extent (Reed 1997) partly, perhaps, because of a general skepticism towards the dualisms (agency/structure, micro/macro) upon which they are predicated (Knights 2000). As a result, studies of organizational discourse often examine either localized and voluntaristic episodes of meaning-making (e.g. O'Connor 1995; Vaara 2002) or, in works frequently inspired by Foucault, concentrate on large-scale structures of knowledge/power that transcend and shape the construction of meanings at a local level (e.g. Knights and Morgan 1991; Townley 1993). As Alvesson and Karreman (2000) noted, organizational discourse theorists rarely attempt to examine the micro and the macro, and/or the agential and structural dimensions of meaning-making together, within the same study. (For exceptions see (Covaleski et al 1998; Heracleous and Barrett 2001).

Our aim in this paper is to present and illustrate a framework that can accommodate these different dimensions of meaning-making, and that can explore relationships among them. In doing so, however, we do not propose to re-institute dualism, as advocated by some organizational theorists (e.g. Reed 1997). Instead, drawing on the work of Laurent Thévenot and Norbert Wiley, two theorists rarely cited in the organisational studies literature, we present a model that differentiates people’s constructions of, and engagements with, social ‘realities’ into three regimes (rather than levels). The first is personal, private and intrasubjective. This is where we locate personal interpretations and preferences, and idiosyncratic arrangements and routines. The second is a realm of communicative interaction, where joint meanings are negotiated and articulated. The third is a more overarching, enduring and public regime, in which macrostructural and generic discourses capable of shaping actions and beliefs across time and space are located. What differentiates this scheme from many others that recognize the micro and macro dimensions of social life is its inclusion of a realm of social interaction that lies between individual selves and broad social structures. As Wiley (1988) noted, many social theorists, including Durkheim and Saussure, neglect this interactive realm (see also Sawyer 2001). Another distinctive feature of this framework is that the regimes do not sit, disconnectedly, on top of each other, as a
‘levels’ metaphor might suggest. Instead, they necessarily interpenetrate each other. In many social situations, we can observe people moving dexterously among them.

We illustrate the framework with data from a long-term ethnographic study of organizational change at an Australian steelmaking plant. Organisational change is a particularly fruitful field in which to illustrate the model, as it encompasses all three regimes. Many writers on change, however, like social theorists more generally, neglect the interactive realm. They often equate ‘the change’ with the prescriptive intentions of managers and consultants, without examining how those changes are (or are not) negotiated and instituted through on-going social interaction. Sometimes they examine the individual perceptions and reactions of the targets of change, portraying them as passively accepting, actively resistant, or ambivalent (Casey 1995; Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Casey 1999; Ezzy 2001; Timo 2001). In other words, like Durkheim and Saussure, they make jumps between individual subjectivities and social structural elements.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce our research site and sources of data. Next, we discuss the theoretical framework in greater detail. We then use it to explore the different regimes of discourse and practice that are set in train when attempts are made to change an organisation’s culture. We conclude with a brief discussion about the advantages of our approach, and what it can help us to understand about the nature of change, and organisational discourse in general.

The research site and our data

The research was conducted in Cokemaking Oz, a division of an integrated steel plant in Australia (Steelmaking Oz). It employs approximately 480 people, mostly men. The plant is dirty and dangerous. Its most prominent feature are hundreds of tall, narrow ovens, collectively called batteries. In these ovens, ground coal is cooked for approximately 18 hours at high temperatures to produce coke. When cooked, the coke is ‘pushed’ into ‘hot cars’, ‘quenched’ with water, and sent off to the nearby blast furnaces, where is it used to make steel. The process is technically complex and ultimately unpredictable. Many different people, objects and processes need to be simultaneously controlled to keep ovens, oven doors, gas supplies, and the pushing machines (called rams) in good working order.

The steelmaking plant has been operating since 1928, and has a long history of industrial disputation. The cokemaking division has long been considered the ‘arse-end’ of the steelworks, characterised by
rigid hierarchy, distrust, conflict, frequent machine breakdowns, and early pushing of ovens, a practice that while allowing workers to go home early, results in poorer quality coke, damage to the ovens and pollution of the environment. In 1998, a new plant manager – Garry – was appointed to Cokemaking Oz. Garry had a reputation for successfully bringing about culture change in other areas of Steelmaking Oz, and his brief was to improve the culture and performance of the cokemaking division. At the beginning of 1999, he engaged the services of an external consultant to lead a participative job redesign process based on the normative principles outlined in Whiteley (1995). Around the same time, he also granted permission for a team of researchers from the University of Wollongong to study the change process, and to provide additional assistance and facilitation whenever we, the managers, HR people or other workers thought it might be helpful.

We have had an unusually high degree of access to the plant. Over the past four and a half years, we have attended many meetings of management and employee groups, shadowed work teams and managers for days at a time, carried out many formal and informal conversations and interviews and in some cases have formed personal friendships with people working at the plant. Our data consist of thousands of pages of notes from meetings, transcripts of taped interviews, assorted company documents, photographs, videos and our personal reflections. Our engagement with the plant has allowed us to follow the participative job redesign from its initial introduction through to its partial implementation. We have also been fortunate to witness a second wave of change, which began in mid-2002. This change was initiated by the CEO of Steelmaking Oz – Garry’s manager – and is based on the principles outlined in Jaques (1989). Its formal rhetoric is quite different in nature to the earlier change program. While the earlier change can be described as normative, according to the criteria set out by Barley and Kunda (1992), the more recent change is rationalistic in nature. Although the latter change was still underway when we ceased data collection in mid-2003, we have sufficient information about its introduction to present some tentative comparisons and conclusions.

Theoretical framework

People who work at Cokemaking Oz do so within a complex environment. Like all socialised humans, they must first make sense of and manage themselves - their reactions, thoughts, emotions and actions. In a never-ending round of work tasks and meetings, they interact with other people, and a variety of compliant and recalcitrant (and sometimes deadly) material objects and machines. Permeating the whole work environment are an array of systems designed to rationalise and control the production
process – oven pushing and maintenance schedules, procedures that govern access to dangerous spaces, audits of safety equipment and practices, computerised systems for recording and comparing key performance indicators, to name but a few. As well as all this, there are the periodic moves to reorganise and change the whole organisation, incrementally or radically altering people’s work relationships and commitments, and their tasks and responsibilities, in a constant quest for increased efficiency and productivity. In a parallel manner, we as academics are confronted with a mass of complex data – individual interviews that express personal perceptions, thoughts and emotions, meeting notes and observations in which social interactions are the key data, and formal documents, systems and practices that reflect attempts to control or change aspects of the organisation in ways that transcend the experiences of any particular individuals or groups.

Workers at Cokemaking Oz, and we as academics, thus experience, and engage with, a world that can, to some degree, be differentiated into ‘things’ (discourses, material objects, practices, ideas, ‘facts’) that are close, idiosyncratic and personal, and those that are more general and far-reaching in their implications. Although interactions among these different ‘levels’ of ‘reality’ have long been of interest to social theorists (Giddens 1979; Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Archer 1995) they have not yet gained much attention from organizational discourse theorists. In common with Hardy (2001, p. 41), we see the exploration of these interactions as one of the most interesting and important problems currently facing organisational discourse theorists. In struggling to understand how localized, idiosyncratic episodes of meaning making are linked to broader structures of knowledge, we can go some way towards understanding how discourses can be said to construct ‘reality’.

In exploring these issues, we (Garrety et al 2002; Garrety et al 2003) have turned to symbolic interactionism and recent French social theory, two traditions whose fundamental propositions and approaches are sympathetic to one another (Dosse 1999). Symbolic interactionism is useful for our purposes because it focuses on the collective construction of meanings through social interaction. The French stream of social theory, among whom we find the actor-network theorists, have produced some fresh and innovative ways of describing and analyzing the complexity of our contemporary world. A major contribution has been their assertion that we should take account of the roles that material objects in play in the coordination of action.

In keeping with the French tradition’s focus on action, Laurent Thévenot is primarily interested in practices – in how people engage with their physical and social environments - and on the conceptions
of ‘the good’ that drive those engagements. He is interested in how people switch, largely without reflection, between micro and macro level concerns – how ‘in our contemporary societies human beings constantly need to change the scope of their engagement, shifting along a scale between greater and lesser generality’ (2001, p. 57). At Cokemaking Oz, for example, much discursive activity is directed towards the creation, maintenance and enforcement of broad-scale generic systems – safety procedures, systems for reporting anomalies, production schedules and so on. At the same time, people are also engaged in private routines and practices – decisions about what to have for lunch, for instance, or whether to leave an office window open or closed. At one moment, a manager may be writing a report on the impact of coke prices on production schedules (a fairly general act, aimed at coordinating action across the whole plant), and in the next, she might decide to put her jacket on (an act which, in normal circumstances, is much less general, concerned as it might be with transient and local considerations such as momentary comfort).\footnote{Putting on a jacket can, of course, have multiple meanings and impacts, depending on the situation. But in this example, we are using it as an example of something a person might do primarily for personal comfort. As such, it is a ‘micro’ action,} According to Thévenot, actions like these cannot be satisfyingly analyzed with a single generic notion of ‘practice’ (nor, for that matter, can all talk and text be fruitfully analysed with a single notion of ‘discourse’). Instead, Thévenot proposed that we differentiate among three interrelated ‘pragmatic regimes’ within which most of our engagements with the world can be located.

The first of Trévenot’s regimes (illustrated above by the example of the manager putting her jacket on) is an intimate ‘regime of familiarity’ which ‘rests on an accustomed dependency with a neighborhood of things and people’ (p. 68). In our homes and workplaces we develop idiosyncratic routines, arrangements of objects and relationships that reflect our individual personalities and preferences. The ‘good’ towards which these practices are oriented is personal convenience. The practices are not always ‘social’ in the customary meaning of the word, that is, ‘in the sense of an act oriented towards other people’ (p. 66), because they pertain to individuals in relation to their familiar objects. For example, people who work with machines for extended periods of time often develop relationships with them. They know, for instance, that if the machine makes a certain noise, it helps to switch it off for a while, or to thump it in a particular spot.

The next regime – that of ‘regular planned action’ is more conventionally social. It takes us out of the personal and idiosyncratic into a zone of mutually comprehensible and (more or less) coordinated
social interaction. This is where we see what Thévenot calls ‘ordinary semantics and action’ (p. 67) oriented towards the accomplishment of particular collective goals. This is the interactive realm of communicating selves that lies between discrete individuals and the collective representations we can designate as ‘structure’ or ‘culture’. At Cokemaking Oz, a great deal of activity takes place in this interactive regime, as managers attend meetings and talk about who should do what, and when, and teams of workers cooperate to fill ovens with coal and push coke into hot cars ready for transportation to the blast furnaces.

Interwoven with these two regimes, however, is a third, more macrosocial one – the ‘public regime of justification’ - in which we can locate (among many other things) the discourses that advocate organisational change. This regime is concerned with establishing and legitimating the collective good in a way that transcends particular situations. It is closely linked to the work of professionals – consultants, engineers, managers, legislators in industrial relations – who construct and legislate what is ‘rational’, ‘good’ and ‘true’. Instead of being couched in ‘ordinary semantics and action’ (as in the regime of planned action), information in the regime of justification is typically formalised, generic and/or codified, so that it can shape, constrain and legitimate actions and practices across a variety of situations. The products of this regime are in many ways similar to Giddens’ expert systems – ‘systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today’ (Giddens 1990, p. 27).

Trévenot formulated his pragmatic regimes as a means of differentiating, but also connecting, practices in the most microsocial of situations with those that occur on a macrosocial scale. Norbert Wiley (1988) was also interested in identifying and connecting micro and macro dimensions of social ‘reality’. However, while Thévenot focussed on practices and forms of agency oriented towards conceptualisations of the good, Wiley was concerned with the types of subjectivities that are of interest to theorists working at different levels (this is a term that Wiley uses). While agency implies outwardly directed action, subjectivity as a concept is focussed more on the inner processes that are an integral part of people’s interactions with their environments. It encompasses self-reflection, emotions and identity construction. Despite these differences in emphasis, Wiley’s levels mesh quite neatly with the pragmatic regimes proposed by Thévenot, and add a useful dimension to them. Because organisational change (and stasis) and subjectivity are inseparable, Wiley’s observations help us to make sense of the and not designed to have impacts beyond the here-and-now. It is therefore quite different in nature to the construction of a production schedule.
types of subjectivities that are expressed and invoked in the different pragmatic regimes that people are engaged in as they go about the business of change (or stasis).

In Wiley’s scheme, the most microsocial level of analysis is concerned with the individual self and intra-subjectivity. Following a symbolic interactionist path, Wiley favors a conceptualisation of the self that is continuously engaged in internal dialogue, social learning and adjustment as it interacts with its environment. This view is compatible with Thévenot’s concept of the agent in the regime of familiarity as a ‘personality attached to his or her entourage’ (p. 67). While Thévenot downplays internal dialogue, and Wiley makes no mention of material objects, both theorists eschew the notion of an autonomous self, disconnected from the local milieu in which it is situated.

Wiley’s next level, like Thévenot’s regime of planned action, focusses on situated human interaction. This is where ‘subjects combine into a dialectic, which might be called joint or merged (or ‘inter’) subjectivity’ (Wiley 1988). As we noted in the introduction, Wiley criticises many social theorists for omitting this interactive level from their analyses. According to him, ‘Individual representations (thoughts, feelings, ‘intentions’) become merged or synthesized, in the limited sense in which they do, not directly into supra-interactive structures but into face-to-face conversations and interactions’ (p. 258). Structure and culture then ‘emerge’ from this interaction, not from a collection of individual perceptions. Likewise, moving in the opposite direction, formal discourses outlining structural and cultural change (such as those promoted and circulated in Cokemaking Oz) do not impact directly on workers’ subjectivities and practical routines. Instead their meanings and effects are mediated through the interactive realm.

Wiley’s next level – the structural or macro level of analysis - shares with Thévenot’s regime of justification a focus on the generic features of social organisation. In this regime,

the defining feature…is that concrete human beings, subjects, are no longer present. Selves are left behind at the interactive level. Social structure implies a generic self, an interchangeable part – as filler of roles and follower of rules – but not concrete, individualized selves. (p. 258)

It is important to note that it is not only social theorists and academics who adopt a structural perspective when analysing social phenomena. As Thévenot noted, agents engaged in ordinary and extraordinary social activities frequently slip into and adopt macrosocial perspectives and concepts
when they invoke, create and argue the collective good. This is particularly true of organizational ‘change agents’ who typically conjure up generic selves as elements of a rejuvenated organisational structure or culture. The difficulty, as we explicate below, comes in translating the qualities of these desirable yet imaginary generic selves into the intra- and inter-subjective worlds of the real flesh and blood individuals who populate the plant.

**What about discourse?**

The framework presented above does not explicitly focus on discourse, and Thévenot and Wiley are not discourse theorists. However, if we define discourse as the talk and texts through which people collectively construct various versions of ‘reality’, then the framework above is permeated with discourse, as it is the ‘stuff’ through which agents/subjects, in their different regimes and levels, construct their identities, interact with each other and create and negotiate social structural elements or collective ‘goods’.

Organisational change is, of course, all about the collective negotiation of what is and will be ‘good’ for organisations in the future. There are many formal statements about how change *should* be managed – texts such as Whiteley (1995) and Jaques (1989), numerous journal articles and manifestos from consultancy firms. Because of their generic nature, and their orientations toward public and collective goods, we can conceptually locate these texts in a public regime of justification that straddles multiple organisations. Through the work of managers, consultants and/or human resources personnel, they are often brought into individual organisations, where they become part of a more localised public regime – one in which actors debate the collective good of their own organisation. This debate occurs in the communicative, intersubjective realm (Thévenot’s regime of regular planned action), which includes the myriad meetings and informal conversations through which people in organisations attempt to customise, install, forestall, subvert and/or resist the more generic discourses. Regimes of familiarity are brought into these debates, as participants articulate personal preferences and beliefs, and attempt to guide the negotiation of the common good in directions compatible with their own convenience. In this way, the regimes interpenetrate one another. In the next section, we use the framework outlined above to present an interpretation of two consecutive change initiatives introduced into Cokemaking Oz.
An attempt at normative change – Whiteley, the onion model and the coke guide

In 1999, Garry, the new plant manager at Cokemaking Oz, initiated a change process inspired by Whiteley (1995). This normative ‘core values’ approach is based on the assumption that because culture is ‘person-made’ (p. 23) people can, through communication, create new cultures:

Each person can seek genuine dialectic, agreeing through the process of disagreeing until each has confirmed or transcended an individual view, giving to and taking from each other. From the original two worlds of meanings [managers and workers] comes a third world: a synergy. From this synergy can come new ideas, structures, processes or even philosophy (p. 29)

The consultant employed to facilitate the change at Cokemaking Oz is a colleague of Whiteley and a contributor to the text. During a series of meetings in February 1999, he introduced the change program to each team of operators and managers in the plant. To illustrate the various components of the forthcoming change process, he employed a diagram consisting of four concentric circles, which later came to be known throughout the plant as ‘the onion model’ (this was a modification of the diagram depicted in Whiteley 1995 p. 82). At the centre of the inner circle were three segments – ‘mission, vision, values’, ‘strategic objectives’ and ‘customers and stakeholders’. Dotted throughout the outer circles (moving outwards) were ‘job design’, ‘work teams’, ‘layout’, ‘technology’, and other terms encapsulating aspects of operations, with items such as ‘symbolic messages’ and ‘recruitment’ on the outer circle. According to the consultant, cultural change could be effected by beginning at the centre of the circle, negotiating the meanings of the items contained therein, and then moving outwards, reorganising other aspects of the organisation in line with what lies at the core. The onion model was a symbolic means of bringing the generic claims and principles of the Whiteley text (a discourse located in a public regime of justification) into Cokemaking Oz.

During the introductory meetings, the consultant invoked the generic subjectivities that are typical of the justificatory regime of social engagement. For example, the ‘we’ in his statement, ‘We can no longer manage through rules and structure' refers to everyone and no-one in particular. In the new organisation, he said, agreed core values would replace structure as 'the rules by which we want to
relate to each other’. In order to operationalise the onion model (or move it into the regime of planned action) the consultant and HR personnel designed a process in which a group of workers and managers from across the plant (the working party) would meet weekly over a period of eighteen months to redesign work according to the method loosely outlined in the onion model. The group would be facilitated by in-house human resources personnel, with occasional visits by the consultant. The redesign would involve periodic rounds of consultation with the broader workforce through a series of communication sessions. In these sessions, working party members would present the results of their work so far, and gather feedback to take back to the working party. This feedback was supposed to inform the ongoing work of redesign, with the end-result being a new culture and set of work practices that reflected the collective vision, values and preferences of the workforce.

Members of the working party – a cross-section of superintendents, operators and supervisors - were selected during a two day meeting in March. Initially there were twelve, but the number changed over time as some members left in frustration, and new people joined. The group would typically meet on Wednesdays for approximately eight hours. Discussions were frequently rambling, peppered with jokes and banter, and sometimes emotional and conflictual. Despite this, it did not take the group long to define the central items in the onion model, coming up with a ‘combined vision’ consisting of items such as ‘better working conditions’ ‘fairness’ and ‘autonomy’. The values were equally unsurprising – ‘respect each others views and opinions’, ‘be prepared to listen for understanding’ and so on. These ‘motherhood’ statements – ostensibly oriented towards the collective public good –were recorded on paper and attached to the meeting room walls.

From the outset, workers’ personal conveniences shaped their engagements with the working party process much more than the generic considerations encapsulated within the values, vision and mission that were supposed to guide the process. During the first round of communication sessions, held in April, many workers took the opportunity to raise grievances about their specific work arrangements:

When I was operating the ram, the whole carriage rose up. I asked the foreman and he called maintenance. Maintenance came and looked and said it was working OK. He didn’t spend a longer time to see why… A few minutes later the whole carriage lifted off the rails – because the bracket that holds the car on had broken. So don’t just listen - take action.(communication session 14 April 1999)
Joe, an electrician and member of the working party, reported the perceptions of his workmates as follows:

People are continually frustrated about things happening and nothing gets done about it. Some say it’s not our job, so we say whose job is it? Many people think that the working party is here to fix things. I have told [name] that it isn’t, and he says ‘ Fuck the working party, if it’s not here to fix things, then fuck it’. We need to publish something about what the role of the working party is (working party meeting 23 June 1999).

The working party included members from senior management and the shopfloor. Long-standing and more immediate conflicts between these two groups were often aired at working party meetings. The interactive forums were arenas for articulating disjunctions between regimes of familiarity and regimes of justification. That is, managerial ‘systems’ and expectations were presented as being at odds with the practices and convenience of workers:

Joe (electrician): The only way they [shopfloor workers] know how to get things fixed is to go on strike. That was the way they got the hot car windows fixed

Tom (superintendent): How do we get an informal way of solving the routine normal things into a routine formally for everything – an event system? We are looking at priorities, and the people in charge of fixing things don’t understand your priorities. They don’t know your priorities.

Craig (operator): Because you don’t stand on their desk like I do. If every time the charger filled up with smoke, your office filled up too, then you would fix it (working party meeting 23 June 1999).

The grievances here are with the generic ‘systems’ that are supposed to facilitate the local convenience of the operators. With his image of what would happen if the superintendent’s office filled up with smoke, Craig deftly links personal discomforts and (desires for, movements toward) action. The conflict illustrates different ways in which discomforts can be brought into, and dealt with, in the public arena – through strike action, or through formal systems. The route taken depends on social location and resources.
At times, concepts from the onion model were invoked to move the discussion away from interpersonal conflict and negotiation into a realm of greater generality, in which orientations toward common goods were supposed to neutralize and over-ride personal grievances (but not always successfully). The following example was part of another management versus worker conflict. Tony, an operator and union delegate, had expressed disgust at the fact that Steelmaking Oz had recently lost a great deal of money because of bad investment decisions by top executives. At the same time, those executives benefited from large bonus payments.

Tony (operator): There are people we have to answer to when we fuck up, but who do they answer to? They make up the rules. They cover their arses

Tom (superintendent): How much chance have I got to get rules that I decide get implemented?

Tony: When it is agreed …

Tom: That’s it – agreed. If we do things that have different values, then we have a fight, and you come from the values of the wages guys, and you can’t fault them…. I wouldn’t have a problem with you because of your principles, but others that go home and don’t perform, who go home fifteen minutes early, despite what is agreed to, they are the ones I will have a problem with…. We need to understand each other, and see where we are coming from. We need a common value system… .

Steve (supervisor): How strong do you think the values written up there really are? They’re words. We stay down here (working party meeting 1 September 1999)

The illustrations above are drawn from the regime of planned action – the zone of interaction and inter-subjectivity in which those who took on the task of organisational change tried to operationalise the onion model into a new set of agreed values and work practices. They did this by sometimes shifting to a regime of familiarity (‘I wouldn't have a problem with you ... they are the ones I will have a problem with’) and to a regime of justification (‘We need a common value system ... We need to recognise it’). The disjunctions and conflict highlight the co-existence and interpenetration of different pragmatic regimes, and illustrate how the task of organising and changing is a constant struggle to align and reconcile the particular and the generic.

The onion model, as a generic guide, was too vague to effect changes in any particular sets of working practices. In order to create conditions in which such changes might occur, members of the working party decided that the end-product of their deliberations would be a set of ‘scenarios’ outlining
different ways of working. These would be constructed in consultation with the workforce, and informed by a sociotechnical analysis of jobs at the plant and visits to other worksites. Although necessarily constructed through the regime of planned action, the scenarios were mechanisms for connecting regimes of familiarity to more the generic principles oriented towards the collective good, as they would allow workers to imagine how the proposed changes would affect their personal routines and conveniences. The workforce would be invited to choose a scenario through a ballot.

When the working party began talking about scenarios, other people among the workforce began to take more interest in what they were doing. As a visitor to the working party said, ‘People out there only get turned on by scenarios and sacred cows, they don’t care about this other shit’ (working party meeting 4 May 2000). Here again, we see links between the regime of justification and that of familiarity:

Visitor: What made me come here today is the scenarios, and people who are not even involved in our job, making a drawing about my future…. There are some scenarios that expect me to come down here and perform my job as a regulator and have time to sweep the bench (working party meeting April 5 2000)

The task of producing scenarios was complex and difficult. They depended on key assumptions and variables, for example, shift length (eight or twelve hours), number of crews (four or five) and possible future manning levels. Whenever one assumption was changed, others also had to be adjusted. The consultant became frustrated with the members’ search for ground rules; ‘All you’ve got is a vision you are striving for, and values about how to proceed, and you guys keep wanting a formula!’ (5 April 2000). The problem here was how to move from one form of the generic (values and vision) to another (a new set of formal and generic working arrangements) when that route involved a detour through some very specific and idiosyncratic considerations. As the working party members apprehended (but the consultant didn’t seem to appreciate), formulas are indeed very useful for moving between the particular and the generic. In the end, the working party decided to work on and present only one scenario for acceptance or rejection.

Even with a single scenario, it was difficult to flesh out all the details of the new work arrangements that the working party, with input from the rest of the workforce, considered desirable. They made a decision to split the change into two phases. In November 2000, they released the first version of the
new scenario as a 120-page long Coke Guide. Under the new arrangements, shifts would be twelve hours long instead of eight hours. Salaries would be annualised, thereby removing overtime. To deal with emergencies, workers would be on call. Shift changeovers would also be ‘hot seat’, that is, workers on one shift would not leave their jobs until their replacements in the next shift had arrived. Details pertaining to the subsequent phase 2 were left out.

The most contentious aspect of the new working arrangements related to the move to annualised salaries. Under the old system, workers could earn considerable amounts of extra money by working overtime. In the new system, salaries would remain constant, regardless of the hours worked. To cover the necessity for periodic overtime during periods of emergency or short-staffing, the working party suggested there be an ‘additional hours component’ included in the salary package. The number of hours was not stipulated in the first version of the Guide, as the working party believed that it required further discussion. As the Guide was circulated, there was heated debate about the additional hours component. This was an issue that linked personal convenience to public regimes of justification in terms of both working rules and concepts of ‘fairness’. Other departments within Steelmaking Oz that had adopted twelve hour shifts paid the equivalent of six hours a week overtime. In Cokemaking Oz, because of budgetary constraints and other idiosyncratic factors, management and some members of the working party wanted to opt for five hours. The following exchange took place in a working party meeting in March 2001:

Kim (superintendent): We have a good package but there is a lot of haggling around one more hour of overtime. If we go to Ross [a top steelmaking executive whose approval was needed], we will have an argument for five, and we can win that because information sits behind it, but we can’t win six.’
Steve (supervisor): Time for a break
Kim: No, that is avoidance. The time for a break is when we have sorted this out. We are avoiding it. I want to know why if anyone is going to walk out of here without being committed to 5 hours. It is about us taking responsibility for our decisions, and making an argument that we can take out to management and to the shopfloor. (throws red pen on the floor) Before we go I want to see a number on the board, will someone write it up?
Dave the visitor puts up ‘8’.
Bruce (operator, working party member) puts up ‘4’
Tony (operator): You want to haggle, and …
Dave visitor: If I go back to the blokes with five, they will say you are a fucking idiot. They know someone in the hot strip mill who gets six hours.

In the end, an additional hours component of five hours was included, along with other changes, in the second version of the Coke Guide (174 pages), released in March 2001. Aspects of phase 2 were now fleshed out, with sections of the Coke Guide outlining ideas about ‘master operators’ and career paths. Voting took place in April 2001 and just over 70% voted for acceptance. Although this was less than the 100% that had been hoped for, Garry deemed the package accepted. Twelve hour shifts were implemented in July 2001.

The ballot paper contained a space for voters to write comments. Many of these, on the part of both acceptors and rejecters, raised objections to the additional hours component being set at five hours. For those who opposed the package on these grounds, a justificatory principle of ‘fairness’ (getting the same as the blokes in the hot strip mill) combined with personal convenience (more money) overrode the justifications of the working party and management in cokemaking, even if these were combined with the personal convenience of twelve hour shifts (longer periods of leisure). Despite the change agents’ efforts to achieve consensus through the negotiation of shared values, vision and mission, alternative views persisted, demonstrating the elusiveness of a complete alignment of pragmatic regimes of engagement.

**An attempt at rationalistic change - The Requisite Organisation & Proudfoot**

During the second half of 2002, some employees at cokemaking began to wonder what had happened to phase 2 of the normative change. Supervisors began sending e-mails to the senior managers, asking ‘why aren’t you doing something?’ A number of meetings were held to discuss how phase 2 should proceed (Badham and Garrety 2003). However, at about this time, another change program began to have an impact. This program was initiated by the CEO of Steelmaking Oz, the larger, broader company of which Cokemaking Oz was but one division.

The new direction was inspired by the system set out in Eliot Jaques’ 1989 text *The Requisite Organisation*. In many ways, this initiative was the antithesis of the cultural change program that had been underway in Cokemaking Oz for the past three and a half years. It was top-down and prescriptive. Rather than being slow, participative, and based on an effort to achieve consensus, its major focus was
on the relatively rapid and precise delineation of the roles and responsibilities of each employee. A document circulated in Steelmaking Oz gives a flavour of this change as manifested in a generic, formal outline:

Strategies underway to achieve these capabilities [better performance, efficiency etc] include:
- Restructuring - from top to bottom whereby roles, accountabilities, discretionary authority and job capabilities are being made crystal clear, providing individuals with greater understanding of what is expected of them …

We have agreed to use the model known as the Requisite Organisation to design the new structure. The prime philosophy behind this model is managerial accountability, meaning that all levels of management are clear about their accountability for specific outcomes.

In terms of implementing this model, we are using a "top down" approach. The essence is to "lead from the top" by progressively restructuring and improving managerial capability and assigning accountability one level at a time, starting with the [senior] management team and working down to first line supervisor level. We believe that systematically driving changed behaviour through all levels of leadership, starting with the most senior leadership group, will generate sustained improvement throughout the whole organisation

Although the formal change programs were quite different, there were the same problems with aligning discourses and practices across pragmatic regimes. Again, the tensions were played out in the interactive realm where, in their negotiations over what the new changes meant, managers and other employees constantly shifted between the personal and idiosyncratic on one hand, and the generic and formal on the other.

Again, people’s initial engagements with this change process were through the pragmatic regimes that were closest and most personal. At the time the change initiative began to have an impact in Cokemaking Oz, the first author was attending a weekly meeting of cokemaking managers (who would become the level 2 managers in the new organisation). The overwhelming initial concern expressed at these meetings was how to replace the front line supervisors who would soon be engaged in full-time training:
Trevor: How will we manage with three people less? They’ll be out of the system for six months. I got information yesterday about who’ll be going for interviews when.
Albert: People will be away for 25 weeks and then come back and train us.
Dennis: No-one asked us how we could replace these guys while they’re away. What organization’s got that much fat in it? (Cokemaking leadership team 25 September 2002)

The same sort of response occurred further down the hierarchy. The following exchange took place at a meeting held to introduce the program to the supervisors (level 1 managers):

Tom: The Proudfoot coaching will happen after Christmas. Maybe you guys have questions and comments? [Proudfoot is the consulting firm that is facilitating the change]
Unidentified speaker: Annual leave relief? Who’s going to cover?
(supervisors meeting 18 November 2002)

The change program, which came to be known as ‘Proudfoot’, was a process in which each level of manager defined the tasks and responsibilities of those below him or her. Individual subjectivities disappear in this system. The focus is no longer on employees and their subjective values and commitments, but rather on the tasks that need to be done. To formalise these, Steelmaking Oz produced graphs that level 2 managers had to fill out in order to define the ‘requisite performance drivers’ for the front-line supervisors beneath them in the hierarchy. ‘Targets’ were outlined, and various measures produced to manage and assess performance. This required some juggling between the generic and the particular. The following is from a meeting of level 2 managers:

Nick: One of the targets should be zero harm.
Matt (Proudfoot trainer): Yes, but concentrate on process. You’ve got no choice. This is edicted.
Dennis: It should translate into routines etcetera for the supervisors. Pick shit in here according to what you want your guys to do in the twelve hours. What do they walk around for now? What do they look for? It shouldn’t be new work. […]
Matt: It is new work, but it shouldn’t be. Back to the diagram. The target for level 1’s is daily stuff, so frequency should be at least once a day.
Dennis: I got a different story. Ross related frequency to tool use. How often do you use the tool?
Matt: At level 1 the frequency is daily. Less often goes to level 2.
Albert and Scott don't agree. Their guys have different sorts of jobs. The maintenance management system spurs stuff out, tells people what to do. It’s not necessarily daily.

Dennis: Maintenance might have to be rearranged
(cokemaking leadership team meeting 11 December 2002).

When questioned, senior managers were able to reconcile this more rationalistic and prescriptive approach with the earlier attempt to encourage autonomy and consensus. The following comes from an interview:

Well, what’s really happened is that the initiative that Garry took to say, ‘Right, let’s change all this’ has moved on. The waves that we’ve been making are getting swamped by a bigger wave and we’ve had lots of… I don’t know if you’ve been in meetings with the crews, but [they say]: ‘Alright, so this means we’re throwing this other stuff out the window then?’.. [answer] ‘Why would we do that? […] It’s not back to “I’m the boss & you’re not”. Where does it say that? It just says, for clarity, who’s responsible now’. All the methodologies we’ve used in the past about how you get people to help you get things done, still hold. You still want to have a committed and capable workforce. You still want to engage people. All those things still have to happen. But now you have some clarity about who it is that wants it to happen and who’s going to take the fall if it goes bad and who’s going to take the praise if it goes good. But the optionality that we’ve allowed for things to happen has to stop for the things that shouldn’t be optional (interview 23 January 2003).

Another senior manager drew stronger distinctions between the two approaches, but still viewed them as compatible:

….and certainly this strong accountability, strongly hierarchical structure is something that we haven’t seen hints of in the company since the late 1960s-early 1970s. Those of us who watched the thirty year journey… We’ve seen the company go off into a flatter, consultative yeah softer fluffier thing about, you know, people just mucking in together in a more loose sense. So this is to some degree in my mind a significant change in direction from… yeah, probably let’s say the 90s. If the 90s was a decade of consultation and workplace reform based around consensus.. I think we should be careful I guess, not replacing that but really trying to augment the consultative process now with some clear accountabilities. I suspect that what we were
experiencing was that twenty people would get around a table and talk about something and all feel satisfied that they had had a say but then no one would take the responsibility to go and achieve something out of that activity. Whereas now somebody in the group has clearly got the role to kick the goal (interview with Dennis, 23 April 2003)

Such attempts to reconcile the two approaches, however, took place mostly in a regime of justification that was somewhat removed from the idiosyncratic practices of shopfloor workers and front-line supervisors. The following extract from an interview with a technician juxtaposes the justificatory rhetoric of the managers with workers’ regimes of familiarity and highlights the tension that arises at that interface:

Simon: You’re still not confident that [Proudfoot] is going to work. What do you mean by that - you know it won’t work?
Darryl: Well, it will work to varying degrees I think. Because of the people here… There’s such a wide variety of people that work here - from people that have come in like myself.. I have a mate that’s only been here a couple of years and he’s like, ‘Let’s go, let’s get in, let’s get it done’ and then there’s the people that have been here thirty years who go, ‘I’ll do it later. I’ve got to have my crib, blah blah’. So to me, I think, they’re going to struggle to get the results that they think they’re going to get (interview 22 January 2003).

On the shopfloor, closer engagements with the production process can render managerial justifications irrelevant, or secondary to the tasks at hand, which may or may not align with the prescriptions that come down from above. Dave, who has been a front-line supervisor for twenty-four years, expressed his views as follows:

Dave: This Proudfoot shit… It's common sense. This is stuff we've had most of our life in the Coke Ovens. Proudfoot's just a different name.
Viviane: OK. The other interesting thing, though, is for me the Proudfoot stuff seems to be the opposite to what was happening with the Coke Guide, in that Proudfoot is very hierarchical, you know, one up, one down, that sort of stuff. Whereas the Coke Guide talk was all about …
Dave: …was all about the same level. OK. Proudfoot was very structured in its presentation. I'd say it's the supervisor’s level, and what they expect of the supervisors to perform. That's the way I read Proudfoot. Nothing really changed with me as far as going to Proudfoot because I
believe that a five-week three-hour course is not going to change your life. (Laughs.) And I believe that is probably how a lot of the other people thought, too. You either got that instinct in you from the day you were born or you haven't got that instinct. You either want to work and have that drive, or you haven't got that drive (interview 10 June 2003).

Steve, an operator on Dave’s crew had a similar view,

Viviane: How has the Proudfoot training about a requisite organization impacted on your commitment to the organization?
Steve: I wouldn't have a clue what it's all about. ... It's all still the same. They didn't need to change. That's the thing. They try to bring in all these you beaut ideas to change things. And it's up to the individual if he's gonna work. You can't make a person work if he's lazy. You know what I mean? That person's not gonna do his job, no matter who you put in charge or whatever happens. ...
Viviane: Did the supervisors say anything to you about Proudfoot?
Steve: Oh, a waste of time. ... (interview 9 June 2003).

Dave and Steve both locate their work ethic in a familiar, intrasubjective realm in a way that depicts it as independent of the more public regime in which generic work structures and concepts are played out. Interestingly, Dave’s crew is widely regarded in Cokemaking Oz as the best performing of the five that work there. Dave’s disengagement and cynicism regarding the change process, and his simultaneous apparently strong commitment to the organisation, illustrates that compliance with organizational goals can be a paradoxical phenomenon. There is no necessary link between commitment and the formal rhetorics that are circulated through change programs. The good towards which Dave and Steve were oriented was successful conventional action found in 'common sense ... stuff we've had most of our life in Coke Ovens' (Dave) and 'it's all still the same. They didn't need to change' (Steve). Both also mobilised the private regime of familiarity, bringing together the personal and the local by mobilising towards the good of having the right 'instinct' or 'drive' (Dave) or 'individual' attributes of 'wanting to work' or being 'lazy' (Steve). We see therefore, that linkages among the different regimes do not necessarily and naturally fall into place. Instead, they require considerable negotiation, and the interfaces among them are sites where disjunctions, contradictions and conflicts can become apparent.
Conclusion

A concentration on the formal and generic manifestations of the two change programs outlined above could lead theorists to conclude that there were marked differences between them. While the first sought to alter working practices through a consensus informed by common values, the second was top-down and prescriptive. As such they fall respectively into Barley and Kunda’s (1992) categorizations of the normative and the rational. However, by taking the regimes of familiarity and planned regular action into account, the differences become much less apparent. For many, work proceeded more or less as usual. It was not the guiding ideologies of the regime of justification that were of paramount importance in the workplace, but the practical effects that each had on localised regimes of familiarity, namely, the move to twelve hour shifts, the number of hours included in the ‘additional hours component’, and the lengthy and intrusive Proudfoot training. These ‘realities’ were not direct products of the formal schemes outlined in Whiteley (1995) and Jaques (1989), but products of the regime of regular planned action, in which alignments between the generic programs (the onion model, the ‘requisite performance drivers’) and personalized work routines (shifts, pay, daily tasks) were constructed, tested and negotiated. The interactive regime thus provided a mechanism in which the other two (the familiar, the justificatory) could be brought together, generating disjunction and conflict as well productive action in the direction of change.

In our exploration and application of the three-dimensional framework inspired by Thévenot and Wiley, we have endeavored not to reify the micro and the macro. Instead, we have attempted to describe and analyse how actors in an organizational setting weave micro (close, familiar, idiosyncratic, personally convenient) and macro (structural, generic, enduring) concerns into the on-going negotiations through which they achieve and resist change. In other words, micro and macro are not just abstract categories available to us as theorists to use in our interpretations of the workings of discourse in the workplace. Rather, the organizational actors we observe are themselves busy deploying and creating discourses and practices that are sometimes situated and particular, and sometimes generic and structural. The process is messy and unpredictable, as recent writers on organizational change have noted (Buchanan and Badham 1999; Gabriel 1999; Sturdy 2000; Badham and Garrety 2003; Dawson 2003; Vallas 2003). The framework presented here provides one way to unravel some of this mess.

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