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Wolfgang Mayrhofer*

Falling for the Change Hype – or: (Career, HR, and OB) Research Should Know Better**

1. Intro

Changing skies
Ch-ch-ch-changing
Changing skies
Ch-ch-ch-changing
Changing skies
Changing skies
Changing skies
Ch-ch-ch-changing
Oooooooooh Oh Oh Oh,
Oooooooooh Oh Oh Oh,
Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh

Lady Gaga, Changing Skies, 2010

2. Change hype – or: is ‘no change’ no issue?

We live in an age of hype. With little, if any, relationship to their respective significance and moral value, society and its sub-systems feast on hypes: Cristiano Ronaldo, university-related excellence initiatives, Lady Gaga, the European safety net for the Euro, Julian Assange, journal rating lists, Paris Hilton – you name it.

Science is part of society. Consequently, it would hardly be surprising to find ‘hype’ an essential part of the scientific game, too. And, indeed, we do. Of course, in research and its rites and rituals it is not yet as blunt, presumptuous and blatant as in other societal sub-systems. But still, it is there (and judging by some of my colleagues’ CVs posted on their web-sites and the number and kinds of awards in our field, we’re keen on rapidly closing the gap).

‘Change’ is a good example for such hype. Practitioner journals love it. A few recent examples include “Fire, Snowball, Mask, Movie: How Leaders Spark and Sustain Change” (Vermeulen, Puranam, & Gulati, 2010¹), “Change for Change’s Sake” (Vermeulen et al., 2010), or “Mega Issues Drive Local Changes” (Kellar, 2011). Our

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¹ In this discourse, a single reference list for all contributions is given at the end.

super-A+-high impact-top notch journals are not too chaste, either, when falling for change. A thoughtful “We’re changing – or are we?” (Sonenshein, 2010), a somewhat hesitant “The Fog of Change” (Hannan, Pólos, & Carroll, 2003) or a straightforward “Being the change” (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010) are just a few examples.

Some try to go beyond hype and put action at the centre of managerial practice (Eccles & Nohria, 1992). More sober observers move even beyond that and inevitably raise a couple of questions: Is it really all about change, does change not require areas which remain stable in order to make change possible and/or prevent systems from changing too rapidly? And: Who looks at – and explains – no change?

Kattenbach, Lücke, Schlese, & Schramm (2011) do. They show that – *horribile dictu* – career expectations of German employees have not changed. And they leave no doubt about it: “In summary, career expectations have a volatile pattern over the years with no clear trend detectable ... results are quite homogenous for males and for females” (304), and “[i]n general, there is no clear trend in career expectations detectable in the period from 1999 to 2009 in Germany” (306). What should we, the scientific community looking at careers, human resource management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB), make of this?

Learn, and learn in a threefold way – for in my reading, the paper by Kattenbach et al. constitutes an opportunity for single-loop, double-loop and deuterio-learning. A brief reminder: building on the work of Bateson (2000, Orig. 1972), Argyris and Schön (1978) propose a simple causal model where governing variables lead to an action strategy which prompts consequences. In case of a mismatch between governing variables and outcomes, single-loop learning involves changing the action strategy (‘first order change’) whereas double-loop examines and changes the governing values themselves (‘second order change’). Deuterio-learning, while being understood in various ways, builds on the notion that actors are capable of adaptive change and that “change and learning must be dealt with at the level of context and relationship and cannot be reduced to the individual level.” (Visser, 2007: 660). Consequently, it “implies that they learn about the context in which these consequences are formed, maintained, and altered.” (ibidem)

The remainder of the paper uses these three forms of learning in a broad sense as lenses for my argument. My focus on double- and deuterio-learning has a simple reason: in this setting it is more important.

3. Single-loop learning – or: what is wrong with the argument?

As with every other article, and in particular with one presenting contra-intuitive findings, the initial reaction of the professional sceptic is (and should be): what might be wrong with the argument and the results? The study in question is no exception to the rule that every study is subject to a fair amount of criticism. The usual suspects are the design of the study, its conceptual foundation as well as data collection and analysis.

Taking an existing data set such as the German SOEP with all its well-known strengths and weaknesses and using it ex post for one’s own specific purposes always requires some compromise in terms of the constructs-variables-link. This is the case here (and acknowledged by the authors), too. In addition, one might argue that Germany is such a special context that in spite of the findings the basic argument of

changing career expectations still holds on a more global level. Maybe most important, one could argue that the time period chosen is inadequate. Critics could build quite an argument that the ‘true’ change happened before the turn of the millennium. Looking at the time period chosen in the study just captures the tail end of this change, showing little or no movement but not shattering the ‘everything changes’-assumption.

All this (and more, if one wants to be picky) is valid criticism of the study. Still, I can go along with the reasoning of the authors: if there is substantial change, it should show in the data despite all the criticism regarding design and details. Yet, it does not.

4. Double-loop learning – or: why are we surprised?

The findings of the study – no change – raise eyebrows and produce surprise because the governing variables (not only) in this area of management research favour change. Rather than being surprised by the result, however, it would be more appropriate to be surprised about the surprise.

Of course, there is substantial evidence about change in career related areas in Germany. Some of the hard facts alone make that crystal clear. Two examples shall suffice here. The participation of women in the German work force has noticeably changed during the past decade. While in 2001 every other woman between 15 and 64 was employed (49.8 per cent), nearly two out of three women are employed in 2010 (66.1 per cent; OECD, 2012). Or take the example of employment relationships. Since the mid-1990s, available forms of employment contracts and their practical use have clearly changed in Germany. In line with changes in labour law and collective agreements, the rise of temporary employment agencies, and a decreasing degree of unionisation, a greater variety of forms of employment – often called atypical employment such as part-time work, fixed-term contracts, ‘mini-jobs’ – is available. Within a 15 year period, the proportion of employees with such contracts in Germany has nearly doubled from about 19 per cent in 1994 to about 37 per cent in 2007 (Brehmer & Seifert, 2008; for a more in-depth discussion see e.g. Nienhüser, 2005 and the contributions in the related special issue).

Yet, besides these changes, there is a lot of evidence about stability with regard to career issues. Kattenbach et al. have gathered a substantial number of studies using different data sources to support their scepticism about change in careers. Issues include the boundaryless career per se, job tenure in industrialised countries, job stability, vocational mobility or intra-organisational mobility. In addition, stability even within a dynamic and fast-changing environment is not limited to careers and Germany alone. In the broader field of comparative HRM (Brewster & Mayrhofer, 2012), various pieces of research indicate that besides some changes there are a number of areas in HRM showing remarkable stasis in a number of European countries, including the size of the HR department relative to the number of employees and the organisational investment in training and development measures (for example Mayrhofer, Brewster, Morley, & Ledolter, 2011).

In the light of this evidence, sober observers go one step further. They start to wonder why the governing variables of our discipline favour change so much that contradictory findings pointing towards stasis have to explain themselves. In other

words: we look at the context in which our research unfolds and move on to deuterolearning.

5. Deuterolearning – or: what’s the trouble with the context of our research?

Everyday experience, popular rhetoric and, sadly, substantial parts of career, HRM and OB research at least implicitly take it for granted that ‘things’ are constantly changing and that, compared to previous decades or centuries, our current situation is unique and highly dynamic. As Collin (1998) succinctly and in a slightly ironical manner put it: “the present is always an exciting, challenging time to be contrasted with a stable past” (412). Out of a myriad of possible reasons for this, three seem particularly important to me when it comes to change in the area of career, HRM and OB.

First, focusing on change secures our existence as researchers and as scientific discipline. Change, ideally dramatic and fundamental change, signals that something is different from what we already know. Immediately, researchers have a field day. No longer looking for the umpteenth variation of an effect which is already well documented, no longer tweaking the numbers with the most sophisticated analytical tools to get at least a trace of significant change, but – at long last – sky-rocketing levels of significance and effect sizes. In turn, this increases our chance to report something important, meaningful and robust to the journals of our desire which will boost our publication record to levels we (let us be forced to) dream of.

Second, dealing with change makes us sexy both as individuals and as a discipline. It profits from the attractiveness of the unknown, exploiting our conviction that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Conversely, it raises attention because it plays with our individual and collective fear of the unknown threatening the status quo, something actors, and especially successful actors, are not too fond of. Last, but definitely not least, it demonstrates to relevant stakeholders – our deans and rectors, the business community, the other scientific disciplines, ah, and yes, our fellow researchers, all of them, by the way, drawing a lot of legitimacy from their own battle with change – that we are on top of the wave, true members of the vanguards who anticipate what is coming towards us. And as a wonderful by-product it shows we are not only sexy, but stay forever young since the young are most capable – and dare – to face change, even long for it. Only the old and fainthearted conjure stability.

Third, having a go at change protects our individual and collective identity. When we grasp something through our research which turns out to be relevant, if we even have anticipated something in time and in the right way – whoa, look at what we can do? If we fail in seizing change in the nets of our research – who can blame us? Since even our highly acclaimed siblings from economics get it wrong most of the time and especially when it really counts, what do you expect from us humble management researchers? We are much younger as a discipline and still on our way up. Focusing on change, then, puts us in a perfect position regardless of the content and effects of our findings. And even if there is nothing new: change is the flashy label which allows to sell old wine in new skins (see also Kieser, 1996).

Of course, a bigger question lurks beneath: why, for heaven’s sake, do individual researchers and respectable scientific disciplines worry about their existence and rele-

vance, strive to become sexy and stay young, and fear for their identity? Dealing with this question is both a major task and the opening of our individual and collective Pandora's box. Suddenly, we are in the middle of a discussion about the role of social science in current German-speaking countries; about the ethical quality of a discipline bending over backwards to accommodate an all-pervasive hype, be it change or something else; about the degree of closeness and distance management research must have to its field, in particular practice; about the increasingly market-oriented transformation of the production of knowledge in the academic system and the accompanying restructuring of universities in the German language area. Yet, as the saying goes, space and occasion to not permit to pursue this bigger question any further than with a quote: "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. 'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.'" (Tolkien, 1980, Orig. 1965, p. 82 – *The Fellowship of the Ring*, second chapter, "The Shadow of the Past", just after the Elvish writing and poem that describes the One Ring).

6. Outro

Through winter-time we call on spring,
And through the spring on summer call,
And when abounding hedges ring
Declare that winter's best of all;
And after that there's nothing good
Because the spring-time has not come—
Nor know that what disturbs our blood
Is but its longing for the tomb.

William Butler Yeats, The Wheel, 1928