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Pienaar, Traceyleigh

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The University of the Witwatersrand

Master of Arts, Sociology

The Reflexive Project of Self: Constructions of White Male Identities in a Changing Work Environment.

Abstract:

This purpose of this study is to investigate if the structural shifts and systemic contradictions [Archer: 2000], which result from large scale organizational change can cause employees to engage in reflexive self-identity reconfigurations[Giddens; 1998]. The ever increasingly complex nature of society dictates that 'change' is becoming a constant feature of social and organizational life. Hence, an organization's sustainability is becoming increasingly dependent upon its adaptability. Yet, the majority of organizational change initiatives fail. I assert that mainstream change management approaches are not able to produce successful methodologies for organizational change. This is because any consideration of the effects of change on employees is limited to an examination of their immediate psycho-social states and behaviours. Because this is not considered, most change approaches are left ill prepared to deal with the many unintended consequences [Archer, 2000] that result from these structural changes.

In light of this, the research undertaken investigates and demonstrates that white men employed at a large Government Research and Technology Agency are engaging in reflexive self identity reconfigurations as a consequence of organization wide change. The research then examines the extent and outcomes these reflexive deliberations.

This study spans 6 years, from 2002 to 2008, and applies mixed methods to track the implementation of a formal organization wide change initiative from both a macro and meso level perspective. The various data gathered were used to demonstrate the causal inferences between structural change and self-identity reformulations. Methods and explanations drawn

from Giddens theories of Structuration [Giddens; 1984] and self-identity construction [Giddens; 1991], Archer's Morphogenetic theory [1995], and Connell's [1987, 1995, 2000] conceptualization of Hegemony (in race and masculinity) are employed within a critical realist paradigm [Collier; 1994] in this grounded theoretical framework.

I illustrated the causal links at meso level by showing quantitative trend shifts in perceptions and attitudes of different groups of employees' experiencing the organization wide change initiative over time. I concluded that there is an evident causal link between reflexivity and changing organizational structures.

I then developed these findings into a typology of white racial and masculine identity formations, which is used to demonstrate why employees engaged in reflexive self-identity reconfigurations from a micro level perspective, and what the outcomes of their reflexive deliberations were. This study demonstrates that the systemic contradictions introduced as a consequence of the change initiative cause white male employees to experience varying degrees of psychological discomfort (dissonance). Consequently, they feel compelled to alleviate their discomfort by reducing the contradictions by employing a variety of mechanisms. These include varying degrees of reflexivity and self-identity reconfigurations.

The implications of these findings for change management discourses are significant. Organizational change methodologies need to locate themselves within the broader social context in order to better understand change at the level of the organization, but also accommodate the impacts of structural change on employee's self-identity constructions, and thus locate the micro within the macro in order to create more successful sustainable and continuous change in organizations.

Black* is used throughout the study to refer to all Previously disadvantaged individuals. This includes all populations discriminated against in the apartheid system of rule, referred to in the legislation as 'Black'- and – prior to the 2009 amendments, meaning all females, regardless of race, and black, coloured, Indian and Asian males, as well as disabled individuals