This is the authors’ final peer reviewed (post print) version of the item published as:

Bryant, Melanie and Wolfram Cox, Julie 2004, Conversion stories as shifting narratives of organizational change, *Journal of organizational change management*, vol. 17, no. 6, pp. 578-592.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30009200

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright : 2004, Emerald Group Publishing
Conversion stories as shifting narratives of organizational change

Melanie Bryant, Department of Management, Monash University, Churchill, Victoria, Australia

Julie Wolfram Cox, School of Management, RMIT Business, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Abstract

This paper is concerned with how employees talk about their experiences of organizational change and focuses specifically on the construction of conversion stories. These are particularly positive narratives that consider change as a turning point in which individuals depart from an old way of life pre-change to embrace a post-change organization. In this study, employees seek conversion into management groups and report the values and philosophies of management in their narratives, thus highlighting the benefits of change while suppressing any negative aspects. This paper draws attention to the dramatic nature of the conversion story and explores the sharp distinction between the reporting of experiences prior to and after change. We also investigate the relationship between constructing conversion stories and gaining personal and career advancement at work and suggest that beneath the positive exterior of the conversion narratives lies a theme of silence, which may be related to career advancement. Our findings suggest that such stories of silence complicate the conversion story as an example of positive organizational change and discuss implications for both the theory and practice of narrative change research.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with how employees talk about their experiences of organizational change. We focus on the interpretation and construction of particularly positive narratives about organizational change, narratives that we term conversion stories. Conversion stories tell of change that has led an individual to turn from “one viewpoint to another” (Snow and Machalek, 1983, p. 169), and to depart from an “old” way of life in order to embrace a new and much better lifestyle (Yang, 1998; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998).

While such stories are usually associated with religious rather than organizational experiences (Pilarzyk, 1983), they are also relevant within organizational settings where people seek membership of groups that have “emotional and value significance to them” (Abrams and Hogg, 1990, p. 196). To be approved by group members, appropriate identities are constructed and the individual will make salient the behavior of the group into which he or she seeks conversion (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Thoits and Virshup, 1997). In the context of this study, employees seek conversion into management groups and therefore, make salient in their narratives the values and stories constructed at managerial levels of the organization. We argue that these stories are comparable to those constructed by individuals who have experienced religious conversion in that they tend to be dramatic and spectacular accounts of transformation where a “perfect image...indispensable packaging...[and] a general gloss” (Debord, 1994, p. 15) are placed on accounts of change to highlight its benefits and to suppress any negative aspects.
As Boje (2001) has argued, people often construct stories in a non-linear, fragmented and irrational manner, which can be difficult to interpret and follow. It is when stories are given chronology and continuity in retrospect that they become narratives (Metz, 2003; Patriotta, 2003). We use the term “story” and “narrative” interchangeably in this paper, for our focus is on the conversion story as a particular type of retrospective reporting (Søderberg, 2003). Indeed, the conversion stories explored in this paper have several characteristics that we discuss in turn. The first of these is the dramatic nature of the conversion story that we read in the context of “top-down” managerially constructed accounts of organizational change. A second characteristic of the conversion story is the sharp distinction between the reporting of experiences in the organization prior to change (pre-conversion) and after the implementation of change (post-conversion), in which the poor state of the “old” organization shifts to the optimism of the “new” (Ballis and Richardson, 1997). Finally, participants who construct conversion stories suggest that support for managerial decision-making throughout the process of organizational change is related to increased opportunities for career and personal advancement in the workplace.

However, we also note a number of inconsistencies within the stories including a theme of silence in which participants psychologically “remove” themselves from organizational change rather than openly support it. We suggest that the reported act of silence is just as likely to be linked to the achievement of career opportunities as the newfound support for managers. We also argue that stories of silence complicate the representation of the conversion story as an example of extreme and positive organizational change and discuss implications of these interpretations for both the theory and practice of narrative change research.

**The dramatic nature of change narratives**

While researchers agree that the term “conversion” implies personal change (Pilarzyk, 1983; Snow and Machalek, 1983; Yang, 1998; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998), the degree of personal change necessary for an experience to be deemed a conversion is the subject of debate. Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998, p. 161) argue that simple “thought reform” is characteristic of conversion, while Richardson (1983) suggests that conversion is associated with social factors, such as identifying with the values and goals of a specific group. However, the early work of Nock (1933, p. 6) characterizes conversion in a more spectacular way, for Nock argued that anything less than a “reorientation of the soul” should not be considered a conversion experience. Pilarzyk (1983, p. 54) adds to the spectacularization of conversion by arguing that conversion requires “emotional episodes of illumination” in which an individual can “gain insight” into the post-conversion world. Regardless of this debate, stories of conversion highlight a highly dramatized process of personal change in which the rationality of the conversion process and the benefit of change to the individual are emphasized (Yang, 1998). Such positive narratives of change are also evident within management literature.

Although conversion stories represent only one interpretation of change (De Cock, 1998), this positive interpretation appears to be privileged at the expense of other experiences. For example, stories of religious conversion highlight a new way of life that is portrayed as being the “right” or “ultimate” way to live, mostly accompanied by extraordinary language to describe the post-conversion experience (Yang, 1998; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998). The post-conversion world is presented as glamorous, liberating and attractive, and accounts of
conversion to this world may gloss over (Debord, 1994) the transformation experience (Yang, 1998) and suppress the stories of individuals whose experiences were not so positive (Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998) in order to project a particular image (Boorstin, 1972) about change. In this sense, conversion stories can be seen as spectacular stories that may censor other tales, for, as Wood (2002) argues:

The spectacle is manifested as grand narrative totalizing, justifying, legitimizing and celebrating the system...the spectacle provides the script, the act, the speech and even evaluates the performance...in fact, the spectacle itself determines which needs and desires are valid and suitable.

In particular, the conversion stories presented in this paper convey a managerialist “ruling order” (Debord, 1994, p. 19) discourse and initially appear to be highly crafted and scripted (Mangham and Overington, 1982) narratives. As such, they highlight a dramatized version of organizational change by focusing on its rationality and order, while concealing the ambiguous and confusing nature of organizational change that we have documented elsewhere (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2003). Perhaps as studies of organizational change expand further, we should only anticipate more dramatic, univocal accounts. However, citing Boje (1995), Oswick and Keenoy (2001, p. 224) suggest that the spectacle of organizational change is limited in that there is an “analytic impossibility of sustaining any monological account of social reality”. In this paper, we sympathize with such a view and argue that, with further analysis, stories that appear to be particularly positive accounts of change can become complicated narratives, suggesting that conversion may occur for “freedom to live a life of comfort” (Vernon, 1999, p. 79) rather than as a reflection of changing beliefs.

Methodology

The research reported in this paper was part of a larger study of employee experiences of large-scale organizational change in the Latrobe Valley, an industrial region in Australia. Prior to the late 1980s, the Latrobe Valley was considered as a prosperous region and held a monopoly in electricity supply to the south-east region of Australia. However, excessive debt in the electricity supply industry led to privatization and a succession of large-scale changes in the form of downsizing, restructuring, amalgamation and further privatization. These changes impacted on other primary and secondary industries in the region leading to major changes to and closure of many Latrobe Valley businesses. While experiences within the Latrobe Valley may not be generalizable beyond its geographic boundaries, this study aimed to understand organizational change in a common context.

This research adopts a constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1998) to gain an understanding of how individual employees interpret and talk about their experiences of organizational change. A constructivist approach highlights the subjective nature of individual realities and assumes that experiences of organizational change are constructed and created between the researcher and the respondents “as the investigation proceeds” (p. 207). Supported by relativist ontology, the constructivist approach recognizes that although respondents may share similar experiences of organizational change, individual realities are contextually specific thus, suggesting that no two experiences of change are exactly alike. This approach lends support to the argument that organizational experiences should be recognized through multiple stories (Boje, 1995) rather than relying solely on, for
example, managerially constructed narratives. By incorporating the voices of employees, not only does the reader become “clearly aware that there are different languages being spoken” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 197) in the organization, s/he also becomes aware of the different issues that employees consider to be significant when organizational change is present.

As the research was centered on “bottom-up” or employee accounts of change, the focus was on people employed in jobs ranging from low level supervisory through to shop-floor positions. Participants were selected from across major Latrobe Valley industries (electricity supply, paper manufacturing, healthcare, water and education) in organizations that had experienced large-scale organizational change (defined as privatization, amalgamation, downsizing or restructuring that had occurred within the last 15 years).

Participants were identified and recruited through snowball sampling, which is an appropriate form of sampling for identifying populations that are either rare or constrained by boundaries set by the researcher (Miller and Chandler, 2002; Morse, 1994). In order to explore “local and specific constructed realities” (Guba and Lincoln, 1998, p. 203) the focus of this study was on the individual participant as the unit of analysis, hence the rationale for selecting participants from across major industries in the region rather than conducting a single site study. However, we recognize that narratives of change constructed within the geographic boundaries of the Latrobe Valley have limitations. Specifically, employee experiences of change may be shaped by the culture of the region and not be representative of experiences of change in other parts of the world.

A total of 22 participants constructed retrospective stories of organizational change within the context of semi-structured interviews conducted by the first author. All interviews were taped and transcribed and then interpreted through personal case study and narrative analysis (Bryant, 2003). While the personal case study analysis studies aimed to focus on the “peculiarity and complexity” of individuals in an effort to gain an understanding of their activity within important circumstances (Stake, 2000, p. xi), the narrative analysis included inductive theme analysis of how employees “sort[ed] their stories” (Boje, 2001, p. 123). The themes identified included a requirement that employees manage their emotions and behavior at work. While responses to this requirement differed, the group of participants featured in this paper considered the management of emotion and behavior at work and support for management decision-making a necessary part of working life and predominantly reported responding to change by loyally supporting managers and the organization.

This was the group that constructed conversion stories, and this paper presents a plot analysis of the 11 such stories that present both particularly dramatic and particularly positive accounts of organizational change. Plot analysis investigates the events that are linked together to form the structure of the narrative (Boje, 2001; Ricoeur, 1984), and in its application here the sequence of participants' accounts of change events and their opinions and perceptions of those events and their effects was mapped both within the individual cases and across the group.

Within the participants' narratives it became evident that the manner in which employees' opinions and perceptions of organizational change were manifested in the organization was linked to the narrative plot. For example, one participant argued that her “good behavior”
throughout the process of organizational change led to the availability of promotion opportunities, highlighting the success of organizational change on a personal level. Such narratives of success are examples of a romantic narrative plot (Boje, 2001) in which the individual is triumphant and succeeds over a situation in which others are unsuccessful (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2003). Not surprisingly, all of the conversion stories told within this research reflect romance either as a single plot or as part of a multi-plotted narrative.

This combination of loyalty toward managers and romantic agency is reflected in the optimism for current organizational life that is evident in what we term the “post-conversion narrative” (Ballis and Richardson, 1997). In contrast, the “pre-conversion narrative” emphasizes poor past employment relations between managers and staff, fostered by parochial organizational cultures and with little evidence of employee loyalty. These reports of organizational life pre- and post-change are explored in the following sections, with emphasis on the sharp division or shift in recounted experiences. All participants' names have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

The pre-conversion narrative

Pre-conversion narratives of change reported in this paper focus predominantly on parochial organizational cultures and on poor employment relations between management and other employees. Such characteristics were considered as “typical” (George) in Latrobe Valley organizations prior to change. As two employees stated, management traditionally “wanted nothing to do with the workers” (Ryan) and “would not be seen dead looking like they got along with them” (Matt). Furthermore, “there was this real distinction between who was a manager and who was a worker...and there's no way either wanted to cross over that line” (Joe). Participants suggested that parochial organizational cultures combined with an “us and them management mentality” (Matt) led to “unnecessary and excessive employment relations issues” (Carl). For example, one participant explained that “no one wanted to work together and [as a result] there were always problems with abuse, industrial disputes, and people out to get each other” (Tim).

As well as the perception that managers were “mean” (Joe) and would “strip you of your self worth...any chance they had” (Melissa), participants felt that “power problems” (Leanne), particularly the inappropriate use of power, caused most of the problems between employees and management. For example, “managers would have you out there doing these dirty jobs...and would boss you around because they thought you didn't support their ways” (Jessica), and “if you didn't do what they wanted it would be nothing for them to scream abuse at you...and treat you like a dog” (Daniel). In addition, “you wouldn't even have to be doing anything wrong...they'd just abuse you because you couldn't do anything about it” (Matt).

Limited career opportunities

All of the participants in this study suggested that poor employment relationships at work prior to change led to limited career opportunities. This was first attributed to the fact that “managers didn't want workers to be as high [on the organizational hierarchy] as them” (Tim) or that employees were not prepared to “take on a management position for fear of retribution from other staff” (Carl). Second, participants argued that they were simply “not liked” (Jessica) enough by managers to be offered better jobs, or were considered to be
“unruly and loud” (Melissa), or “troublemakers” (Leanne). As one participant stated, “it was common knowledge that management didn't like to give promotions to anyone at the best of times…but if you were loud or caused trouble at work forget it. There was no chance” (George). Consequently, there was “nowhere to go, no real future or opportunities where you were, but nothing outside either because you'd work here from day one of your career” (Carl). Several employees felt that any effort they did make to work hard “went unrewarded” (Leanne) and “no matter how hard we tried we were still wrong” (Melissa). For example:

I don't have a problem with workload but I'd produce a program and bring it in for [the manager] to look at. “This isn't good!” “Tell me why it isn't good.” “They're not doing the work. Why aren't they doing the work? Get out there and find out!” So I'd go out there and find out. “This isn't good enough!” And I used to get ripped over the coals for it...[and] I've done everything humanly possible...and I'd do it in a timely manner as per his rules. But I would be violently abused for that and told I was useless and incompetent (Carl).

Typically, employees felt that “the old [organization] wasn't good for people” (Tim) and “didn't encourage people to really want to be there” (Daniel). “People were constantly being pulled up for things...[and were] never told they were doing a good job” (George); “you can understand why the culture of the place was like it was...because you tried to create a better working atmosphere and management wouldn't even support you in that” (Clint). “Managers simply were not listening” (Leanne) and “some employees would take advantage of the situation and create total havoc” (Ryan).

In summary, pre-conversion narratives were replete with reports of continuous and entrenched problems in employee relations. However, while management was identified as a cause of this dystopic past, it was interesting that several participants then went on to report that it was to “new managers” who came into the organization from outside during the implementation of organizational change that they looked for hope and for identification. For example, it was suggested that people “looked for help from new managers who didn't know better” (Joe). Once employees could “see that some of new managers were just like us” (Daniel), they “started to look to them for support” (Leanne). Once they could “identify with what the new managers were talking about” (Ryan), several employees “felt as though we could commit to the change” (Carl) and “trust that management were trying to do the right thing by us” (George).

Thus, rather than turning to a completely new source or group for identification, participants who told conversion stories told of conversion to managerial thinking, to the thinking of the very group with whom they had previously disagreed. Perhaps this is not surprising, for Ballis and Richardson (1997, p. 111) suggest that “both the experience and the language individuals use to describe conversion draw directly on the values and beliefs” of the group with which they seek identification, but whether this irony reflects identification with an aggressor or, instead, a profound shift in the realities of old and new managerial work is worthy of further attention. As this was a study into the shifting narratives of organizational change rather than a specific investigation into shifting management values and behaviors, both such explanations must remain possibilities. What is particularly noteworthy here is that this identification, reproduction and reinforcement of management ideology became even more evident in post-conversion accounts.
The post-conversion narrative

In contrast with the pre-conversion story, the post-conversion stories tended to be both more dramatic and more positive. In line with other research into the post-conversion experience as a better way of life (Ballis and Richardson, 1997; Yang, 1998; Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998), stories of organizational life subsequent to change in the Latrobe Valley are told virtually in opposition to those depicting earlier times. Strauss (1959) argues that this is due to the very nature of conversion, in which individuals are introduced to new opportunities and benefits that previously were not available to them. Consistent with this argument, employee reports highlight transformations within the workplace as turning points (Lofland and Stark, 1965) that opened up opportunities for career and personal development and allowed them to depart from old ways. Within their stories, participants suggested that organizational change “provided the basis for us to change individually” (Ryan) and that “from this point it felt as though we could move on” (Melissa). One employee stated that “we literally had to adapt to a whole new thing from one day to the next...but if you did, a whole new world opened up to you” (Clint).

Employees described organizational change as “breaking the chains” (Daniel), “cutting the red tape” (Carl) and “kicking the workplace into reality” (Leanne). While they recognized that “change is tough” (Jessica), and that “it hurts people” (Tim) by “breaking them out of their comfort zones” (Carl), they could also “understand the necessity of it” (Melissa), both for organizational and personal progression. Their new world was a world in which agency and career development were now possible, and participants suggested that restructuring, amalgamation and privatization of Latrobe Valley organizations led to changes in culture, promotion systems and employment relations that, in turn, altered career prospects for employees. Rather than being “held back” (George) by limited career opportunities, participants felt that restructuring had enabled them to “move forward into bigger and better jobs” (Ryan), rather than “stagnate where we are” (Daniel). Consequently, “status and self-confidence increase” (Melissa) and employees were able to gain “a sense of responsibility” (Jessica) and to see “a different world” (Tim).

This new organizational world had a clear transactional basis, for post-conversion stories commonly featured the belief that support for management decision-making and organizational change provided employees with improved career opportunities. Typically, participants explained that “if we were seen to be doing the right thing management would reward us” (Jessica) and that “opportunities definitely came for those who were seen to commit to the changes” (Daniel). Similarly, “it was quite clear which employees got the good jobs” (Tim), for “it was a simply a matter of those who are seen to commit see good things...those who don't don't” (Clint). As well as being “seen” to commit to organizational change, several participants commented that “agreeing with management and saying the right things” (Tim) or, more specifically, “not saying the wrong things” (Carl) was an important part of the change process. As one employee stated: “everyone knew that if you worked hard and kept your mouth shut you could benefit from all of the changes...whereas management were clearly trying to weed out those who rocked the boat” (Jessica). Furthermore, “you would just do what they wanted and that way you could have the benefits...as simple as that!” (Ryan) This new attitude to management was not an unreflexive shift, for participants were well aware of the dramatic changes in their identifications.
Although some employees openly expressed their disillusion and questioned their belief in management activities, they also commented that their lives had “definitely changed for the better” (Jessica) as a consequence of change. Thomas (2001, p. 527) argues that such transformation in employees is often a reflection of the “manipulative and coercive” nature of management who inflict a “type of cultural supremacy” over staff, and one participant admitted to “being very anti-management...until these opportunities were provided” (Tim) to him. He further added that he “didn't have much to do with managers before” change and was “surprised that they were not all that bad” (Tim).

More generally, change has led to “a good work situation” (Carl) in which employees are able to “gain a sense of fulfillment” (Tim) from working with “people who are very...self-motivated” (Joe). In particular, employees feel that they are “able to be challenged” (Jessica) and “develop self-confidence” (Melissa) within the “new organization” (Daniel). Employees also recognized that changes to organizational structure meant, “staff numbers have been cut quite dramatically” (Daniel). While “some very fine workers have lost their jobs” (George), it was also suggested that downsizing has “gotten rid of a lot of dead wood” (Clnit) from the organization. This “whittling away of staff...has been a welcome relief...in some cases” (Tim) because it has “removed a lot of people...that [sic] were holding everyone else back” (Carl). Several employees recalled “losing their cool” (Tim) or “becoming very annoyed and frustrated” (Melissa) with “bad managers and slack workers [before change]...who now, thank God, are mostly gone” (Daniel). In particular, “the workers who have gone are the ones who could never keep their mouths shut” (Carl).

**Affiliation with “New Management”**

This personal transformation in outlook from anti- to pro-management thinking suggests that the conversion narrative device enabled employees to proclaim social affiliation (Richardson, 1983) with the “new management”. As one employee stated:

New managers just had this completely different style, they were more like leaders, more inclusive in terms of how they actually saw you there...The old ones just had this “you jump when I tell you” management system...and wondered why we had no respect for them (Carl).

Along the same lines, participants referred to new managers as “fantastic leaders” (Melissa), and suggested “they didn't consider themselves above anyone else like the old ones did” (Leanne). Several employees perceived management changes as “the best thing that could ever have happened to the workplace” (Tim), and one remembered gaining recognition for her work a week after her manager was replaced:

He told me I had done a really good job and that people like me were very valuable in the organization. I nearly fell off my chair! I couldn't get over it. I swear I just had this stupid ear-to-ear grin on my face for the rest of the week! (Jessica).

Participants also remarked that transformation enabled them to “go through significant personal change” (Carl). For example, “it’s smoothed and mellowed and matured me...your efforts are recognized in a positive manner” (Carl). Others also made statements such as “change completely changed me” (Jessica), “I can't believe life before change even existed” (Daniel) and “it's hard to recognize the old way now...its like it never happened” (Matt).
While these statements may appear extraordinary, Pilarzyk (1983) argues that people seek conversion to remove the “all-pervasive anomic, alienating aspects” from their everyday lives. In this sense, the conversion narrative is a “form of reductionism that inevitably distorts the past in favour of a particular interpretation of the present” (Ballis and Richardson, 1997, p. 111). Thus, in post-conversion stories, change takes the form of a “tale of regeneration...[focusing on] how terrible life was before and how wonderful it is now” (Lofland and Stark, 1965, p. 863), suggesting that the conversion story may be a form of retrospective fiction (Patriotta, 2003).

By imposing a negative interpretation (Ballis and Richardson, 1997) on organizational life prior to change, conversion stories tend to replicate stories of organizational change that may be considered as socially acceptable and organizationally approved. However, it may not be uncommon to expect management values and philosophies to be reinforced by employees in the telling of organizational change, for Goffman (1963, p. 193) argues that stories constructed by individuals are likely to reflect their “behavior while in a social situation...[which is] guided by social norms.” Ballis (1999) adds that reconstructing experiences of change in retrospect may “combine personal experience with the expectations and the symbolism of the group”, particularly if the favorable report is perceived to generate additional rewards to the teller.

However, it is noteworthy that, when explored further, what appears to be a highly positive and extremely beneficial process to both the individual and the organization is complicated by inconsistencies, including a common theme of deliberate silence across the narratives. In the following section we explore this theme of silence and argue that inconsistencies within the narratives have the potential to undermine the dramatic way in which the conversion story initially depicts the process of organizational change.

**Inconsistencies and silence within the conversion narrative**

Some of these inconsistencies were initially revealed in “offhand” comments made by participants that contradicted the overall focus of their stories. For example, several participants suggested that they “were not really sure what...[they] really thought about change” (Jessica) and “didn’t really understand it” (Leanne) but preferred to “say and do the right thing according to management” (Joe). Other participants made more obvious contradictory statements within their narratives. For example, one participant described the organization prior to change as “easygoing and relaxed” and suggested that “you'll never get an organization as good as what we used to have ever again” (Daniel). However, in his post-conversion story Daniel than stated that “the old organization was terrible, people were so slack...you never had any work to do and there was no real future.” Such inconsistencies are also evident in Tom's narrative. In his pre-conversion story Tom suggests that prior to organizational change the “culture of the [organization] was great, you could just kick back and do whatever and get paid a shitload for it...that all went out the window when change came.” He then comments in the post-conversion narrative that “now you work, work, work all the time. They [managers] keep you on your toes...but there is dignity in working like that. Unlike the lazy, bloody awful...place before.”

After constructing conversion stories, other participants appeared to question their opinions about change: “I think regardless of what I think about change, which I'm not sure anymore what that is, it is important to convey the organization's story to the public” (Carl).
Furthermore, “I wonder, do any of us really care about change? I mean managers are still managers…I think we just became yes men to avoid sudden unemployment” (Leanne). Regardless of whether inconsistent comments were made in an obvious or subtle manner, their presence suggests that participants may not be fully convinced of the motives of management or may not have embraced the rationale behind change. However, researchers such as Frank (1995) and Zinnbauer and Pargament (1998) argue that inconsistent accounts are often the norm in conversion stories as participants may convey multiple truths, including both a lived reality and a reality that is constructed within their process of retrospective reporting. In this case, while the reality at the end of the story conversion story may be inconsistent with the reality at the beginning, it may be no less “real”. Beckford (1978, p. 260) supports this argument by stating that the meaning of a conversion experience “emerges in the very process of construction...[which] takes place at different times in different contexts.”

It may also be that the narrative device of conversion has been used by respondents to attain particular outcomes such as a favorable impression on the interviewer, and that the perceived need for such impression management exceeds any requirement for internal consistency within the narrative. Comments such as “they gave me a chance, so I feel I have to make them [management] look good” (Clint) and “management are happy when we tell everyone how good organizational change has been for us” (Leanne) suggest that participants possibly found it necessary to reflect the organization’s version of change rather than the reality that they experienced (Alvesson, 2003).

Regardless of the rationale behind contradictory accounts within conversion stories, analysis also revealed that rather than openly supporting management, most employees tended to remain silent throughout the implementation of change. Similar to inconsistencies in the narratives, these accounts of silence were obvious in some respondents’ stories and less obvious in others. For example, two employees argued that “everyone knew that if you wanted to benefit from change you were best to keep your mouth shut” (Clint) and that “those who were quiet seemed to be okay [while] those who made a noise have mostly gone” (George). While such comments suggest that silence during organizational change may have been a deliberate act for some, other participants’ comments indicate that silence may have been a result of fear or coping with the “unknown”. For example, “I got this promotion because of the support I gave during the changes…I didn't do anything. I just kept quiet because I didn't know what was going on” (Leanne), and “because of all the stuff that happened [during change], I didn't want to be seen as causing trouble because I was worried about my job...so I just said nothing” (Tim).

Morrison and Milliken (2000, p. 706) argue that “employees often feel compelled to remain silent in the face of concerns or problems”, particularly in the face of organizational change, and that silence among employees may be caused by “powerful forces...that cause widespread withholding of information about potential problems or issues by employees”. However, several researchers (Rusbult et al., 1988; Withey and Cooper, 1989; Zhou and George, 2001) consider the act of silence to be an expression of loyalty toward the organization. For example, Zhou and George (2001) argue that employees who are loyal will passively accept the status quo rather than state concerns to managers. Relevant to both these positions, the narratives in this paper suggest that such powerful forces were evident in the form of career opportunities; for those who remained silent or looked as though they were supportive of change benefited from career advancement, while those who openly
challenged or did not support change had career opportunities withheld (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2003).

For example, within their post-conversion narratives, several participants claim that they achieved career opportunities as a consequence of their “loyalty to the organization” (Clint), “high levels of commitment” (George), “good behavior” (Matt), and “level-headedness throughout the changes” (Jessica). However, the same participants later suggest that they were not “particularly loyal” (Matt) to the organization until they could “get better jobs” (Clint), “be respected” (George) and “trusted by management” (Jessica). Furthermore, George and Jessica added:

I couldn’t give a shit about the company before change...but then management dangled a carrot in front of me and offered me a better job and higher pay. But I reckon that was only because I kept my mouth shut when the changes were taking place and for that I was a more worthy employee to have...only after that time did I even contemplate feeling any sort of ties to the place (George).

While my manager continues to promote me I’ll continue to say how good organizational change was and how great the place is to work for. It's as simple as that! (Jessica)

Such comments indicate that loyalty to the organization may be a post hoc product of rewards, rather than rewards being a product of loyalty and passive acceptance of organizational change. Similar to the previous discussion of inconsistent reports within the conversion narratives, employees may feel that they are prevented from discussing particular issues about organizations both at work and in the interview setting for a number of reasons. Unlike those who are able to construct atrocity narratives and reveal the “darker” side of organizational change (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2003), participants who construct conversion stories may reflect a “natural desire” (Frank, 1995, p. 78) to express their ability to cope with and overcome any challenges that arise in the process of organizational change. However, the construction of an ambiguous conversion narrative combined with reported silence during organizational change could also be a consequence of “powerful...[organizational] norms...that many organizations implicitly convey to employees that they should not ‘rock the boat’ by challenging...managerial prerogatives” (Morrison and Milliken, 2000, p. 706).

While we may speculate over the rationale for the construction of conversion stories, Beckford (1978) argues that it is not the place of others to determine whether a conversion story is reliable. Conversion experiences embody process within their own boundaries “in a way which is known to...[individuals] as being appropriate” (p. 260). Therefore, we cannot argue whether or not conversion has occurred even with evidence of inconsistent reports and stories of reported silence. However, we do argue that the conversion story is an important tool for analyzing retrospective reports of organizational change and have attempted to highlight in this paper that what may appear to be an “obvious” narrative plot or form may indeed require closer examination.

Conclusion

In this study, we have discussed how employees construct conversion narratives to retrospectively report their experiences of organizational change. The main feature of the
conversion narrative is the obvious shift from one viewpoint to another in which participants departed from the “old” organization prior to change, to embrace the views of management in the “new” post-change workplace. In exploring conversion narratives, we argued that employees sought conversion into management groups as a way of obtaining opportunities to gain promotion and/or advance their careers. Rather than seeking to join management groups per se, participants constructed stories that highlighted the benefits of organizational change on a personal and organizational level, thus reflecting and perhaps internalizing the values of management in their own accounts.

In discussing conversion theory at the beginning of this paper, we suggested that conversion literature is spectacularized and highlights an extremely positive, dramatized account of personal transformation. Conversion is characterized as gaining insight into a world that is privileged as being the “ultimate” or “right” way to live in comparison to the pre-conversion experience. Similar to many top-down managerial accounts of organizational change, conversion stories emphasize the benefits of change while suppressing stories by individuals whose experiences of transformation may not have been so beneficial. However, like managerial accounts of organizational change, monological narratives of conversion are limited in that they provide only one interpretation of change that is not necessarily representative of social reality as experienced by others.

We argued that the conversion narratives explored in this paper initially appear to be monological reports of organizational change, marked by a particularly sharp distinction between pre- and post-organizational change. However, inconsistencies and themes of silence revealed from further narrative analysis complicated the extreme and positive nature of the conversion story and suggest that participants may not be fully convinced of the motives of management, or may not have entirely embraced the rationale for organizational change. Furthermore, in analyzing participant reports of silence we suggested that conversion to managerial norms is possibly a product of rewards, such as career opportunities offered to participants after the implementation of organizational change, rather than a product of newly-formed loyalty, thus raising questions about whether or not the conversion experience actually occurred.

Employee reports of change discussed in this paper may not illustrate a “transformation of the individual’s world view” as suggested by Pilarzyk (1983, p. 54) or a “reorientation of the soul” (Nock, 1933, p. 6). However, such accounts do suggest that employees may seek to rebalance their lives when their social or political ideologies have been disturbed (Yang, 1998) by organizational change processes. Stories of conversion in this study are essentially narratives of “thought reform” (Zinnbauer and Pargament, 1998, p. 161) indicating “small shift[s] in the balance of…persistent conflict” (Marlett, 1997, p. 676). As such, it may be argued that the conversion experience, as documented in this paper, is a consequence of “material exigencies or opportunities rather than conviction of conscience” (Thomas, 2001, p. 528).

In conclusion, we suggest that there may not be a simple correspondence between dramatic organizational change and dramatic accounts of such change, and that the latter are worthy of further investigation in their own account. Regardless of whether or not they are “accurate” representations of the experience of organizational change, such dramatic retrospective accounts may serve other purposes in terms of attributions for current behaviors, impression management and even as inspiration for future development. As
such, the elicitation of such accounts works at the boundaries between research and intervention, offering possibilities not only for change theorists who may seek to understand the emergence of such wondrous tales, critical theorists who may seek to disrupt conversion monologues and delve, as we have, into their inconsistencies and silences, but also for practitioners who may seek to work with the emotion of organizational conversion and channel it toward affirmative ends.

References


Bryant, M. (2003), "From organisational change to organisational talk: a study of employee narratives", Monash University, Melbourne, .


