

Legitimizing Resistance to Organizational Change: A Social Work Social Justice Perspective

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Abstract

Resistance is considered one of the biggest barriers to successful implementation of organizational changes, often perceived to be an expected, automatic response in employees that managers need to overcome. From a social work social justice perspective, resistance can conversely be viewed as a means of fighting against the status quo or as a way of promoting change deemed to be necessary. This article examines the concept of resistance to organizational change. Given the divergent and even paradoxical views of resistance that exist in the business management and social work professions, it is questionable as to whether the two opposing views of resistance can be reconciled. This article examines the history and idea of resistance in both professions, and considers how a social justice perspective, as defined by key social work values, contributes to an understanding of employee resistance to organizational change as a legitimate response.

Keywords: employee resistance, organizational change, social work, social justice

1. Introduction

Organizational change has become an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in both business and human service organizations due to forces such as globalization and political shifts to neoliberalism (Piderit, 2000; Baines, 2007). Despite the increase in the perceived necessity of change and attempts at implementing organizational change initiatives, it has been estimated that at least two thirds of organizational change efforts do not result in their intended aims nor do they foster sustained change (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Employee resistance is the most often cited problem encountered by management when trying to implement change yet, ultimately, for an organization to change, it is essential that the employees of that organization also change (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Thus, employee cooperation with organizational change efforts is indisputably connected to either the ultimate success or failure of a change initiative.

The concept of resistance has a long history in both business management and social work. Lewin (1951) was one of the first researchers to consider the notion of employee resistance to organizational change in the management field. His conception of the term was drawn from the physical sciences and considers resistance to be a restraining force attempting to maintain the status quo (Piderit, 2000). Since the conception of the term, a plethora of research on resistance has emerged in the organizational change literature drawing on different fields such as psychology. Like the business management field, social work has also drawn some of its knowledge base from the physical sciences and psychology, however, from a social work or social justice oriented standpoint, resistance can conversely be viewed as an attempt to challenge and fight against the status quo rather than trying to maintain it (Baines, 2007). In this view, resistance is actually considered a tool that can be used to try and create change deemed to be necessary.

One of the core values of social work is the pursuit of social justice (Lundy, 2004; Hare, 2004). The principle of social justice means that social workers should act in solidarity by challenging social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatization or subjugation, and to work towards an inclusive society.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) recognize that social work is a value based profession. The definition of social work itself has a strong emphasis on the principles of human rights and social justice. Social workers have a responsibility to promote social justice both in relation to the people with whom they work and in relation to society generally. Promoting social justice means that social workers challenge negative discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, spiritual beliefs and, consistent with this, social workers recognize and respect ethnic and cultural diversity, taking into account individual, family, group and community differences. Importantly, social workers vouch for the equitable distribution of resources according to need. Moreover, social workers have a duty to challenge unjust policies and practices. This means that social workers are obliged to “bring to the attention of their employers, policy makers, politicians and the general public situations where resources are inadequate or where distribution of resources, policies and practices are oppressive, unfair or harmful” (IFSW & IASSW, Section 4.2.4, 2004). Consequently, often, in the pursuit of social justice, social workers resist against organizational changes that are considered to have potentially negative impacts on how well clients are able to be served.

Organizational changes in social service agencies frequently take the form of workplace restructuring, which often includes budget cuts and reductions in services. The adoption of neoliberal management models and new ways of organizing social service agencies has led to consequences such as standardization, fragmentation, worker deskilling, increased stress, and higher workloads (Baines, 2007). This inevitably impacts not only the workers of these organizations, but also the quality of services that clients receive. With social service agencies increasingly drawing on business management literature to guide the successful implementation of organizational changes, (Dominelli, 1999; Mullaly, 2001) it is imperative to consider how transferrable and relevant organizational change management strategies are to social service organizations undergoing changes. Additionally, it is important to think about what the profession of social work may be able to contribute to the organizational change literature. Specifically, this article examines the concept of resistance to organizational change within the professions of business management and social work, and considers how a social justice perspective, as defined by key social work values, can contribute to an understanding of employee resistance to organizational change as a legitimate response.

2. Approaches to Organizational Change

Organizational change has been defined as “a deliberately planned change in an organization’s formal structure, systems, processes, or product-market domain intended to improve the attainment of one or more organizational objectives” (Lines, 2005, p. 9). In attempts to better understand the concept of resistance to organizational change researchers have considered the context or work environment under which change occurs, the process or how the change is dealt with, and the content or type of change involved (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Bouckennooghe, 2010). The type of organizational change and how it is implemented may have a significant impact on the level and extent of employee resistance. Within the organizational change literature, there are generally two perspectives on organizational change: the strategic management perspective and the organizational development perspective (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Another way to view these two types of change as suggested by Bouckennooghe (2010) are top-down driven, planned and transformational change (strategic management view), or bottom-up driven, emergent and incremental change (organizational development view).

Most of the literature on resistance to change focuses on the strategic management perspective (Bouckennooghe, 2010) which views organizational change as a process of implementing corporate strategies made by organizational leaders and decision makers. This approach to change primarily adopts power-coercive and rational-empirical change strategies (Choi & Ruona, 2011). In this perspective, those in upper management are seen to have the knowledge and power to strategically reposition their organization to take advantage of its dynamic environment (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Other individuals in the organization are viewed as inadequate, potential sources of error or resistance, and are expected to faithfully carry out initiatives generated from the top of the organization (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Conversely, an organizational development perspective regards change as intentional efforts to make a difference in the organizational work setting to enhance individual development and improve organizational performance (Choi & Ruona, 2011). This approach to organizational change is a deliberate decision to increase an organization’s effectiveness and capability to change itself. An organizational development approach utilizes measures such as obtaining feedback, reflecting on the feedback and making further changes.

This approach emphasizes the importance of employee participation and primarily uses normative-reeducative change strategies, which maintain that change only occurs when individuals participate in their own reeducation, and that participation is essential for building partnership, trust and commitment (Choi & Ruona, 2011).

3. Conceptualizations of Resistance to Organizational Change

The concept of resistance is complex. Sociological researchers Hollander and Einwohner (2004) assert that despite the proliferation of research on resistance there is little consensus on its definition. Even strictly within the organizational change literature this statement seems to ring true. In their attempt to synthesize the diverse literature on resistance, only two common and somewhat obvious factors could be delineated: that resistance involves some type of broadly conceived action (verbal, cognitive, or physical) and that the term resistance always implies a sense of opposition (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Before considering a social work social justice oriented view of resistance to change it is thus necessary to consider the varying ways that the concept of resistance has been viewed and used within the organizational change management literature. The majority of the literature about attitudes toward change (including resistance toward change) focuses on planned, top-down driven organizational change and the individual level of analysis (Bouckenoghe, 2011). As mentioned, Lewin (1951) coined the term *resistance to change* as it applies to employee responses to a proposed organizational change. However, some have suggested that since the inception of the idea of resistance, its intended meaning and application as systems concept has been skewed into more of an individualized psychological construct. It has been argued that this mental model of employee resistance to change has become received truth and confuses and undermines change dynamics (Dent & Galloway Goldberg, 1999).

Resistance is often viewed as an inevitable fact that managers must face when attempting to implement an organizational change (Piderit, 2000). It has been suggested that some people have a natural predisposition to resist change, which is described as “an individual’s tendency to resist or avoid making changes, to devalue change generally, and to find change aversive across diverse contexts and types of changes” (Oreg, 2003, p. 680). Researchers or managers who hold this view see resistance as a conditioned reflex and something that will occur regardless of how positive organizational members feel about the organization (Lamm & Gordon, 2010). Meanwhile, others have suggested that managers should not assume that workers will always be opposed to change or create resistance (Piderit, 2000) as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Social constructionist researchers purport that if change agents expect resistance they will inevitably look for indicators of resistance and make sense of others’ actions as being resistant in order to confirm their expectations (Choi & Ruona, 2011).

Resistance to organizational change has been examined from diverse perspectives. For example, resistance has been viewed in emotional terms, as a cognitive construct, as an attitude, or as a set of behaviours or intentions (Piderit, 2000). From a cognitive perspective, an individual’s beliefs, such as negative thoughts about the organizational change, are given primary consideration. When viewed with an emphasis on emotion, researchers mainly focus on resistance in terms of aggression, frustration and anxiety, and resistance in behavioral terms generally refers to a particular action or inaction, or intentional acts of commission or omission on the part of employees (Piderit, 2000). Behavioral intentions to resist change are viewed as having the capacity to be both overt and covert, and active or passive (Bovey & Hede, 2001). Behaviors reflective of resistance to change include things like: strong voicing of opposing points of view; ridicule of the change, the process, and its premises; boycotts of arenas where change is discussed; blocking behaviors; and sabotage (Lines, 2005). Additionally, members who are less committed to the organization may also choose to leave the organization. Thus, resistance can also range in terms of intensity.

Some researchers have combined different elements in their considerations of resistance, such as Bovey and Hede (2001) who examined the role of both cognitive and affective processes in relation to resistance. It has been asserted that resistance is part of a four-stage reaction process that employees go through when faced with an organizational change: initial denial, resistance, gradual exploration, and eventual commitment (Scott, & Jaffe, 1998; Bovey & Hede, 2001). Here again resistance is viewed as being a natural and inevitable part of the change process and as something that exists within the individual.

4. Alternative Views of Resistance to Organizational Change

The majority of research on attitudes toward change published prior to the 1990s originates from a negative problem-centered mindset, which espouses that change recipients automatically resist change (Dent & Galloway Goldberg, 1999).

In response to this change agent-centric view, some researchers have argued that the idea of resistance to change needs to be put out of use altogether (Dent & Galloway Goldberg, 1999; Piderit, 2000). Dent and Galloway Goldberg assert that more useful and appropriate models are needed for describing what resistance has come to mean in the organizational change literature that “employees are not wholeheartedly embracing a change that management wants to implement” (1999, p. 26). Piderit (2000) similarly argues that conceptions of resistance have largely simplified and dichotomized employees’ responses to change and that by labeling responses to change as resistant, potentially valid concerns about a proposed change can be easily dismissed.

Piderit (2000) suggests that rarely do employees resist change without first considering the potentially negative consequences for themselves, so it is unlikely that employees frivolously adopt resistant attitudes. Lamm and Gordon (2010) also suggest that prior to possible resistance workers will consider how their personal work situation will be affected. Other researchers have similarly argued that individuals are not naturally resistant to change, but rather they resist the imposition of change, or the way change is imposed on them (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Therefore, it is evident that individuals make assumptions about change processes, evaluate them, assign meaning to them, and develop feelings about them (Choi & Ruona, 2011), rather than automatically resisting proposed changes.

Lamm and Gordon (2010) suggest that organizational members can interpret change as being advantageous, insignificant, or disadvantageous. Changes perceived to be disadvantageous are those that cause pain, stress and undesired challenges, in addition to a perceived loss of control, routines, traditions, and relationships (Lamm & Gordon, 2010). Folger and Skarlicki (1999) similarly propose that employees resist change because they feel threatened, particularly when they perceive the change as imposing hardship or loss. Here we begin to see the potentially valid or legitimate reasons why employees may resist organizational changes.

Lines (2005) also suggest that early in a change process, organizational members form beliefs about the change. These beliefs concern issues such as how the change will affect one’s job characteristics, whether the organization is capable of implementing the change successfully, and whether the change is compatible with one’s values (Lines, 2005). The consideration of values is essential when looking at organizational change from a social work social justice perspective. As will be discussed, it could be argued that one of the main reasons why social workers resist certain organizational changes is because the type of change, or possible outcomes of the change initiative are incongruent with the social work value base. This notion is supported by Lines (2005) who contends that strong, negative attitudes toward change are likely to be the reaction to changes that in their content or process are strongly opposed to important and salient values of an organization’s membership.

In recognition of the varying definitions of resistance to change and similar concepts that have emerged, such as cynicism about organizational change, some authors have tried to create a more integrative view of attitudes toward change (Bouckennooghe, 2010; Piderit, 2000). In his review of 58 journal articles published between 1993 and 2007, Bouckennooghe (2010) aimed to generate a more complete typology of attitudes toward change. Piderit (2000) has similarly advocated for a new conceptualization of employee responses to change as multidimensional attitudes. This notion of attitudes toward change is used to bring together the varying ways of conceptualizing people’s reactions toward change by incorporating cognitive, affective or emotional, and intentional/behavioural components (Bouckennooghe, 2010; Piderit, 2000). By considering that people may have different reactions toward change along the different dimensions of attitude, the possibility of ambivalent attitudes toward change also becomes apparent (Piderit, 2000). An ambivalent attitude toward change would describe a response that is not entirely supportive of the change, or completely against it, which Piderit (2000) asserts may actually be the most favourable employee response toward change.

Bouckennooghe (2010) notes that some writers use positive terms in relation to employee responses to proposed organizational changes such as readiness to change or commitment to change, while others use negative terms such as resistance. Similarly, others have questioned the validity of the concept of resistance to change and hold that focusing on individual readiness for organizational change, instead of the more traditional focus on resistance to change, can be useful for designing and implementing effective organizational change strategies (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993; Choi & Ruona, 2011). Accordingly, individual readiness within the organizational change context is “concerned with the extent to which an individual perceives a change as needed and whether he or she has the capacity for it” (Choi & Ruona, 2011, p. 51).

Choi and Ruona (2011) conclude that individuals are more likely to have higher levels of readiness for organizational change when they experience normative-reeducative change strategies and when they perceive their work environment to have characteristics associated with a learning culture. Some consider the positive reasons why employees may have negative responses to proposed organizational changes. Piderit (2000) suggests that workers may resist change as a means of acting in ways aligned with their own ethical principles, or that workers may be looking out for what is in the best interests of the organization. This seems consistent with a social justice oriented view of resistance. For instance, if a proposed organizational change is viewed to have potential negative impacts on clients, it is against social work values and ethics not to resist and speak out against the change. Also, a concern for the best interests of clients should certainly be viewed as a positive reason to respond negatively to an organizational change.

Researchers have also increasingly been recognizing that resistance to change can be legitimate and actually beneficial to the organizational change process (Piderit, 2000; Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). It has been argued that resistance or disagreement can be an important catalyst for developing new knowledge, and research on strategic change processes supports the notion that disagreement can play an important role in supporting organizational renewal (Piderit, 2000). Folger and Skarlicki (1999) maintain that legitimate resistance under some circumstances might even bring about additionally needed organizational changes. Piderit (2000) suggests that rather than attempting to overcome resistance, ambivalence should be fostered for these very same reasons; if a change initiative is met with complete acceptance, it may be implemented without consideration of beneficial adaptations to the change proposal.

5. Resistance and Power

Foucault's notion of resistance holds that as soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance (Dalrymple, 2003). Importantly, Piderit (2000) has brought forward and considered the element of power and its role in resistance to organizational change. She notes that the majority of research on resistance to organizational change has been done from the perspective of those responsible for initiating the change, rather than workers with less power (Piderit, 2000). Moreover, labeling employee responses to change as resistant has become a way for managers to blame less powerful workers for the failure of change efforts, rather than considering their own role in the failure (Piderit, 2000).

Research has demonstrated that power-coercive change strategies are the least effective (Szabla, 2007). Power-coercive strategies are characterized by their emphasis on political and economic sanctions for lack of compliance with a proposed change, or on using moral power by playing on feelings of guilt and shame (Choi & Ruona, 2011). The use of coercion ranges under these types of strategies from subtle manipulation to the use of physical force, as people who are more powerful within the organizational hierarchy impose their will on the less powerful to achieve compliance (Choi & Ruona, 2011). These types of change strategies are generally used in conjunction with a strategic management organizational change perspective (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Szabla (2007) suggests that power strategies typically result in compliance, but not full support of the change, and employees may actually undermine the change eventually. From a critical view, it could be argued that the interests of managers should not be privileged over the interests of workers when considering organizational change (Piderit, 2000). Interestingly, the notion has been put forward that resistance can best be understood in certain contexts as feedback to management about its need to change (Adams & Nelson, 1997), which seems supportive of a more critical view of resistance and a social justice perspective.

The concept of psychological empowerment has also entered the debate on resistance to organizational change. Organizational changes have the capacity to either increase or decrease a worker's sense of empowerment (Lamm & Gordon, 2010). Empowerment, or an individual's feelings about mastery and control of his or her work role, is said to be influenced by structural empowerment conditions in the workplace (Lamm & Gordon, 2010). In their study examining the relationship of psychological empowerment and predisposition to resist change, Lamm and Gordon (2010) found that psychological empowerment is significantly related to support for organizational change. It is suggested that organizational resources might best be spent by ensuring that employees take partial ownership for the change to reinforce their feelings of empowerment. Adams and Nelson (1997) suggest that it is common for administrators to define implementation problems at the frontline level as resistance when trying to promote a new approach to delivering services.

It is argued that managers (and policy makers) need to understand that complex innovations requiring flexibility and creativity from frontline staff have to be reinvented in each local context, and different relationships between professionals and communities also requires fundamental changes in the relations between managers and workers (Adams & Nelson, 1997). These researchers warn that the disempowerment of frontline staff in human service organizations can in turn be reproduced as disempowering practice with clients. It is argued that these examples point to the need for a social justice perspective on resistance to organizational change. Advocacy and empowerment, in addition to striving for social justice, are important social work principles.

An organizational justice perspective is based on the notion of fairness and offers a different perspective on resistance. This view recognizes that when organizational and managerial decisions are deemed unfair, employees will experience anger, outrage, and even feelings of retribution (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). However, when workers see themselves as being treated fairly, they are able to develop attitudes and behaviors facilitative of successful change, even under conditions of adversity and loss (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). In this view, resistance is a way for employees to exercise their power “to restore the injustice within the existing power relationships” (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999, p. 35). While this view is useful when trying to incorporate a social justice perspective, it still does not take into account the deemed fairness or value of the type of change that is being initiated, or what impact the change may have on clients of the organization. Conceptions of organizational justice seem to begin and end with fairness as it applies to and is perceived by individual employees. But, what happens when the type of change is perceived to have harmful or unfair consequences for service users, such as in cases of social service agency restructuring?

6. Resistance from a Social Work Social Justice Perspective

As with the organizational change literature, within the profession of social work, the concept of resistance has evolved over time. The term resistance also takes on different meanings in social work depending on the circumstance and context in which it is used. On the micro level or direct work with clients, the idea of resistance has been influenced by the Freudian view that resistance arises due to an incompatibility of strongly held beliefs, and is based on the poor resolution of past problems, all of which pose barriers to working with clients (Payne, 2005). It is evident that some of the research in the organizational change literature has been influenced by Freud. For example, normative-reeducative change strategies espouse that unconscious elements hinder problem resolution and therefore must be brought into consciousness to be examined (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Organizational change researchers have also incorporated Freud’s work on defense mechanisms to enhance understandings of responses to organizational change (Bovey & Hede, 2001).

Over time, new considerations of resistance at the micro level have come forward in the social work literature. By and large, resistance as it is related to direct practice with clients has generally come to be viewed as “an understandable response to a situation” and “a product of client-worker interaction that may be influenced by practitioner behaviour” (Forrester et al., 2008, p. 1305). This notion of resistance takes some of the onus of being labeled resistant off of the client and puts it onto the practitioner. For example, resistance could be the result of a social worker trying to use a technique that does not fit well with a particular client. Viewing resistance in this way suggests that it is up to the social worker to analyze and reconsider his or her own practice technique. It is important to note that similar to the evolution of work pertaining to resistance to organizational change, the social work field also tends to focus more on creating client readiness for change, rather than overcoming resistance.

Resistance in the macro sense has been a part of social work’s history since the beginning of the profession. Social justice oriented social workers have historically engaged in multi-level forms of resistance and organizing against oppressive forces (Baines, 2007). In the 1890s, Jane Addams and other social workers addressed problems associated with industrialization, urbanization, and immigration in the U.S. and through their activist efforts founded the settlement house movement in North America. Different forms of resistance and transformation efforts striving for social justice have since become mainstays in social work practice, although advocacy and lobbying efforts to change policy and challenge the status quo have largely been contested by globalization and neoliberal interests (Baines, 2007). Beginning in the 1970s, spurred by a crisis in capitalism and a world-wide recession, the welfare state on an international scale began to be reduced; social justice ideals began to fade as disparities between the rich and poor increased, national trade union movements went into disarray, and massive economic uncertainty prevailed (Mullaly, 2001). Western welfare states have since gone through considerable restructuring in order to respond to the needs of a globalized corporate sector (Dominelli, 1999).

The market-state economy, neoliberalism and workplace restructuring have had a large impact on social service agencies, making it more difficult for those in need and also more difficult for social workers to translate their social justice ideals into practice (Dominelli, 1999; Mullaly, 2001; Baines, 2007). Numerous examples of discontent about organizational changes among social workers are evident from across the developed world. Research from England and Scotland has exposed extreme levels of demoralization, alienation and anger among experienced frontline social workers, noting that “there is a growing mismatch between what social workers feel they are trained to do and what they are required to do” (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006, p. 309). Australian welfare managers in Healy’s (2002) study perceived several threats in relation to welfare reform, namely, that reform challenges social justice values and the collaborative processes central to progressive human services management, ultimately leading to negative impacts on service users.

They expressed their reluctance to engage in cross-sectoral collaboration with the private sector perceiving an incompatibility between the dominant values of the business sector and the social justice orientation of human service organizations. In Canada, Devine (2010) examined social workers’ perceptions about the amount of input they had into an incident of organizational change brought on by a reduction in federal transfer payments to the provinces. The majority of social workers felt this top-down driven organizational change lacked relevancy to the client population being served, and they did not feel they had an adequate opportunity to provide input, or that their input was valued, and ultimately felt disempowered, devalued, and demoralized (Devine, 2010). Social workers’ lack of power in the change process may impact their sense of professional competence and identity, since as professionals they are expected to advocate for change on behalf of their clients, but feel unable or powerless to do so (Devine, 2010).

In this context, it is not hard to see why many social workers engage in resistance practices when faced by organizational changes. As discussed, it has been found that employees who view an organizational change as disadvantageous and imposing hardship or loss are likely to resist the change. Additionally, organizational changes that run counter to social work values will likely meet resistance. As Ferguson and Lavalette put it: “neoliberal social work not only challenges those who wish to employ more collective, structural approaches but also undermines the value base and the practice base of traditional social work” (2006, p. 313). This adds support to the argument by Lines (2005) and Piderit (2000) who suggest that resistance may result when workers are faced with organizational changes that are incongruent with their value base. Jones (2000) has suggested that we can develop a better understanding of the responses of frontline practitioners to neoliberal-inspired organizational changes by referring to their constructions of integrity and the moral dilemmas that they face. Integrity concerns striving for a convergence of practices and espoused values whereby the construction of integrity involves a sense of doing the work properly in a context where the importance of certain values, such as striving for social justice, are at the forefront (Jones, 2000). Jones believes that the concept of integrity can shed light on a particular dimension of organizational (and social) change: “the way ... staff become involved in a process of interpreting the scope for adopting new practices which find accord with espoused values whilst also submitting these values for redefinition on an ethical ... basis” (Jones, 2000, p. 366).

Jones (2000) modified Merton’s (1957) typology of modes of individual adaptation to link individual social worker’s sense-making processes with broader socio-political developments that have been occurring within human services. Jones (2000) asserts that there are at least three strands of human service worker responses to organizational change: engagement, overt compliance/covert resistance, and withdrawal. The engagement response occurs when one’s espoused values are not compromised by the change and is associated with a generally positive and hopeful outlook in which organizational members are active in seeking opportunities to learn, influence and innovate. In the overt compliance/private resistance strand of responses to organizational change the minimum necessary commitment is given to the organization, and that while basic procedures and codes of action are followed, there is a covert following of previous practices now considered redundant (Jones, 2000). For example, workers may continue to follow old policies because they are viewed as being more useful and helpful to clients, even though such policies may no longer be sanctioned by the agency (Baines, 2007).

Jones asserts that in constructing integrity, “there is an embattled view of fighting against the worst excesses of the incoming system and of not being drawn into collusion with it; of learning the new rules of the game but of using that knowledge to outwit powerful other players” (2000, p. 369). Workers falling under this strand may express resistance in different ways, such as by disclosing their insider knowledge to clients about flaws and weaknesses within newly reintroduced systems.

The withdrawal response to organizational change may take the form of physical absence from work, or more commonly an emotional or mental absence, which is described as an empty performing of function, not unlike the characteristics of burnout (Jones, 2000). Here, it is presumed that there is no place for authentic practice and no possibility for practicing in ways aligned with espoused values. Resistance practices among social justice oriented social workers can include a range of activities from individual and incremental acts of non-compliance to collective organizing. In cases of restructured social service agency settings characterized by isolation and decreased job security, it is often through small, everyday acts of resistance that social workers find opportunities for social justice work within mainstream practice settings (Smith, 2007). In Smith's study on resistance practices, she spoke with a group of female frontline social workers who had experience in restructured agency settings. Resistance practices for these women included stealth social work practices that were beyond the radar of managerial surveillance, impression management activities that diverted attention in order to camouflage resistance, and the use of hidden and transitory coalitions to build support networks (Smith, 2007). Resistance requires both strategies and tactics that involve critical analysis and critical reflection (Benjamin, 2007). What can be surmised from this discussion is that given the complexity of historical political, economic factors and ensuing restructuring of social services organizations, social workers, inspired by their values are engaging in thoughtful, rational and intentional acts of resistance culminating into a revitalized critical social work practice.

7. Conclusion

Over the years there has been an evolution of the use and conception of the idea of resistance to organizational change. The notion of a natural predisposition to resist change has largely been dismissed. Newer conceptualizations of resistance as one of the many possible components of an overall attitude toward change has allowed for greater insight into the many varying responses that individuals may have toward a proposed organizational change. Increasingly, the focus has shifted to a consideration of individual readiness for organizational change, the positive aspects of resistance, and the legitimate reasons why employees may resist change. Some contemporary organizational perspectives, the concept of empowerment, a consideration of values, and an examination of power relations have also been brought into the debate, offering possible links to a social work social justice understanding of resistance.

When considering the current literature on employee responses to organizational change, an organizational development approach has been shown to be associated with improved employee attitudes toward organizational change (Choi & Ruona, 2011). The utilization of normative-reeducative change strategies within an organization characterized to have a learning culture (Choi & Ruona, 2011) have also been put forward as ways to enhance employee readiness for organizational change. Normative-reeducative strategies also seem consistent with a social work social justice perspective. In addition to focusing on involvement and participation, these types of strategies provide the opportunity for employees to express opinions and legitimate reasons for resistance so that they can be utilized to improve change implementation (Choi & Ruona, 2011). Organizational leaders need to ensure and communicate that input is received and valued, even if some recommendations are not implemented (Devine, 2010). Micro understandings of resistance from a social work perspective suggest that resistance can be a legitimate and understandable response to change and that resistance can be influenced by the initiator of the change. Resistance is not viewed negatively, but as a sign that an alternative approach is necessary. At the macro level, social work values such as striving for social justice are increasingly being challenged by organizational changes in the form of restructuring. The maintenance of worker integrity involves reconciling espoused values and practices in a changing work context through a process of transformative learning (Jones, 2000).

However, even if workers aspire to undertake this work, the current climate of many human service organizations is not conducive to this process. Thus, resistance has become a way for social workers to maintain their integrity by continuing to practice their vocation in ways aligned with social work values. While the term resistance to change seems to be increasingly falling out of use, and even though it seems to have come to be viewed in more positive and diverse ways, it is still questionable as to whether legitimate forms of resistance are receiving an adequate amount of attention. As discussed, to support an organizational change employees need to view the change as necessary, likely to be successful, and in line with one's values. When organizational changes such as restructuring are under consideration, these criteria may not be satisfied. Perhaps what is still needed in the organizational change literature is yet another perspective on resistance – a social justice perspective. It has been recognized that the majority of research on resistance to organizational change has been done from the perspective of those in charge of implementing the change rather than the employees with less power (Piderit, 2000).

Looking at resistance to change from the employee perspective may shed valuable insight on this longstanding issue within the organizational change literature. It is also evident that social work knowledge has largely been omitted from the organizational change literature. While management literature has widely considered psychology research and knowledge, it has not similarly attempted to draw on social work knowledge. Legitimate resistance also seems to be deserving of more study, but it is not hard to see why there has been a dearth of research done in this area to date by the largely business-focused organizational change literature. Social work knowledge allows for an understanding of how society is structured and how power is distributed and maintained. Those in positions of power and privilege may not share a vision for a more just and equitable society like most social workers does. An organizational justice perspective of resistance (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999) may at this time be the closest link between the organizational change and social work literature. Expanding the concept of organizational justice to include a social justice perspective does not seem that far off and may have the capacity to contribute to both social work and organizational development knowledge.

Micro-level or analysis of resistance to change at the individual level does not seem sufficient when it comes to trying to examine this multifaceted, complex construct. It is not argued herein to retire the idea of resistance to change, but to incorporate a more macro-focused perspective in consideration of why employees may resist change. If resistance is legitimate from the employees' perspective, new strategies need to be developed not only to validate employee resistance, but also strategies that look to address how to mediate between what agency managers and decision-makers want and what employees feel is in line with their own ethical and moral standards. The underlying purpose and values of business management and the social work profession may be too divergent to assume that all business management knowledge is transferrable to social work organizations. For example, the opinions of frontline social workers will obviously be quite contrary from managerial opinions that support private-sector-like restructuring of social services. In fact, it could be argued that social services may have already been influenced too much by for-profit sectors. It has been asserted that "the globalization of corporate power has been accompanied by a narrowing of alternative visions of human service provision" (Baines, 2007, p. 89). Public service provision has largely been replaced by privatization, contracting-out, and the empowerment of business and quasi-business actors, which has led to the fragmentation of services, decreased service quality, increased inaccessibility and contribution to the growing gap between the rich and poor (Baines, 2007).

When deeming an organizational change either a success or a failure, considerations that go beyond profitability and market share need to be incorporated into the equation when considering organizational changes in the social service sector. It is largely acknowledged that most social workers are in the business of social work out of their desire to help people, not because they view the profession as being financially lucrative. Questions for social workers faced with negative organizational changes remain: how can they follow their ethical obligation to resist organizational changes that are perceived to be harmful? What avenues of resistance are available to social workers in their pursuit of social justice? How can they navigate being viewed as insubordinate, disobedient, or labeled resistant to change for trying to uphold their professional mission, ethics, and values? Resistance has a long history in social work. In a society where neoliberal political shifts and globalization are creating more of a need for social services, while at the same time downsizing and limiting who can access such services, it is more imperative than ever that social workers practice from their value base that strives to achieve a vision of a more just and equitable society. It is equally important to acknowledge the legitimacy of resistance practices among social justice oriented social workers who are dedicated to achieving these ends.

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