

## Chapter 7

# Culturally Informed Evidence–Based Organizational Change and Development Through the Lens of Complexity Theory

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, the authors apply the lens of complexity theory to explore evidence-based organizational change and development (EBOCD) in global contexts with external OCD consultants working with organizations located in a national culture other than their own. The authors' research and experience leads them to believe that, while OCD is practiced within the complexity of organizations, the addition of cross-cultural dimensions significantly exacerbate the contradictions and paradoxes OCD practitioners need to manage, making change initiatives and their results more unpredictable. The authors highlight the experiences of global OCD external consultants to illustrate this added complexity and discuss how practitioners should apply evidence in a complex, cross-cultural environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

The increased complexities and paradoxes witnessed in today's organizations and the continuous change processes resulting from technological advancements and globalization require the expansion of evidence-based organizational change and development (EBOCD) approaches to inform change agents in their practice. Hamlin (2016), defined EBOCD as “the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence and/or of action research to inform, shape, critically reflect upon, and iteratively revise decisions made in relation to the formulation and implementation of OCD interventions and the associated change management processes” (p. 129). In this chapter we discuss the challenges of using

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evidence in cross-cultural contexts where, besides the already well-studied complexity of organizations as social systems, OCD consultants also need to effectively work with equally or more complex, often unarticulated conceptual systems we often refer to as culture (Pickel, 2007).

We have been studying how OCD consultants learn and work across cultures since 2007 and our research (Cseh & Coningham, 2007, 2012) and experience leads us to believe that complexities inherent in organizations become more intense when they have to be dealt with by external OCD practitioners working in global contexts, and the degree of unpredictability regarding the targeted results is increased. The fundamental point we make is that it is important to design and implement change with the awareness that it is difficult to predict what will happen when OCD evidence meets the values, practices, and expectations of a local culture, particularly in the situations where external OCD consultants are working with organizations in national cultures other than their own. To tackle this challenge that many OCD practitioners encounter on a regular basis as they attempt to apply evidence, this chapter presents some of the essential concepts of complexity theory as it relates to EBOCD, discusses the relationship between culture and complexity, provides examples of practitioner insights coming from the work of external OCD consultants working with organizations in different national cultures than their own, and concludes with reflections on culturally-informed EBOCD.

## **COMPLEXITY THEORY AND EVIDENCE-BASED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT**

*Complexity theory has caused the people who lead and study organizations to acknowledge that the world is much more complicated and that we understand much less about it than we like to admit. (Lowell, 2016, p. 179)*

In an economy where knowledge takes a predominant role as a major commodity, many organizational practices based on a mechanistic view of organizations became out of date. Based on Newtonian determinism, the metaphor used to describe organizations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was that of a ‘machine’ (Taylor, 1911). This view is characterized by hierarchical relations, centralized and rigid control, comprehensive strategic planning and standardized procedures. However, globalization, technological innovations, and the changing nature of work revealed the limitations of this approach in the 21st century (Olson & Eoyang, 2001) where complexity, flexibility, and unpredictability characterize the lives of organizations. In this Knowledge Era, social assets including learning, innovation, speed, and adaptability have become critical for organizational survival, thus physical assets no longer play a dominant role in ensuring the effectiveness of the organization (Zohar, 1997).

In searching for frameworks to explain the increased complexities inherent in organizations, complexity theory was adopted from the disciplines in natural sciences (Gleick, 1988; Lorenz, 1995; Styhre, 2002). Complexity theory is an agent-based theory within which agents in organizations (e.g., individuals, groups) are interdependent and interact on a consistent basis in a dynamic environment (Thietart & Forgues, 1995). The complexity theory framework helps with the understanding of the discontinuous, disruptive, and emerging patterns of change in the organization (Arena, 2009; Dooley & Van de Ven, 1999; Lewis, 1994; Stacey, 2012). According to Lowell (2016) “Complexity theory was proposed as a means to explain human interaction as organic, nonlinear, and multifaceted” (p. 149). Complexity theory holds that a system is constituted by ongoing entropy and instability, conditions that result in the

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