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3. THOUGHTS ABOUT BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE DURING SOCIETAL TRANSITION

Looking back at a 3 year research project

Robert A. Roe
Tilburg University

During the years 1993-1997 a small research team including Laurens Ten Horn has worked on a project that aimed at clarifying the nature and role of work motivation as a factor influencing work attitudes and behaviour of employed people in Bulgaria and Hungary, both countries in transition from a Communist system to a liberal market society.

The proposal for the project, which was funded by the European Commission, was based on the idea that society can only change if people are changing their behaviours, and that people do not just change their behaviour according to the blueprints of politicians, economists and lawyers. It was postulated that the behaviour of people at work follows its own laws of motivation and performance, and that change can only occur and be effective if people's needs, feelings, and habits are taken into account. As the title of the project suggested: there are social and psychological prerequisites for successful socio-economic change.

The research scheme was broad and encompassing. We covered a great range of situational variables, personal characteristics (needs, values, attitudes) and outcome variables. Variables at different levels (national, institutional, job and individual level) were included. There were 2 moments of measurements, 1.5 year apart. And the two countries were compared to The Netherlands.

Information came from a variety of sources: country-wide surveys, case-studies in firms, historical and statistical records. Communication about the study took place with various local policy makers, as well as with scientists.
After finishing the active part of the study, with 'data mining and processing', we have entered into the stage of deeper processing, reflecting and writing up the results. Bit by bit, the evidence collected is looked at, analysed, interpreted, re-interpreted. Rather than following the logic of the data themselves and the research questions initially posed, we are now trying to make sense out of the whole.

What was it we have been studying? What have we seen? What actually happened? What have we learned? What do we know about change, that is about changes in the economy as a whole, in business life, and what about the part individual working people play in it.

We now should ask ourselves: Were our ideas about what happens in these transient societies correct? Did we grasp the phenomenon we wanted to study?

The reason for raising these questions in the context of this symposium, dedicated to the work of Laurens Ten Horn at Delft University of Technology, is the need for a deeper understanding that we all somehow felt after the project, but that was particularly articulated by Laurens himself. I would like to offer some thoughts that may help him in his quest for the 'real cause', the discovery of the 'big idea'.

I will first put up a frame for looking at the matter, by applying the logic of the project to another setting. Merely changing the focus from 'those former Communist countries' to a context nearer by, may give us a different feel of the problem. I will propose to take The Netherlands with its changing economy and work life as the object of our inquiry. By applying all the questions and arguments to ourselves we may better see the complexities of what we have been working with.

Next, I will discuss some facets of change in society, relevant from the perspective of people's behaviour at work, distinguishing 5 interrelated dimensions. And finally, I will address the question: 'What is needed for working people in a transient society to effectively change their behaviour and what else is needed to obtain effective changes at the level of organisations and society?'. To this purpose I will propose a simple model. Hopefully you will agree that the quest for the 'big idea' justifies such an ambitious plan. Let me add that I will limit myself in the exposure of my thought in order not to consume too much time.

3.1. Framing the matter

Suppose we are dealing with a study of how Dutch people feel and think about their work, using - of course - the Delft Measurement Kit. How would we proceed in order to understand what would happen if major changes would be imposed on the country by foreign governments and banks? What if our politicians would decide to change the rules of the law and the economy, present an overhaul of everything we had as Dutchmen, for good or for bad, in our communities, our firms, our schools, our health care, etc. What changes would we as individuals have to display - in all our different rules - for an outsider who came to observe us and look at our DMK-scores to say 'they are moving the right direction' or 'they have done well, the change has come'?

Thousands of ideas come to mind about what might happen. How people would react, who would take profit from the new situation, who would oppose, or try to stay out. How changes would be proposed and implemented, how other plans would be put forward at the same time. Who would get engaged, why, with what effect. How certain projects might go smoothly and others would be thwarted or effectively sabotaged. How long it would take for us to really change, what would go fast, and what would take years. How successful we would be in the end - what end?

3.2. The hierarchical dimension

The dimension macro-meso-micro, referring to the society, the firm and individual workers, is readily accepted. But it is not so easily understood how it should be applied to social change. First, there is the problem of aggregation: there may be one single macro, but there are many meso's, and numerous micro's. It is difficult to imagine how they relate to each other when dealing with change.

For example, if 1/3 of all individuals move in one direction, 1/3 in the opposite direction, and 1/3 do not change, the apparent overall picture - at the aggregate macro level - is one of no change. One finds this situation in various forms: the transition process for the country as a whole is composed of many different changes at the lower levels: change, restoration, stagnation (Roe, 1996). The success of newly established or privatised firms is counter-balanced by the failure of state firms and by privatised firms which are less lucky on the market.

In our study, we have noted the problem but not properly dealt with it, perhaps mainly because we did not have the proper tools. What one would need is a clear idea about how to conceptualise these different and simultaneous types of change, including their inter-relationships.
Next there is a similar problem of *causality*. It seems plausible that without the proper motivation to change among individuals, there will be no individual change, and as a result no change at the level of organisations and the overall economy. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that there must be some type of change at the macro level lest people are ready to change themselves ("Why should I, if the others don't?"). Thus, it seems that causes and effects are distributed over the 3 levels, which make them difficult to analyse, unless one disposes of appropriate intellectual tools - which in our case we did not.

### 3.3. The temporal dimension

Changes can only be observed by searching for evidence along the time-line (following the track through time). One has to careful note what happens first, what next, what later - the sequence of events. In our study we could not do that. We were far off what would have been needed in this respect, having only 2 moments of observations in the main study. Even in the case studies, which lasted several months, there was limited room for time-based observation.

One difficulty with the study of time is that the 3 levels have a different *historicity*. The notion of time flowing in one direction - from past through present to future - may apply to the state, the firm and the worker, but the scale of resolution needed for its description is different. What happens from day to day is noise at the macro-level, but it may appear as regularity or a chain of important events at the micro level. One might perhaps say that society changes at the scale of years or decades, institutions change in quarters or years, and individuals change over weeks or months (or even days).

Aggregation many have to do with this. The speed of societal change and individual change would be the same if every citizen in society would change in the same moment (and the same direction). If people do not change at the same time, error variance appears and overall change slows down. And this is generally the case as we know from statistics (birth rate, real estate sales).

Another issue is that of *delay*. Change processes take time. Even discrete events such as the establishment of new legal rules do not affect people directly, but evoke slowly unwinding chains of effects. E.g. considerable time elapses before a newly accepted law gets implemented, known, observed, and sanctioned. In other cases, such as organisational restructuring, changes have an even more gradual character. Time is needed to define, declare and implement changes, and it takes long before they take effect on people's behaviour.

True, there are sudden changes with immediate effects as well, such as dismissal, job change, sudden price-rises. These changes may force people to stop following old habits, but still there it may take weeks or months before new behaviour patterns get established.

### 3.4. The structural dimension

Of course, society is not an amorphous set of individuals, a population from which behavioural scientists can draw their subjects. It has a structure which should be taken into account in analysing change.

By segmenting society into socio-economic classes and smaller social entities, one discerns various types of *agents*, i.e. networks of actors with particular positions, resources (powers) and interests. The different agents cannot be assumed to play the same role in the transition process - quite on the contrary. Some may grasp the opportunity to strengthen their position, while others will vehemently defend the positions they used to have. E.g. in the countries studied the new businessmen and the former members of the political elite, the Nomenclature, had widely different stakes and competed to get the best out of it.

Thus, when looking at a society in transition, one should identify the various groups of actors and examine the roles they play with regard in the process of change, countercharge and preservation. That is, one should look at (old and new) politicians, governors, bankers, firm managers, trade unionists, but also at the clergy, the police, the military, the Mafia etc. It will then become obvious that what we call overall change is a melting pot of processes involving coalition, opposition, open fight between such groups, as well as corruption and crime.

Again, in our study we have not followed this perspective. We did not study particular groups nor did we examine their interaction with the large mass of workers and citizens. But we did, from time to time, run into phenomena emerging from coinciding and clashing interests of agents, and made some observations of how workers were affected - especially in the case studies.

Much the same applies to *institutions*, the patterns of collective behaviour built up in the past. Institutions related to production, consuming, housing, education, child rearing, work, transportation, civic behaviour - being mutually reinforced patterns of activity, reproduced in
everyday life - are not likely to be equally responsive to economic and legal changes imposed by politicians. In some domains changes may indeed be adopted and implemented smoothly, but in others one would rather expect 'resistance to change', a continuation of older patterns, especially when articulated by specific agents.

One of the most striking findings of our research relates to this domain. It is the tendency of people to behave the old way, that is to persist in patterns that were developed under Communist rule, or even before. I refer to some 'remnants of the past' in the firm management and employee relations found in our case studies (Zinovieva, 1996; Dienes, 1995) - and to so-called 'ego-centrism at work' (Zinovieva et al., 1993, 1996). However, it should be admitted that our analysis was not especially geared to institutional phenomena, and deeper knowledge might have been found by utilising other methods of study.

3.6. The contextual dimension

If only the world around us were to change, and we as Dutch workers would passively wait for things to come, there would be change among us after some time as well. No country is isolated from the surrounding world anymore. Thus, the national economy, in whatever state it is, is part of a global economy. Considerable cross-border interaction is taking place on a day-to-day basis. In some areas, such as that of finance, consumer products, entertainment, tourism and crime, foreign actors penetrate deeply in society. Similar influencing takes place in the cultural and political domain. Again the change is, of course, not only one-directional. Opposition to foreign intervention or to the adoption of foreign work methods and cultural exports does also occur.

This interaction makes the study of change processes, at each of the three levels, even more difficult than it already is for the other reasons mentioned. Yet, as social scientist, one would somehow have to account for contextual influences, that is to identify them and gather information about how they operate. This, however, has been very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve for us. In a way, our own project, representing a transfer of knowledge from Western to Eastern Europe, can be considered as part of the wider process of cultural influence just mentioned. Prudent as we may have been, or thought we were, in implementing only those parts which seemed compatible with local culture, we did not look into the matter of cross-border influence more generally. Again, I believe, we would have needed other tools to highlight this aspect of change.

3.7. Behavioural change

Do we know what makes people change their behaviour? Looking at societal change from a psychological perspective, it is important to understand how people change their behaviour, what makes them change, and what consolidates the results. There is an extensive body of literature relevant here, covering such topics as learning and training, adaptation, coping, and parts of career theory, and developmental psychology. Most of the concepts and methods have been developed in a context of stable and predictable society in which the change is limited to individual role and career transitions. The situation we are dealing with is a different one, however, since it implies a dynamic but unpredictable context. Thus the person is facing strong pressures to change and considerable ambiguity at the same time. Even if the willingness to change is there, the possible direction and form of change is unclear, and the effects cannot be foreseen.
What follows is a proposition of factors hypothetically involved in effective behavioural change, which might apply under unstable external conditions.

As for individual change the key assumption is that people in a steady state, fulfilling given roles and getting what they want or need, on a daily basis, will not change. On the contrary, habits make people immune to change, especially when they are embedded in a network of social roles. In order for change to occur, it seems necessary that something is blocking people's everyday behaviour or that a new opportunity is presented which poses a real challenge to their habit. Thus, the appearance of a barrier and/or a new opportunity seem conditions favouring the emergence of a new action goal or a new means to achieve an existing goal. Economic events, such as losing one's job, a drastic decline in income, or the acquisition of property by e.g. restitution can be considered as examples of conditions which can evoke changes.

However, new goals and means do not always come by themselves. People also need relevant experience and knowledge, creativity and examples to develop goals. E.g. setting up a business requires at least some idea about what to strive for and how to achieve it. Moreover, it is necessary to overcome the hurdle of uncertainty and find a personal route - an action plan - compatible with personal motives, experience, and competencies. For the starting entrepreneur knowing somebody who did the same, may be a great help. Generally speaking, examples can be particularly helpful in modelling new behaviour. Finally, there is a need for persistence in order to carry out one's plans after a change has been launched. Persistence might be enhanced by perceived progress and success, which points at the effect of feedback and positive rewards. Summarising this, the likelihood of effective change seems to depend on:

1. barriers
2. opportunities
3. exemplary goals
4. compatible action plans
5. feedback and rewards.

In retrospect, it seems that the legal and economic measures introduced as part of transition policies (the macro level) or organisational changes (meso level) can be effective indeed, in eliciting individual change, in the sense that they force people to reconsider the need fulfillment in the lower range of Maslow's hierarchy, i.e. the physiological and/or security needs. But they are not sufficient conditions for effective change, since other goals and actions have to be developed before effective change can take place. The conditions 3 through 5 seem to be of a more social and psychological nature.

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Whether people do change or not, and whether there are successful will not only depend on change-promoting factors but also on hindering factors. Apart from objective impediments to change, such as the absence of job vacancies, there may be social and psychological factors affecting people's readiness to change (Frese, 1995), or alternatively said, their resistance to change. Here, one would think of contextual unclarity, the lack of transparency of what is and what is not possible, which is very typical for post-Communist countries. Social information processing - sharing views and spreading rumours - may promote false expectancies, such as the expectancy of a return to the earlier situation or the hope for "better times". Counter-evidence of other people not changing under similar conditions, may be another factor. Factors such as these may induce people to postpone or abandon the revision of goals and means. Goals and means may also be unrealistic, and result in trial-and-error. And finally, change may have adverse effects, evoke criticism from others or result in failure. As a consequence people may abstain from change and adopt a passive attitude.

1. contextual unclarity
2. false expectancies
3. counter-evidence
4. trial-and-error
5. inadequate or negative feedback and failure.

However premature all this may be, I consider it to be the core of a behavioural model of individual change applicable to the conditions we are interested in. It may help to understand the occurrence and non-occurrence of individual change, but also be applied to changes at the meso-level (that of firms) and the macro level (that of the state), in as far as they are initiated by individual actors. After all, intentional organisational changes can be considered as changes launched by individuals in their role as manager or politician. But of course, many more factors are supposedly involved in the resulting process of change.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to propose an elaborated scheme for changes as these higher levels. However, in the project we have developed a scheme (attached) showing summarising some main factors contributing to successful change at the higher levels, starting from individual motivation and performance. Of course, this scheme is much too simple to account for all the factors pointed at before.
3.8. Conclusion

Having come to the end I would like to raise the question where we stand in our effort to understand behavioural change in transition, and whether we were right in assuming that individual factors, especially motivation, play a crucial role. My conclusion is that only now we begin to grasp the complexity of the issue. There are many factors beyond the motivation of the individual worker which determine whether people change and if so in which direction. Motivation as we have investigated it, seems to be important, but perhaps more as a factor hindering change - at least egocentrism in work refers to a pattern from the past rather than from the present - than as a trigger of change. Since change and stability can be considered as two sides of the same phenomenon, this remains an important finding that helps us to understand the further course of the transition process. The most intriguing question from a psychological point of view remains how change is brought about and how individual activity is altered. If we could answer this question one day, we would also be farther in our understanding of how changes at the macro, the meso and the micro level interrelate.