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How metaphorical framings build and undermine resilience during change: A longitudinal study of metaphors in team-driven planned organizational change

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ABSTRACT

Change is a constant feature of organizing and one that requires resilience, or the ability to effectively face challenges. Although research demonstrates important findings about resilience during chaotic change like crises, less is known about resilience in mundane situations like planned change. This study explores team-driven planned organizational change, offering insights about how team members metaphorically frame change, analyzing how their framing fluctuates over time relative to perceptions of team success. Our three theoretical contributions extend theory about metaphors and organizational change, showing how negative framings of change are endemic to teams, regardless of perceived success; generate knowledge about resilience in organizing by showing how metaphors both build and undermine resilience; and extend applied theory about stakeholder participation in bureaucratic organizations.

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In an age of political and economic instability, change is a constant feature of organizing. To manage change, including the need for many organizations to partner with other entities to meet legislative and community requirements, many companies seek assistance. Much support involves readying employees for change (Choi & Ruona, 2010) and processing difficult changes such as downsizing (Bringselius, 2014). Managing change effectively requires resilience, or the ability to recover after setbacks and face challenges (Buzzanell, 2010). Although research demonstrates important findings about resilience during chaotic change like crises (Doerfel, Chewning, & Lai, 2013), less is known about resilience during mundane and ongoing situations like planned change.

One significant challenge facing change-seeking organizations is that most change projects fail. In fact, scholars pessimistically suggest that between 30% and 90% of change projects fall short of their goals (Gilley, Gilley, & McMillan, 2009), even with good planning (Jian, 2007). Consequently, we have fewer models of what successful change looks like, especially over the long term (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013). Context, process, and history fundamentally affect change processes,

requiring more longitudinal work with connections to organizational outcomes (Pettigrew, Woodman, & Cameron, 2001). Unfortunately, much research stops after change implementation, and is therefore less able to speak to the issues that contribute to successful change sustainment (Proctor & Rosen, 2008), especially communication (Lewis, 1999, 2000, 2006, 2011).

Another reason why change projects might be deemed failures relates to the ways that scholars and practitioners talk about and measure change. For example, the phrase “change success” is used casually, by practitioners and scholars alike, and usually refers to perceptions of the change meeting implementers’ intended goals or stakeholders’ perceptions about the change outcomes (Lewis, 2006). To enable more objective measurement of goal implementation, change practitioners commonly lobby for SMART goals – changes that are specific, measureable, attainable, relevant, and timely. However, when change “success” is conceptualized purely in terms of goal attainment, much is lost in the ability to evaluate the often-nuanced results of a change initiative or how project goals shift in progress (Mitchell et al., 2015). Likewise, many change projects are almost exclusively driven by organizational leaders, even though the most effective change projects involve participation by diverse stakeholders (Lewis, 1999; Lewis & Russ, 2012). Further research is needed to understand highly participatory models of planned change such as those that delegate change conceptualization, implementation, and communication to organizational members (Lewis & Russ, 2012), as well as how implementers who are responsible to communicate about change view success during the change process (Lewis, 1999, 2006).

To better understand participation in planned organizational change, we explored a complex set of collaborations between criminal justice organizations and substance abuse treatment providers who worked together in “change teams” to articulate, implement, and sustain mutually determined change goals over five years as part of the federally-funded Criminal Justice Drug Abuse Treatment Studies II (CJDATS-II). CJDATS-II was advanced by 10 collaborating research centers with members from universities, criminal justice agencies, and non-profit research institutes. We, the authors, worked with one of the research centers.

In this article, we examine how change team members spoke about planned change as they crafted change goals, implemented changes, and worked to sustain them in their respective agencies. In particular, we evaluate the metaphorical language used to frame change, and link language to implementation outcomes to explore how team members’ framing of change evolved over time, relative to perceptions of team success. Metaphors are powerful interpretive devices, especially as people in the midst of confusing or traumatic experiences like change are less able to clearly and consciously articulate their views (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006). Metaphors symbolically and cognitively frame phenomena at hand, pointing to the ways people understand possible options, view the future, conceive of personal agency, and understand challenges (Malvini Redden, Tracy, & Shafer, 2013). Additionally, metaphors can influence attitudes and motivational states for self and others, whether intentional or not (Landau, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2009).

In this study, we examine how the metaphors team members shared connected with perceptions of success in the change process, as well as how they demonstrated resilience during challenges. This project is significant because it answers the calls of past researchers

to examine change contextually and longitudinally (Pettigrew et al., 2001), and to provide more fully informed case studies of organizational change that combine participant voices and experience with processual analysis (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007). Furthermore, studying language over time provides important information about how long-term change projects evolve, and critically, ties organizational change efforts to implementation outcomes, something that has been identified as needed but largely missing in organizational literature (Kuhn & Corman, 2003). As past scholars have also called for more research that studies patterns and meanings of metaphors in various organizational contexts (Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008), this study also contributes to communication scholarship by extending existing theory about metaphor analysis and organizational change. Finally, the study attends to highly participatory models of team-driven change, a topic not well covered in the communication literature due to its relative rareness in practice (Lewis & Russ, 2012).

Our analysis advances three contributions to communication theory. First, we extend theory about metaphors and organizational change, showing how negative framings of change as difficult obstacles are endemic to teams, regardless of perceived success. Second, we create knowledge about resilience in organizing by showing how metaphors both build and undermine resilience during change. Third, we extend applied theory about stakeholder participation, providing insight about implementing change in highly structured, law and rule-bound bureaucratic organizations.

Scholarship about planned organizational change, metaphor, and resilience

In this section, we review relevant research regarding planned change, framing change metaphorically, and factors that contribute to effective change such as resilience.

Participation and communication in planned organizational change

When examining planned organizational change, organizational research has focused extensively on the viewpoints of leaders who usually drive changes, even though the most effective projects involve diverse stakeholders who provide meaningful input into change processes (Lewis, 2006; Lewis & Russ, 2012). Stakeholders are critical for implementing changes as they are often responsible for communicating about change and enacting new processes. However, they are not always consulted or integrated into change initiatives, with stakeholder input about change ranging from the very common merely symbolic to least common meaningful use as a resource (Lewis, 2011). When stakeholders' input is not used effectively – either glossed over or ignored – organizations lose vital opportunities to discover errors and consider alternative ways to implement change (Lewis & Russ, 2012). Furthermore, Lewis and Russ (2012) point out that high resource orientation, highly participative models of stakeholder engagement are scarce. Consequently, they call for research that investigates highly participatory change models, like the ones featured in the present study, to highlight concerns such as how stakeholders gain voice, the degree to which stakeholders desire to participate, and how dissent works. Likewise, they call for research with nonprofit and variously sized organizations, like the ones in this study.

One key area that also needs development involves the ingredients for successful change implementation and sustainment (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011). As noted, research usually focuses on change planning, leaving questions about elements that contribute to successful change dissemination and sustainment. Implementation science researchers argue that assessing change implementation is important because those outcomes function as prerequisites in and proxies for attaining desired organizational outcomes (Proctor & Rosen, 2008). In other words, scholars should analyze how change goals are implemented because well-implemented goals often point to important future organizational outcomes. Furthermore, researchers argue that stakeholders' knowledge, experience, and perception of change is critical, and that "implementation outcomes should be assessed based on stakeholders' knowledge of or direct experience with various dimensions of the change to be implemented" (Prendergast et al., 2017, p. 231).

Communication is a key aspect of planned change efforts. The way implementers of planned change speak with employees about the change process can influence how those employees perceive the success of the change (Lewis, 2006). Likewise, how leaders frame and discuss change, and involve lower level staff, can influence levels of resistance to the process. Lewis (2006) advocates for planned change communication to be a dialogic process with stakeholders, rather than simply information transfer. This is especially important, as a "campaign" approach to implementation communication, with many repeated messages *about* change is less effective than engaging *with* stakeholders to understand their ideas and interpretations (Lewis, 1999). As well, the better employees rate information about change efforts, the less likely they are to resist (Lewis, 2006).

Framing change metaphorically

Given the importance of communication for planned change, we examine the language and framing used by team members involved in developing and implementing goals during change projects. Analyzing metaphors in particular – words that compare one thing to another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) – enables scholars to understand how people make sense of experiences and frame their worlds (Malvini Redden et al., 2013; Tracy et al., 2006) and conceive of organizational change in particular (Cornelissen et al., 2008). As framing guides decision-making and communication (Fairhurst, 2010), assessing metaphors provides a way to understand how people approach change, and critically, shift their thinking about change processes over time (Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011). When combined with processual data about organizational change projects, metaphors about change can offer insight into the challenges of planning, implementing, and sustaining change.

Metaphors highlight how people engage in sensemaking about change, a process of collective meaning making (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is a valuable theoretical lens because it emphasizes identity and communication in complex situations that are ongoing and where meaning needs to be constantly made and re-made, such as during long-term change projects. To capture the complexity of change as an ongoing process, Weick and Quinn (1999) advocate that scholars think about "changing" rather than "change" because this linguistic shift "directs attention to actions of substituting one thing for another, of making one thing into another thing, or of attracting one thing to become other than it was" (p. 382). Likewise, examining metaphors and symbolic language

points to important cultural and contextual meaning making of change agents (Cornelissen et al., 2011) and reveals how metaphors work “as available sensemaking devices that are triggered by events, but also as actively employed to ‘manage’ interests in social interaction” (Cornelissen et al., 2008, p. 13).

Resilience

Attending to framing and symbolic language also directs attention to other processes that may be important for understanding team-driven change, including resilience. Studied widely across disciplines, resilience is the ability to positively adapt, recover, or bounce back from adversity (Buzzanell, 2010). Resilience is among other personal psychological capital that are associated with positive organizational change, such as hope, efficacy, and optimism (Avey, Wernsing, & Luthans, 2008), and is useful when cultivated in relationships (Afifi, 2018) and organizations (Agarwal & Buzzanell, 2015). A communicative perspective emphasizes “how resilience is constituted through storytelling, messages, routines, rituals, slogans, networks, and other means” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 16). Facing challenges, resilient people develop normalcy, generate “affirming identity anchors,” maintain social ties, cultivate positive emotions, and creatively reframe challenges (Buzzanell, 2010). As change projects are often associated with tensions and difficulties (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013), there are many opportunities for practicing resilience. This study pays heed to ways that language and framing may support resilience during planned organizational change.

Given our interest in metaphors, planned organizational change, and resilience, we sought to answer the following research questions: 1. How do members of change teams metaphorically frame planned organizational change projects? 2. How do metaphors of organizational change in change teams evolve over time and relate to perceptions of change success? 3. What do change team metaphors communicate about what it means to be resilient in the face of change?

Methods

Data came from a large federally funded research project called CJDATS-II that focused on assessment and treatment referral mechanisms for offenders with substance use disorders. Research centers across the United States collected data separately, and then merged it for one large data set. Below we report national-level procedures, as well as how we produced this secondary analysis.

Participants

The current study relies on interviews with 151 Local Change Team (LCT) members and facilitators recruited from 21 sites. Among the LCT members, 17% worked in parole or probation, 27% in prisons, 31% in treatment agencies, and 25% in other settings such as facilitation. Approximately 61% of participants identified as female; 71.4% as Caucasian, 12.2% as African American, 7.5% as Hispanic/Latino, and .5% as Native American, and the rest as “Other, Multiple, Unknown.” Most held front-line or mid-level management positions.

Each 5–10 member LCT was led by an external facilitator who guided the group through the change process following the Organizational Process Improvement Intervention (see Shafer, Prendergast, Melnick, Stein, & Welsh, 2014). CDJATS-II kicked off with a pre-phrase period where the project was introduced to participating agencies and LCTs formed. The first phase involved conducting an inter-agency *Needs Assessment* to establish goals to improve drug and alcohol treatment services for clients. Activities included assessing opportunities and threats, goal setting, and participating in agency “walk-throughs,” where LCT members got to see how offenders/clients travel through the system. Needs Assessment concluded with each LCT writing a process improvement plan, articulating goals, objectives, and action steps. In the second phase, the facilitator assisted each LCT in *Implementation* activities which included laying groundwork for the third phase of *Sustainability* where the LCT assessed piloted changes, made mid-course corrections if necessary, and identified resources needed for sustaining changes long term. Additionally, this phase included communicating about implementation activities and sustainability plans to executive sponsors and agency leadership.

Data collection and analysis procedures

LCT members participated in interviews at the end of each phase (see Table 1), reflecting on the change process including team dynamics, facilitator ability, goals, leadership support, goal feasibility and implementation, and hopes for sustainability. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, de-identified, and fact-checked locally before being combined into a shared database and systematically coded for primary themes. The research centers’ qualitative teams, including the first and second authors, met weekly to develop codebooks and guidelines for coding fidelity. The coded dataset was then made available for secondary analyses, including the current study.

Iterative metaphor analysis and metaphor tracing

During the initial coding of the Needs Assessment data, the first author noted participants frequently used metaphors to describe experiences. Subsequently, we began a secondary analysis to understand how members of inter-agency collaborations metaphorically frame planned organizational change projects (RQ1). We began with the Needs Assessment data, identifying 761 metaphors in 111 interviews, coding for broad themes that emerged frequently in our local data such as change process, facilitation, team dynamics, and obstacles. To ensure trustworthy interpretations, we engaged in consensus coding (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). The first and second authors identified metaphors

Table 1. Phases of the CJDATS-II change projects.

Study phase	Duration of phase	Number of LCT interviewees	Pages of transcribed, coded data	Metaphors identified
1. Needs Assessment	6–7 months	111	967	761
2. Implementation	4–6 months	88	273	607
3. Sustainability	3+ months	54	243	322

Note: Phase durations are approximate as some teams took more and less time for each phase depending on the needs of their organizations.

in a section of data independently, then met to discuss metaphor identification and interpretation to determine that the data was coded reliably. In secondary coding cycles (Tracy, 2013), we hierarchically linked similar metaphors, forming categories. We report three in this study.

After analyzing Phase 1 data to see how people framed organizational change broadly, we wanted to know if metaphors changed over time as teams met their goals, encountered challenges, and experienced failure. We then turned to Phases 2 and 3 to ask how metaphors of organizational change in inter-agency collaborations evolve over time and related, if at all, to perceptions of team success (RQ2). We determined that of the original 21 study sites, eight had sufficient and rich data from all three time points. As such, we limited our second round of open metaphor coding to these eight teams, analyzing 88 interviews from the Implementation phase and 54 interviews from the Sustainability phase. We identified 607 metaphors in Phase 2 data and 322 metaphors in Phase 3.

To determine if and how metaphors changed over time, we assessed the qualities of metaphors, identifying the type and tone of metaphors at each phase, as well as interpreting what the metaphors communicated about the participant's understanding of change, such as an agentic or unagentic orientation, distancing, communicating resilience, etc. In keeping with coding best practices (Tracy, 2013), we ensured that our interpretations aligned with the context of participant speech, also addressing historical criticisms of metaphor analysis (Cornelissen et al., 2008).

Additionally, we examined participants' perceptions of team success by closely reading each interview, describing how team members talked about group process, goals, implementation, and sustainability. We especially focused on questions asking participants to rate team success, including: a Needs Assessment question asking about team dynamics; an Implementation question asking people to rate each goal as either fully, partially, or not at all implemented; and a Sustainability question where participants reflected on the entire change process. We used this information to develop qualitative ratings of "success" using participants' own language. From these, we created aggregate team descriptions, keeping in mind separate team reports about goal implementation and facilitators' evaluations. We noted when ratings aligned among participants, which was the case for most teams; team members usually described team success as similarly good or similarly poor. We noted when ratings did not align, assigning labels like "no consensus." We then put the success ratings and metaphor analyses together to trace if and how metaphor type, tone, and meaning changed over time, and if metaphor change could be associated with perceptions of success.

Metaphors of team-driven planned organizational change

These findings draw together insights from interagency and inter-professional change teams that followed the same mandate: To collaborate with others to improve the assessment of people in the criminal justice system as to their need for substance abuse treatment. The ultimate goal was to reduce substance abuse and recidivism. For some teams, collaboration featured correctional officers partnering with onsite health treatment staff in prisons and jails. Other teams involved probation officers and off-site community treatment providers, some that competed against each other for business. All teams worked to determine appropriate change goals (with approval from leadership). Goals

varied in complexity, ranging from crafting procedural memos and using new forms for screening people in the criminal justice system (variously referred to as offenders, probationers, or clients) to enabling information sharing across systems requiring new infrastructure and complex system changes. During the initial phase of the project, LCT members received training in how to craft SMART goals with the hopes that change progress could be objectively measured.

The analysis below demonstrates how people framed change through metaphor and symbolic language (RQ1), and how that language changed over the course of the project. We begin with an overview of metaphors used by participants from all 21 teams to describe change, sharing a selection of the most prominent themes. Then we offer mini-case studies of seven¹ teams to show how the meanings of metaphors changed over time in relation to perceptions of success (RQ2).

Metaphors of organizational change

LCT members worked in highly bureaucratized environments where change processes are plentiful but often slow moving, generally driven from the top-down, and governed by legislation. Participants' descriptions of their local, team-driven change efforts, while varying somewhat widely, were often tinged with skepticism, confusion, or fatigue. For instance, one participant described needing to overcome the attitudes of her colleagues: "I think so much changes all the time ... people just quit caring about it ... 'Cause it's going to stop again too because it'll change to be something else at some point." Others emphasized difficulties in attending to change. Candidly, one person admitted, "I don't have time for this shit," discussing how time away from regular work caused significant disruption. Another person observed the "honeymoon phase" of newly implemented change and how swiftly excitement dissipates: "That first time the change hits people are like, yeah, great! And then they don't really care about it because it's going to be one other change among many." By and large, change was discussed with chagrin and annoyance.

As we analyzed interviews, we realized that participants framed change in ways that give insight into meaning making (Weick, 1995). As we argue in the discussion, this talk provides clues as to how people orient to change and contribute to team achievement. Briefly, we review three major categories of metaphors that emerged in Phase 1 data across all 21 teams – change as: real or fake, fate/luck/an external force, and obstacle – before sharing a team-by-team analysis of seven teams.

Change as real/fake

When participants discussed their goals and LCT processes, their talk included many references to change as either real/meaningful or fake/meaningless. Some argued for the importance of their projects, describing the impact of an executive sponsor reporting to their organization about the team: "That went a long way in showing the team that, ok, this is real and it's not fluff, and we want to get something accomplished." When change goals are positioned as "real" and important – not "fluff" – they are something to "get behind" and support. Leadership support was pivotal in lending credibility. In fact, one participant observed that their LCT leader acted as if the change process was "her baby," something to be coddled, protected, and cherished. These metaphors are

what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call “ontological” in that they convey status and substance onto something that might otherwise be ignored or deemed unimportant.

In contrast, other participants framed change as for “show,” as a “cover,” and ultimately meaningless. One participant reflected upon her colleagues’ apathetic views of change, suggesting they do not understand the purpose behind changes, “Some of them are close enough to retirement that their changes may only be cosmetic,” while another described the planned changes as “lipstick on a pig.” Metaphors of fakeness or cosmetics that gloss and improve only the surface of things convey cynicism, futility, and mistrust. Cosmetics, whether make-up for the skin or facades for buildings, suggest that what is being covered is bad, pock-marked, or in need of improvement. To cover up for the sake of “showing” work to higher-ups suggests that participants know there is “real” work to be done but that such work is not worth the effort.

When people view change as meaningless or merely cosmetic, it follows then, that their commitment may be diminished and changes will be harder to sustain. Understanding how people conceptualize change – as vitally important, worthy of care and attention, or as surface level and fleeting – can provide insight into organizational culture, receptivity to change, and how a change will be adopted. A key component of change success relates to individual and team efficacy (Bordin, 1979), which emerged in metaphors that related change as about luck, change, and external forces.

Change as luck/chance/an external force

As members of CJDATS-II, participants were invested in a well-planned, externally supported, and frequently monitored change project with infrastructure and often, dedicated resources. Given this structure, it is curious that so many participants framed change as a matter of luck, chance, or external forces. Repeatedly, participants articulated hope for change “panning out,” “trickling down” to the appropriate places, not being a “one shot” deal and as “taking a big leap.” For example, one officer said: “I think we *pulled off* what we were hoping to. I think ... I guess time will really tell on how everything will *pan out* but what we have done so far I think is kind of our goal.” To pull something off, according to Merriam Webster, is to “carry out despite difficulties; to accomplish successfully against the odds.” The phrase is colloquially used to describe underdog sports victories and bank heists. On one hand, it seems strange that such resourced team members would discuss their goals and success in terms of luck or chance. It could be that team members were strategically, albeit inadvertently, distancing themselves from the changes in case the project was unsuccessful, thus not risking their professional identity. Likewise, it could be that team members from organizations so deeply affected by external barriers like state budget cuts, hedged about potential success or failure to allow room for contingencies, themes we address in the team-by-team analysis.

On the other hand, some of the metaphorical language suggests calculated risks. Whereas, we could infer that viewing change success as an external element of luck might indicate passivity and apathy, it may also be more complex. Consider the metaphors of gold mining (changes “panning out”) or poker (“taking the bet”). Although both endeavors involve luck (good soil, good cards), they also rely on prodigious skill and preparation. While some might draw upon beginner’s luck, the most successful gold miners and poker players understand their craft intimately, study, and read their environment (whether soil conditions/weather or other players), and practice.

Conceptualizing change in terms of calculated risks may indeed be a realistic way to make sense of collaborative change processes where so many variables are outside of one's control, including obstacles.

Obstacles

Obstacle metaphors emerged regularly in the data as participants described team members being “dragged kicking and screaming” into the project, the team process as “roadblocks, roadblocks, roadblocks” and “kinks,” with “no one driving the bus.” Some metaphors conceived of implementing change violently as in needing to “take the boot and put it on someone's neck” to get changes done, while others described minor and temporary glitches like communication “hiccups.”

Many LCT members encountered obstacles associated with their organizational context, which they referred to as “The System.” They spoke about The System as a constraining monolith battled in their daily work, rather than an organizational process that they themselves were a part of. In participant talk, metaphors related to The System represented bureaucratic processes constraining change efforts. Negative feelings of frustration and resignation emerged in metaphors such as “red tape” and “an inch thickness of paperwork.” One LCT member described hierarchical influences present in The System: “It's all chained up ... You don't skip a link in the chain. And, the top of the chain is ... the Executive Director. If he wants to, he can break the chain and all of that work goes away.” The System as composed of dependent links in a hierarchical chain is a powerful metaphor that demonstrates awareness that change team efforts may be for naught if those in power positions decide against proposed activities, which happened to several teams. Furthermore, the chain metaphor emphasizes the constraint and powerlessness of middle links.

Interviewees emphasized the role of leaders, saying they needed those in higher-level positions to “be their executive cheerleaders” to create sustainable change. Conceiving of high ranking prison and probation officials as cheerleaders – frequently scantily clad, usually female, and always ancillary to the main sporting event – is interesting in that leaders are positioned as frivolous and silly, but also critically important. The framing paradoxically communicates significant respect and need, but also a clear indication that leaders are not involved in the “real” work for change. The feelings expressed around The System and its influences are ironic given that the CJDATs project was intended to empower frontline and midlevel workers by involving them as change agents.

However, while some LCT members volunteered to participate, many were directed to volunteer, or “voluntold.” Team members who were voluntold seemed less engaged than those who willingly gave their time. As one “voluntold” participant said: “There's just too much back at home ... it wasn't a big priority 'cause there wasn't a fire, it was just a systematic thing to maybe make things better or to grow or whatever.” Describing her workplace as home demonstrates the commitment and loyalty she feels to her day-to-day work as compared to the change efforts, especially as she frames herself as a hero who is constantly putting out fires to save her home/workplace. The officer positions the change project as a bureaucratic nuisance disrupting her more vital work, clearly missing that changes were meant to improve her work and perhaps extinguish fires.

Tracing metaphors throughout the team life cycle

After identifying and analyzing metaphors for key themes, we traced metaphors over time to see if and how they changed over the course of the project, attending to RQ2. In this section, we offer a mini case study of each team, describing team goals and how metaphor usage varied over time relative to contextual influences including perceptions of goal attainment, team cohesion, fairness, change feasibility, executive support, work burden, and external obstacles (see Table 2). Due to space limitations, we primarily report metaphors, rather than interpreting them at length.

Alpha – Time 1: Successful/Time 2: Mostly successful/Time 3: Very successful

Team Alpha focused their changes on improving communication between treatment providers and probation officers by: developing a better protocol for information sharing, crafting a uniform monthly report for treatment providers to send officers about probationer progress, and streamlining the referral-to-treatment process. Throughout all phases, team Alpha described making good progress and achieving success on their goals. Their metaphors reflect success, showing cautiously optimistic framings in Time 1 and 2, with mostly agentic language, discussing being “on board” with change, “grabbing the horse and riding it till it’s sweaty,” and “tackling” problems. These metaphors suggest cohesion, hard work, and an agentic orientation to the change process.

While team Alpha did not face major external challenges like other teams, all LCT members described historical “bad blood” between probation and treatment, as well as competition between treatment providers that nearly derailed the project. One provider said: “Because it’s not been good for a long, long, long, long time and everybody knows it.” The “bad blood” was in part a result of distrust between probation and treatment, and a lack of understanding about each other’s roles and expertise. For instance, one treatment provider accused probation of viewing them as the “warm fuzzy people and we don’t really do anything. We just sit around and gab with our clients.” However, an agency walk-through, where the team visited respective partner organizations to get first-hand experience of their systems, showed the officers how providers use an evidenced-based curriculum to guide treatments rather than “warm fuzzies.” Bad feelings also resulted from differing philosophies in substance abuse treatment and framings of the people they were serving, with providers more likely to emphasize treatment for *client* slip-ups, and officers more likely to “throw the book” at *offenders* who break their probation.

Table 2 . Ratings of team success.

Team	Phase 1: Needs assessment	Phase 2: Implementation	Phase 3: Sustainability
Alpha-	Time 1: Successful	Time 2: Mostly successful	Time 3: Very Successful
Bravo-	Time 1: Successful	Time 2: Mostly successful	Time 3: Successful
Charlie-	Time 1: Successful	Time 2: Successful	Time 3: Partially
Delta-	Time 1: Partially	Time 2: Partially	Time 3: Partially
Echo-	Time 1: Partially	Time 2: Partially	Time 3: Unsuccessful
Foxtrot-	Time 1: No consensus	Time 2: No consensus	Time 3: Successful
Golf-	Time 1: Partially	Time 2: Unsuccessful	Time 3: Unsuccessful

Notes: Participants were asked to discuss various elements of team dynamics including team functioning, facilitator skill, utility and importance of goals, personal support for goals, goal implementation, and predictions of goal sustainment. Using these descriptions, we developed ratings of team success. A team was rated as successful if they described the team dynamics as healthy and functioning, and if they felt were making progress on goal planning, implementation, and sustainability.

Bad blood may seem like a minor problem. However, the contrast between “warm fuzzy” treatment providers and book-throwing officers speaks to a deep divide and skepticism that tinged every early interaction, as well as the different discursive schema (Kuhn & Corman, 2003) of healing-focused treatment and punishment-oriented corrections. However, with a patient facilitator, a supportive executive sponsor from probation with a progressive view of community corrections, and team members willing to get vulnerable about difficult history, the team confronted the “pink elephant in the room” to hit the “meat and potatoes” of the change team goals. One probation team member described how the process of getting vulnerable “broke down some of the barriers” while a treatment provider mentioned “being fortunate to have a change team that worked closely together and were all kind of on the same page from the beginning.” Team Alpha was so successful that it developed spin-off projects that continued after the grant ended. Team Alpha’s experience illustrates how vulnerability and honesty can cultivate resilience, especially with supportive leadership.

Bravo – Time 1: Successful/Time 2: Mostly successful/Time 3: Successful

Team Bravo focused change efforts on finding a more comprehensive assessment and evaluation process, using resources more effectively, and improving communication. The team made steady progress throughout the project, achieving full implementation of most goals. Team Bravo managed disruptive team turnover but did not experience significant challenges.

The tone and focus of metaphors seemed to initially vary by organization, with officers describing obstacles like turnover’s “rollercoaster effect” and change being needed to address “too many hands in the soup for too long.” These metaphors suggest chaotic transitions and confusion that can ruin the project/soup. In contrast, providers initially described the change as “palatable,” with everything “falling into place,” framing change processes as pleasant and functional. The facilitator described the team as “meshing well” and “hitting the ground running” initially but then only making “baby steps” towards goals, somewhat foreshadowing future struggles. By Time 2, team members’ metaphors either stayed negative in tone or moved from optimistic to neutral or tentative. While a corrections participant described the collaborators’ willingness to change in terms of “coming to the table ... to actually sit at the table” and work together – contrasting just showing up versus actually collaborating – others discussed challenges like “opinions that have been barriers” and how the “brass” and other “higher powers” in the “chain of command” had gotten in the way.

While the team all described their goal achievement as “good” with one person saying things had been “80% sustained,” the metaphors turned consistently negative and challenged in Time 3. Members described the team as “fizzling,” meetings “struggling to get off the ground” with the facilitator’s departure, and frustration at folks retreating to their old “silos” and getting “bogged down” by other commitments. Despite admitting that the team had fully dissolved, some clung to descriptions of a successful team, with the LCT leader emphasizing that although the team was no longer meeting, work was still happening to ensure information sharing and cross-trainings were still in effect. As one member said, “I value the fact that those things are still in place right now. Because it gave us a foundation from which to build on and we will continue to build on it because we have buy-in.” While optimistic, another participant offered more complexity, describing the changes as technically implemented but being actively resisted by non-change team members.

Charlie – Time 1: Successful/Time 2: Successful/Time 3: Partially

Team Charlie aimed to implement a new shared screening tool to assess prisoners and new technology that would interface with the shared state database. The goal was to improve communication, decrease duplicate work, and prevent people needing treatment from “falling through the cracks.” Unfortunately, the team experienced significant external turbulence due to state budget cuts. The male and female prison facilities merged, resulting in the closing of a state hospital and several prison facilities. Many employees lost their jobs. Consequently, half of the change team left the project, and the rest were significantly limited in their ability to participate. The facilitator took over many leadership tasks when the LCT leader seemed unable.

This turbulence shows in team metaphors. In Time 1, metaphors varied between optimistic portrayals of “taking a big leap” and “stepping up to the plate,” and more negative images of “a stall pattern,” and not being a “Pollyanna,” so as not to get “lost in the shuffle” of the process. Midway through, as the team absorbed major organizational changes, members described their progress as good. However, metaphors continued to be mixed, with some showing distance from the change in comments like “everybody else is getting stickers and I’m not” – suggesting a lack of incentive or praise for participation – and “It seemed that the planned process was really much smoother than the actual practice ... it always looks good on paper.” In contrast, others commented that “the stars were aligned” and people “stepped up to the plate.” The facilitator praised the team for navigating tricky leadership challenges and choosing feasible goals: “The team was very conscientious of not overshooting ... If there was more stuff done, that was considered cake ... after the meat, you know?” The facilitator’s comments suggest an important pragmatism – focusing on a nutritious main course for primary goals with extra accomplishments as dessert, pleasant but not necessary.

In Time 3 however, with three prisons closed and the team only partially achieving goals, metaphors suggest that members became resigned, excusing, and negative. One initially optimistic provider described it as “just another piece of paper.” While the team *technically* succeeded in achieving some goals, the changes were not necessarily meaningful or important. Another provider admitted accomplishing just “a small piece” of the project at the beginning. The LCT leader complained about the process being “tricky” and trying to “keep it afloat” on her own, while wishing the facilitator had stayed to keep pushing and help “share the wealth” in terms of work load.

Delta – Time 1: Partially/Time 2: Partially/Time 3: Partially

Team Delta aimed to improve assessment, ease transitions between corrections and the community, and bolster communication from treatment providers to corrections. Team members described progress as partially successful at every phase. Their metaphors reflected frustration in early stages when the team “hit a dry spell” between meetings and wasn’t “cutting the mustard” in terms of progress, but trended positively, offering determined, hopeful, and resilient framings of the process. Participant two, for instance, went from complaining about needing to “slap myself on the wrist” for slacking and getting “slapped upside the head” by the process in Time 1 to later framing change as a “wonderful boost in the arm.” The view moved from painful metaphors of violence and

self-flagellation to likening the change to an inoculation with positive effects for the organization.

The team faced numerous major challenges including state budget crises, team turnover and changes to prisoner sentencing laws that stymied several planned goals. Despite setbacks, the team made some gains on their goals, describing changing targets as “the nature of the beast” and remembering to focus on the “big picture” rather than getting mired in the details. One person said: “For me was an awareness of the big picture, small change concept. To not lose sight of how making a small change on an area can do a positive impact to the whole process.” Even when expressing frustration, this team’s metaphors emphasized agency, resilience, and overcoming challenges. A treatment provider described the importance of being adaptive in uncontrollable situations, saying, “There’s no way you can predict what might happen. So we had to do what we thought was the best plan and then we have to adapt it to the changing environment.” In describing how being involved with the change team helped them assess personal work process, work better with multidisciplinary partners, and improve services, they described the project as “Three levels of positive,” despite not hitting every single goal.

Echo – Time 1: Partially/Time 2: Partially/Time 3: Unsuccessful

Team Echo aimed to improve communication by enabling electronic information sharing, implementing a new assessment form, and creating a joint policy for new assessment procedures. Initially, the team’s metaphors suggested a lack of agency, disorientation, and frustration. Several described metaphors of fate and luck, and unagentic, external loci of control – communication as a “no fly zone,” change as “never panning out,” with “no one driving the bus.” Despite the negative tone, participants also acknowledged the early stage of the project and forecasted the possibility of success when “ruffling the feathers ... that need to be ruffled” to pave the way for change, and “jelling” into a team which made the project “more interesting when it wasn’t a chore after awhile.”

However, Team Echo faced multiple catastrophic setbacks, including budget cuts, IT staff being unable to help with the major focus of their changes (a new electronic data system), and law changes that thwarted several goals. An external team was brought in parallel to the LCT to work on similar projects, making the LCT redundant. In Time 2, metaphors suggest tentativeness, distancing, negativity, but also some progress. One person described feeling “out of my element” and that much of the process consisted of “basket weaving,” meaning it was perceived as useless activity. Another described the frustration of trying to accomplish change in a strict bureaucracy as “It’s all chained up.” Despite this clear frustration, other participants emphasized that they were “not dead in the water” and still had “the last couple chapters to be written.” One participant contextualized challenges as having “One quarter of the rug pulled out.” This comment suggests that while setbacks threw them partially off balance, most of the plan was still humming along.

However, by Time 3, when the whole team admitted to being unsuccessful in meeting goals or even staying relevant in light of the new team, metaphors seemed wholly distanced, resigned, and negative. One participant described how “One of the projects that was, you know, three years in the making ... got scrapped” and how that barrier was like “quicksand” – likening the loss of three years to what’s portrayed in the movies as

an all-consuming, but slow, painful, panic-inducing struggle to the death. The LCT leader admitted feeling “rudderless” after the facilitator left – unable to maintain directional control – and not “keeping a finger on the pulse” of the team. While the facilitator suggested many times there was a “lack of the right hand knowing what the left” was doing, the process helped illustrate major issues, “In black and white, and in color, and in gifs, 3D, 2D, 4D.”

Foxtrot – Time 1: No consensus/Time 2: No consensus/Time 3: Successful

Team Foxtrot prioritized improving communication between the courts and community treatment, improving the referral-to-treatment process for juvenile offenders, and implementing a new assessment tool. However, team members exhibited significant confusion, especially those in probation. Apparently their leader had committed the agency to the grant project and then left without providing instructions or documentation. Once the research team got the organization to re-agree to participate – losing months of time – many team members were “voluntold.” The facilitator complained about needing to repeatedly re-explain the project.

The initial confusion was exacerbated by spotty administrative support, turnover, the loss of one organization’s “executive cheerleader,” and statewide legislative changes. Team members’ framing consistently exemplified confusion. Even at the end, some said they were still trying to “figure out how our little piece is going to fit into the whole national puzzle,” managing an “inch thickness of paperwork” and “hitting hiccups,” while trying to “close the loop” and make progress. Metaphors of confusion – of not knowing the scope of the project or how it fits within the grant project ecosystem, of wading through bureaucratic hurdles like reports, evaluations, minutes and memos – suggest that members viewed the change process as effortful, burdensome, and difficult. These framings seem to connect to the facilitator’s description of the team as not “jelling.”

Oddly, team member language varied greatly. Some used consistently affirmative and agentic language, like a provider who contextualized challenges like an imbalance in participation as “sticky,” something annoying or messy, but as not completely restricting the team’s “good stuff.” In contrast, others used resigned or distancing language. One probation participant lamented being chosen “at random” for the LCT and chafed at extra tasks on top of regular work. This person described the process as being “kept in the dark” and operating “in limbo,” using metaphors that indicated a lack of commitment. The facilitator remarked that as a whole, “They’re not resisting. But they’re just not really engaged in the process. They’re not creative. They’re not bringing things to the table.”

Despite consistent confusion and varying levels of commitment, by Time 3, the team did succeed in implementing their goals. Reasons for this apparent success include the team focusing on simple, specific, and measureable tasks not requiring much coordination with others. The LCT leader, who described the work “falling on” her and needing to “phase out” and “not come back to the table,” completed much of the project alone. Intriguingly, she attributed the team’s success to facilitation and commitment to the process while others demonstrated minimal or no commitment at all. Her metaphors indicated a level of personal resilience in a challenging environment.

Golf – Time 1: Partially/Time 2: Not successful/Time 3: Not successful

Team Golf aimed to change their protocol so that people could enter treatment within 21 days after leaving prison or jail, reducing their average-at-the-time of 35 days by creating a new assessment/referral form. However, Team Golf faced many challenges including: disengaged leadership, wide role diversity which hurt consensus, not including people who could implement changes, imbalanced representation from various agencies, and having to coordinate meetings with people from five different locations, with some team members commuting 45–60 min to attend.

Team metaphors reflected consistent challenges. In Time 1, metaphors indicated skepticism, impatience, and frustration. Participants described “roadblocks” to success such as team members’ “moldy old thoughts” and needing to get “buy-in” from the “Walking dead,” aka those “counting their days to retirement.” Participants framed change as “crap” and “bureaucratic bullshit,” and the process as happening “under the gun” which resulted in day jobs getting “bogged down.” Collectively participants shared metaphors that conveyed change as wasted energy, and positioned themselves as largely powerless. One person skeptically said, “The house is burning and I’m gonna go be part of a research team?” The “house” in this case was the workplace, with the change process framed as an unnecessary distraction. Another emphasized what it was like to work on the team against their will, “There’s a lot of things that we get shoved down our throat . . . I really didn’t want to do it [the change team] . . . but I kind of had to.” The image of having work violently crammed down one’s throat illustrated the extreme discomfort and lack of voice felt by some team members.

As the project unfolded, team members managed the material reality of long distance work with others also not committed to the change. Team members described unmet goals and negative momentum in comments like progress “going downhill,” work “going to the wayside,” and how the project was a “pain in the ass.” Metaphors conveyed wasted energy, challenges, obstacles, and how the investment in the change was not worth the reward. One participant lamented how their goals “just look good on paper” – suggesting the change was not real or meaningful. Another complained, “I’ve been doing this for two years . . . is it ever going to end?” while another said the project had lasted “a millennium.” The external facilitator described the team as not having a “push it through” mentality, pointing to a collective lack of grit, and that the team “went out quieter than it went in.”

Metaphor tracing over time

As we analyzed the teams, we noticed that metaphors did indeed seem to change over time relative to perceptions of success, although in unexpected ways. Predictably, metaphors for teams that appeared successful at all three phases were consistently more positive in tone and meaning than those who fielded significant obstacles and achieved fewer goals. In teams where success varied between time points, metaphors seemed to track with perceptions of success. For instance with Team Echo, which was partially successful at Times 1 and 2, and then not at all successful in Time 3, metaphors started as cautiously optimistic and pragmatic, shifted to tentative and negative when success dipped in Time 2, and then were negative, distanced, and resigned in Time 3 when the team was unsuccessful in terms of goal attainment, sustained change, and morale.

However, more interesting was how the type and meanings of metaphors changed. As discussed, obstacle metaphors were rampant. Every team experienced challenges of varying degrees. In looking closely at metaphors over time, it appears that teams who were more successful used metaphors differently than teams who were unsuccessful. Specifically, successful teams who used optimistic, determined, and hopeful metaphors framed obstacles as challenges or hurdles that could be overcome. The tone of their metaphors connoted resilience, a key component of which is grit and persistence, and is associated with long-term change success (Avey et al., 2008).

Team Alpha, which was consistently cohesive and successful, noted that prior to CJDATS-II, the historical tensions between probation and treatment existed as an awkward “pink elephant in the room.” The colloquialism “elephant in the room” signals an obvious and important issue that goes ignored. Describing the elephant as pink suggests that the issues were glaringly obvious. However, unlike other teams who cited similar historical and philosophical differences between collaborating members, Team Alpha persevered, acknowledging the history, talking through differences, and coming to a shared understanding. Due to CJDATS-II, several Team Alpha members – officers and treatment providers alike – noted they developed a common/shared language that signaled they were all, finally, “on the same page.” While the team did experience some “bumps in the road” and “glitches in the system,” they continued to “rally together” and “avoid getting derailed” through each phase of the project to create sustainable changes.

Interestingly, unsuccessful and un-cohesive teams relayed similar metaphors of roadblocks and red tape – but framed challenges as problems that were impossible to surmount. Consider Team Golf, which reported achieving their goal of streamlining inter-agency communication. However, the external facilitator rated the team’s success as partial at best. During Phase 1 interviews, team members expressed confusion over LCT processes and spoke of their project as one small part of a much bigger puzzle: “We still haven’t figured out how our little piece ... is going to fit into this whole national puzzle.” Not understanding how their small piece fit into the larger puzzle suggests that they felt helpless and that local work was worthless. Intriguingly, other teams that were unsuccessful, like Team Echo, also used piece-to-whole comparisons, which signaled not only confusion about the larger CJDATS-II project, but a misunderstanding of their local team’s process. Team members from Echo complained about not understanding “the big picture,” feeling like they were only responsible for their own “piece of the pie,” and that tasks were accomplished in a “piece meal” fashion. These mundane metaphors cast change processes as mysterious on a larger level, which might trigger people to focus on their own purview, the little piece they can control and accomplish, even if it means accomplishing tasks unsystematically, and without regard for the rest of the team.

Metaphors also indicate how team members are identifying with their team and the change project at large, things that are critical to change team commitment, goal dedication, and eventual change (Bordin, 1979). For instance, LCT members who indicated strong identification with the project or team by discussing how goals were meaningful and how they were committed, shared positive metaphors that changed relative to success. In other words, positive metaphors were associated with positive outcomes, and even when change progress was negative, metaphors tended to be hopeful, optimistic, or excusing. For instance, in Team Charlie, participant 2 demonstrated strong commitment to the change process, and used cautiously optimistic metaphors like “stepping up

to the plate,” “rolling up sleeves,” and “diving in” to work at Needs Assessment, where Team Charlie had good, in-progress success. These metaphors suggest action, agency, and efficacy, and that the speakers see how they can play a part in the change. At Implementation, participant 2 was fully optimistic as the level of success was good, and used metaphors like “stars aligning,” “casting nets,” and “rising to the occasion” to signal work progress. However, when the level of success was merely partial after Time 3, participant 2’s metaphors were resigned and negative, lamenting that there was “no bringing troops together,” that problems were “glossed over,” and they personally were “swamped” with work. As this person demonstrated commitment and investment in the project, they were understandably upset when it did not go according to plan.

Predictably, when people voiced metaphors that were very negative, they seemed to have less buy-in or identification with team goals or process, even when the project proceeded well. Negative metaphors were common among participants who were “voluntold,” unclear about their roles, and/or hostile towards the process. For instance, in Team Bravo, which had good success at all three time points, participants 1 and 5 offered consistently negative metaphors. Participant 1 suggested the team “struggled to get off the ground” which likens the change process to a bird or airplane unable to achieve flight, in other words, failing. Participant 5 felt “prodded” “pulled” and “bogged down,” suggesting that the change process was uncomfortable. These participants did not demonstrate strong commitment to the LCT, which is reflected in their metaphors, despite the fact that this team technically achieved their goals.

Perhaps most interesting, and reminiscent of Pratt’s (2000) study of types of organizational identification, were those who identified ambivalently. People who seemed unclear about how they felt about the project communicated more metaphors to hedge about commitment (metaphors of hope, chance, luck), or distance themselves, regardless of success. For instance, participant 3 in Team Echo conveyed pragmatic metaphors at Time 1, then tentative/distant metaphors at Time 2 and 3. He talked about “shooting for” goals that “never pan out,” that success was “hit and missed” and certain ideas “didn’t make the cut.” Tellingly, he used metaphors to actively distance himself from the team, describing the change goals as “their baby” (meaning, belonging to the larger team and not him personally), and that he “inched” while the larger team “ran with it.” Similarly, participant 4 from Team Golf offered skeptical and negative metaphors at all three time points as the team demonstrated partial and then poor success. Participant 4 complained about feeling like the team’s “bitch,” meaning the feminized, lower-status person who gets worked dumped on them. He discussed feeling in “left field,” or disconnected from the process, and that the team had to “scramble” to get things done. From these cases, it appears that people who identify ambivalently use metaphors to distance themselves from projects and protect themselves from identity threats related to team failure, while offering excuses and rationale for potential failure.

These findings are important because they show that while team members may be talking about the same things, obstacles or challenges, the tone and meaning of metaphors can dramatically differ. Understanding these differences is important because how people make meaning about, frame, and react to change directly connects to their team participation, commitment, and attitude. This is especially important to evaluate because the most difficult part of change is sustainment (Aarons et al., 2011) which requires eager champions over the long term.

Discussion

In this study, we present the results of a multi-site, longitudinal, comparative case study of planned organizational change, focusing on the metaphors communicated by change team members. In this section, we answer RQ3 – what do change team metaphors communicate about it what it means to be resilient in the face of change? – before offering three important theoretical and practical contributions.

Theoretical implications

Our first scholarly contribution is to extend theory about metaphor and organizational change by showing how negative framings of change as difficult obstacles are endemic to teams. We argue that change projects, even those that are well structured and resourced, are inherently difficult and demand resilience. Our iterative metaphor analysis shows that change is framed as scary, daunting, and difficult, even when teams are ultimately successful. Practically, understanding that change projects evoke negative emotions is vital for change leaders because it shows that negative framings are typical of organizational change, and not necessarily a cause for alarm. In fact, critiques offer crucial opportunities. This finding supports Lewis's (2006) arguments that critical feedback and dissent from stakeholders – frequently avoided and discounted by organizations – can actually point to opportunities for improving change projects. Likewise, this finding is useful for planners and researchers of organizational change who may be surprised that even projects like CJ-DATS-II, with protocol carefully derived from substantial scholarly work and designed to prevent common roadblocks to change, can be filled with so many negative framings. However, as we discuss below, the ways that those obstacles are framed is consequential.

Our second theoretical contribution is to build knowledge about resilience in organizing by arguing that metaphorical framings both create and undermine resilience during change. According to our analysis, being resilient in the face of change also means being realistic about the material reality of a project and what is feasible given elements outside of a team's control. Being resilient means acknowledging obstacles but not letting them overwhelm or stymie team progress. As noted in the case studies, several teams encountered significant external disruptions like organizational leaders dying, laws changing, or facilities closing. Meanwhile all teams faced more typical struggles like turnover or budget cuts. Although obstacle metaphors abounded in the data, many team members communicated about them with resilience framings, showing how they could positively adapt to challenges (Buzzanell, 2010). For instance, members of Team Echo contextualized setbacks in light of uncontrollable circumstances and focused on small wins within their scope of influence, while members of Team Alpha and Foxtrot used metaphors that communicated personal resilience. Communicating optimism – important for individual-level resilience – can also be useful for bolstering social relationships (Afifi, 2018) that are critical for successful change and counteracting elements that detract from change processes such as dysfunctional attitudes, cynicism, and destructive resistance (Avey et al., 2008).

A related theoretical contribution also shows the limitations of resilient change metaphors. Like scholars who have criticized the misuses of resilience – e.g., organizations blaming employees for not being resilient enough (Houston & Buzzanell, 2018) – we

also point out where people communicated resilience without reason. For instance, members of Team Foxtrot futilely emphasized personal fortitude on a doomed team, and members of Team Bravo spoke about still “pushing and fighting” even as their team dissolved. Such framings suggest a paradox of optimistic metaphors. On one hand, optimism is infectious, energizing, and can help people envision future success, aspects important for communicating change (Buzzanell, 2010). However, in complex change projects, challenges are the norm. Optimistic metaphorical framings that belie the difficulty or impossibility of change may in fact create expectancy violations that further undermine resilience.

Thus, we argue that being resilient in the face of change does not necessarily mean being exclusively optimistic, cheerful, or positive. Performances of resilience also include individual and collective vulnerability, efficacy, grit – framing change as possible while being flexible about goals – activities that are not exclusively positive in tone but still do important work to cultivate resilient organizing. This argument also complicates existing scholarship that calls for exclusively positive supporters for change projects as a means of change sustainment (Aarons et al., 2011). It is critical for change leaders and researchers to know that performances of resilience do not necessarily have to be cheerful to be effective and change agents can be committed to change while acknowledging obstacles.

Furthermore, we argue that metaphors that cast change as “real work” are connected with perceptions of a meaningful change process, and can point to important elements like agency and efficacy, which contribute to successful change (Bordin, 1979) and are important personal resilience factors (Avey et al., 2008). Framing a change as real suggests that it is important and meaningful, while notions of cosmetics or fakeness indicate ephemeral efforts that are not worth the time. People also use metaphors to both link and distance themselves from change activities. In particular, metaphors of luck/fate/chance allow participants to discuss their roles in strategically ambiguous ways, and protect themselves from the negative identity implications related to failure. If things “pan out,” great; if they do not, it’s because of external factors. However, avoiding any ownership of the change project was related to less success, whether at the individual team member level or at the group level. Throughout the data, successful teams discussed change, obstacles, and team cohesion as something the team initiated and pursued, saying things like “we brought our strengths to the table.” In contrast, less successful or cohesive teams described change, obstacles, and lack of cohesion without agency and as outside of their control – something that happened *to* them, for instance, as being “shoved down our throat.” Agentic language is an indicator of efficacy and the degree to which people feel able to control or shape their environments (Malvini Redden et al., 2013). If team members feel powerless, that the change doesn’t matter, or that they have no personal stake, it is no wonder that many projects were unsuccessful or less successful than otherwise possible.

In addition, our analysis shows some of the emotions associated with change and resilience, answering calls for more evaluation of the emotional aspects of resilience in organizing (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Together, these findings contribute to knowledge about organizing and resilience by examining resilience in more routine organizational situations, adding to what we know from scholarship about resilience in crisis situations (e.g., Doerfel et al., 2013). By emphasizing the important role of metaphorical framing and supporting positive identities, we corroborate and add to the communicative

theory of resilience (Buzzanell, 2010), while also emphasizing that a diversity of emotional expressions can be resilient.

Practical implications

Our study also advances two important practical implications. First, our analysis demonstrates that even though organizational change “best practices” use participative models (Lewis & Russ, 2012) that involve significant stakeholder input, tensions exist in allowing front line employees to drive change in contexts where employees are highly disciplined, rule and law bound, and constrained by bureaucratic systems outside their control. Much change research features private or for-profit organizations (Lewis & Russ, 2012) with more flexibility to enact change. Considering complex change in bureaucratic institutions is an important contribution, especially in terms of participation. While past research shows that most implementers and stakeholders of change are specially invited to join change projects (Lewis & Russ, 2012), in bureaucratic organizations such as corrections, or small, non-profit organizations, participants may be “voluntold” as our participants described. While some who did not volunteer willingly, such as successful Team Alpha’s LCT leader, can ultimately be important to the change process, this situation creates extra hoops to jump in terms of buy-in and commitment.

Our study also shows significant potential for difficulties when employee change teams develop innovative projects, but are still ultimately unsuccessful due to lack of institutional support. Frequently, participants related metaphors of chained up bureaucracy and hierarchies. Especially in later stages, participants expressed cynicism at the absence of executive buy-in, citing it as a reason for failure, which likely resulted in more long-term damage than just a failed change project. In several instances, change activities were developed and then squelched by the absence of resources or management support. These setbacks directly contributed to poor overall team performance and cynicism, leading employees to experience paradoxical double binds (Tracy, 2004) of being mandated by management to work together, and then not being able to because of management restrictions. Masquerading at letting employee teams lead changes when it is not actually possible given organizational realities leads to frustration, withdrawal, and resignation. This finding is critical as it strengthens previous scholarship (Lewis, 2006) that shows when stakeholders feel their input is not valued, they are more like to resist change or find it less successful.

Limitations and directions for future research

While the current study examined metaphors over time, giving insight to change process, it relied upon metaphors shared in individual interviews. Future research could fruitfully extend this work by using ethnographic methods and observing how metaphors emerge in team settings. Such research could give additional insight into how team dynamics influence language use, fully attending to Lewis’s (2011) call for more in-process, ongoing studies of change. Likewise, it would be interesting to examine language use of different agencies in an inter-agency collaboration, to see how framing differs by organization, and how meanings change over time as a result of interaction.

Future research might also consider what resources could help protect change teams from challenges and cultivate resilience. For instance, the theory of resilience and

relational load (TRRL) describes how in personal relationships, people “accrue emotional reserves that help protect their relationships” (Afifi, 2018, p. 7). It would be interesting to know if the TRRL could help account for resilient team dynamics in organizations where team members had long-term relationships.

Note

1. While we analyzed eight teams across three time points, we report here on seven due to space limitations.

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