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Creating a Colorful Model of Change: Reflection on Developing a Theory as Scholar-Practitioners

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Abstract

This article describes how a meta-theory of change, now referred to as the "color model," was developed over a period of two decades. We look back to better understand how one creative idea took on many manifestations and is now a widely used theory. We identify three distinct periods of development: inception, storming and norming, and maturity. In each of these periods, we discern a similar pattern of activities, in line with Smith and Hitt's four-stage model of theory development: tension, searching, elaboration, and proclamation. The case illustrates the journey was spurred on by breakdowns in meaning, influenced by context and serendipity, and shaped by incremental elaboration. As academic practitioners, we discuss how our position in the field affected the way we approach theory development. We conclude the article with a discussion on the downside of originality.

Keywords

change management, qualitative research, organizational development

Introduction

We have been practitioners first and academics second. In the late 1990s, we were creating a curriculum and a book on change management for practitioners. We searched the literature, reflected on practice, and summarized our best thinking. During this process, we felt that a piece of the puzzle was missing: an understanding of why change occurs. So we started to map key assumptions behind change. This, in time, became a meta-model of change theories. The "color model" served as a common language, helped people understand phenomena, suggested action perspectives, and was grounded in literature and practice. With Lewin's (1952) statement in the back of our mind that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 169), the versatility of the model hinted that we had stumbled upon a theory. Looking back, we have questions about why this model's popularity surpasses our[1] other contributions. What made the process of developing it take on a life of its own for two decades? How is theory (supposed to be) developed? To address these questions, we describe and reflect on the model's development process—using our publications, research logs, and didactic materials, as well as our recollections and those of our collaborators. We do so keeping in mind Runkel and Runkel's (1984) admonishment to theory developers: "We plead only that they do not save theory to label their ultimate triumph, but use it as well to label their interim struggle" (p. 130).

We do this reflection in a context of recurring dissatisfaction with the relevance of management theories to management practice, despite repeated calls to bridge the gap between both worlds (e.g., Ghoshal, 2005; Rynes, Bartunek, & Draft, 2001). Some blame it on how scientific rationality "artificializes" the richness of practice with relatively abstract thinking (e.g., Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011), while others notice contrasting preferences for types of theories: variance theories in academia versus process theories in practice (Bartunek, 2008). Most of the writing on how to bridge the gap focuses on how academics could inform practice rather than the other way around (Bartunek, 2008; Van de Ven, 2007). Interestingly, Corley and Gioia (2011) emphasize that most of the new ideas in management that are put into practice actually come from the world of practice rather than academia, and that they rarely cross into academia. Bartunek (2008) reaffirms that as well for organizational development (OD), where this article originates. Given all this, it seems a pity that there is limited discussion on how scholar-practitioners might develop theory. We hope our experiences can be of value to fuel such discussion.

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A Frame to Reflect on Theory

Theory is a cornerstone for practice and the "currency of the scholarly realm" (Corley & Gioia, 2011). However, this does not mean there is consensus on what theory is and does. The literature offers "a plethora of definitions, opinions and criteria" (Gay & Weaver, 2011), and even rumblings about whether we have too much theory or too little (Suddaby, 2014). We take Corley and Gioia's (1990) definition as a starting point: "A theory is a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs" (p. 12). Sutton and Staw (1995) provoke by saying that "references are not theory," "data are not theory," "lists of variables or constructs are not theory," "diagrams are not theory," and "hypotheses are not theory" (pp. 372-376). Instead, theory encompasses all of the above, with an added emphasis on the relationships between them. Whetten (1989) phrases this more positively, suggesting that any theory specifies (a) what it is about (a collection of variables, constructs, concepts), (b) how these are related (links and patterns), and (c) why this is deemed to be the case (the assumptions underlying the "what" and the "how").

Checkland and Scholes (1999) insist that any phenomenon is best understood by what it "does." This raises the question: What does a theory contribute? Some stress originality, referring to how theory "allows us to see profoundly, imaginatively, unconventionally into phenomena we thought we understood . . . Theory is of no use unless it initially surprises—that is, changes perceptions" (Mintzberg, 2005, p. 361). However, theories can also be of value because of their practical utility when they increase practitioners' understanding of real-life problems and suggest ways to address them (Dick, Stringer, & Huxham, 2009). Theories can be useful for academics in a different way: by advancing the rigor of our concepts and enhancing ways of testing them (Corley & Gioia, 2011). Bacharach (1989) regards this as a third criterion: falsifiability. A theory needs to be constructed in such a way that empirical refutation is possible. Moreover, it should stimulate debate and allow us to build on each other's work (K. G. Smith & Hitt, 2005). A social constructionist view of theory points to a fourth criteria: resonance. A good theory does not collect dust in a drawer, but is picked up by others, becomes a common language, is further developed by its consumption, and may give rise to "schools in organizational theory" (McKinley, Mone, & Moon, 1999). A theory needs sufficient novelty, continuity, and scope to allow this to happen.

In short, a strong theory may have *four traits*: It is original, practical, valid, and attractive. These four criteria are often at odds with one another, leading to compromises: "Good theory splits the difference" (DiMaggio, 1995, p. 392). When Mintzberg (2005) states "All theories are false . . . We must choose them according to how useful they are, not how true they are" (p. 356), he seems to put practicality before validity. In contrast, van Maanen, Sørensen, and Mitchell (2007) describe the problem of reader response: "When a paper is widely read and the audience grows more general . . . simplification results, attentiveness to theoretical arguments or empirical materials fades" (p. 1150). They thus highlight how overemphasizing resonance runs the risk of turning theories into slogans (DiMaggio, 1995). We will use the three components and four criteria to reflect on our theory development (see Table 1).

Table 1. Theory Components and Criteria.

Components of a theory	Criteria for a theory
Collection of concepts	Originality
Interrelationships between them	Utility
Underlying paradigms and values	Validity
	Resonance

A Frame to Reflect on Theory Development

How is theory developed? Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) state that typically "theory is supposed to 'fit' data—either by design, where misfit should lead to rejections or revisions of the theory, or by default, where theory is understood as emerging from data" (p. 1265). The first is a process of creative conjectures followed by refutation and testing (e.g., Fetterman, 1989), the latter a process of induction based on observation (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Alvesson and Kärreman problematize the view that empirical materials can show the right route to theory as they deem such materials to be an artifact of interpretations, using specific vocabularies. In short, data are inextricably fused with theory. They therefore advocate a process of critically going back and forth between theoretical frameworks and empirical work, to search for deviations ("signs of mystery") from what is to be expected, and to investigate such "breakdowns in meaning" as doors to new theory development. All this suggests there are many ways to develop theory, there is no clear agreement on how well any of them work, and that the process might not be all that rational. In the same vein, K. G. Smith and Hitt (2005) critique much of the literature on theory development as well intentioned but having little connection to the reality of creating theory. Nobody seems to develop meaningful management theory by just following formulas, such as "identify variables, state relationships and clarify boundary conditions." So how does it work? K. G. Smith and Hitt asked 30 "great minds in management" to describe how they happened to develop what are now considered 24 established management theories. They figured such an inquiry was warranted, as these theories are more recognizable than the processes used to develop them, which remained mostly tacit. The authors of these theories concurred that theory development seemed

Table 2. Four Stages of Theory Development.

Tension	Search	Elaboration	Proclamation
• Dissonance between own viewpoint and other (dominant) theories • Resolving conflict among existing theories • Contradictions between own theory and research findings	• Suspending beliefs and allowing creative thinking • Exploration and discovery to develop a framework • Influence of own background, affiliation, peer networks, and partnerships • Role of serendipity and chance	• Sprawling collection of ongoing interpretative actions • Working through the logic with incremental modeling • Series of qualitative and/or quantitative research projects to ground or test ideas and failures • Getting others interested in co-developing, integrating ideas from other theories	• Presentation of aspects in incremental articles • Writing a book to represent the full gestalt • Dealing with criticism and misconstruction • Fixating the theory so it can be used as "common language" • Getting the word out, creating teaching aids • Supporting application, creating consultancy aids • Establishing communities of practice, formation of a "school"

Source. Based on Smith and Hitt (2005).

more logical in hindsight than it had appeared at the time, and that their processes were quite different from one another. Smith and Hitt considered it a pitfall to look for some neat codification. There were, however, some commonalities. In all cases, theory development spanned a significant number of years and was incremental in nature. Many encountered great barriers along the way; some were spurred on by serendipitous events. The developers experienced the processes more as a winding journey than as an efficiently managed production. Smith and Hitt discerned four common stages of theory development in all of the journeys, though the duration and intensity of the stages might differ, as well as the extent to which they happened sequentially, iteratively or in parallel. We have summarized their stage-based model in Table 2, and will use this to describe how we developed our theory. The gray text in the last column are our additions to Smith and Hitt's model, as will become clear in the case description and discussion.

The Color Theory of Change: A Brief Gestalt

The color theory expanded into a multitude of manifestations during 20 years. Though many are familiar with the basis of the theory, this is much less so for many of its elaborations. As we want to focus this article on the process of theory development, we will not describe many of the content-related aspects here, but we want to provide both the essence of the theory and a sense of the many manifestations. We hope this makes the reconstruction and discussion of its development more understandable. We refer anyone who is interested in delving more into its content to our other publications (see selected references). If we liken theory development to a tree that grows and branches out over time (Zucker & Darby, 2005), the roots are formed by an overview of paradigms of change characterized by different underlying assumptions and resulting in contrasting change behaviors. This overview is characterized in Table 3.

Blue-print thinking is based on the rational design and implementation of change. Scientific management is a classic example. Empirical investigation often is the basis for defining solutions or goals. Planned change is responsible for delivering predefined outcomes: Project management is one of its strongest tools. Key actors are those managers in charge of the change, experts who define it, and project managers who control its orderly realization. In many ways, this is still the dominant paradigm in our field. *Yellow-print thinking* is based on sociopolitical concepts about organizations, in which interests, conflicts, and power play important roles. This type of thinking assumes that people change their standpoints only if their own interests are taken into account, or if they can be compelled to accept certain ideas. The favored methods for achieving change with this type of thinking involve combining ideas or points of view, and forming coalitions or power blocks. Change is seen as a negotiation exercise aimed at feasible solutions. *Red-print thinking* focuses not on power or rationality, but on motivation. A key assumption is that stimulating people in the right way can induce behavioral change. In its most basic form, this corresponds to a bartering system: The organization provides resources and hands out rewards in exchange for personnel taking on responsibilities and trying their best. It is at the heart of many HR systems. Other interventions include recognizing achievement, strengthening collegial ties and team spirit, and enticing people with a vision of the future. At its core, this type of change is about the quality of attention that is paid to people. *Green-print thinking* has its roots in action learning and OD: Changing and learning are deemed inextricably linked. Change agents focus here on helping others discover the limits of their competences and to learn more effective ways of acting. The process is characterized by setting up learning situations, preferably in groups as

Table 3. The Five Colors at a Glance.

	Yellow-print	Blue-print	Red-print	Green-print	White-print
Something changes when you . . .	bring common interests together	think first and then act according to a plan	stimulate people in the right way	create settings for collective learning	create space for spontaneity
in a/an . . .	power game	rational process	trading exercise	learning process	dynamic evolutionary process
and create . . .	a feasible solution, a win-win situation	the best solution, a brave new world	a motivating solution, the best "fit"	a solution that people develop themselves	a solution that releases energy
with interventions like . . .	forming coalitions, changing top structures	project management strategic analysis	assessments & rewards, social gatherings	gaming and coaching, open systems planning	open space meetings self-steering teams
by a/an . . .	facilitator who uses his own power base	expert in the field, project manager	HRM expert, a manager who coaches	facilitator who supports people	person who uses his being as instrument
aimed at . . .	positions and context	knowledge and results	procedures, inspiration and atmosphere	setting and communication	patterns and meanings
The result is . . .	unknown and shifting	defined and guaranteed	outlined but not guaranteed	envisaged but not guaranteed	unpredictable but not aimless
safeguarded by . . .	decision documents and power balances	benchmarking and ISO9000 systems	Personnel systems and healthy relationships	a learning organization	self-management and dialogical quality
The pitfalls lie in . . .	dreaming and lose-lose	ignoring external and irrational aspects	smothering and conflict avoidance	excluding no-one and lack of action	superficial understanding and laissez faire

these allow people to give and receive feedback as well as to experiment together. Whenever possible, learning is co-created with participants who strengthen their learning abilities in the process, and facilitators help those involved to become facilitators in their own right. *White-print thinking* can be understood as a reaction to the "planned view" of change held by the four other colors, albeit to different degrees. A key idea in white-print thinking is that everything is changing autonomously. The change agent's interventions thus only catalyze change, giving that which is about to happen an extra push. Sense making plays an important part to discern and show undercurrents. White-print thinkers try to understand where opportunities lie, support those who grasp them, and help removing obstacles in their path.

These "roots" of the color theory were further elaborated right from the start, especially in terms of key traits and links to the literature. It took a bit longer to discern guidelines for its four key applications. Together, these constitute the basis of the theory, depicted in the first column in Table 4: the basic overview of paradigms as its "roots" and the key traits, literature and applications as its "trunk." We will describe how, over time, the theory "branched out" in traits, aspects, and interactions (column 2); applications of the theory in certain sectors and its links to other disciplines or methods (column 3); and in aids for teaching and consulting (column 4). Taken together, Table 4 gives an impression of the different manifestations.

A Reconstructed History—Part I: Inception (1997-1999)

K. G. Smith and Hitt (2005) mentioned the iterative nature of their four-stage model. In hindsight, we can construe three main iterations of these stages in the development of our color theory: an "inception" period of 2.5 years, a "storming and norming" period of 7 years, and a "maturity period" of 10.5 years.

Tension

In 1997, we got together with two colleagues in a large Dutch consultancy firms to discuss our unease about the implicit knowledge within our firm about organizational change. To us, "change" felt at the core of our profession and services, but in contrast to other subjects—such as project management or organizational design—our firm had no common concepts to discuss professional choices. Our firm did not yet feel a strong urge to remedy this, nor was it lagging behind in comparison with our competitors in this respect. Nevertheless, we felt there was a need to clarify the ideas and methods people

Table 4. Impression of the Sprawl of the "Color Theory."

Basis of the theory	Elaboration of the colors and the interactions between them	Applications and extensions	Aids for teaching and consulting
Overview of paradigms • Assumptions • Change strategy/mechanism • Resulting type of change behavior Connection with the literature • Schools of thought/ traditions within the colors • Other meta-models of change • Using meta-language and metaphors Key traits (linked to main elements of planned change) • Diagnostic focus • Type of interventions • Profile of change agent • Key factors involved • Nature of communication • Nature of monitoring and safeguarding outcome • Typical language • Ideals and "dark side," pitfalls and challenges (shallow/deep variations) Key applications incl. rules of thumb • Strategy: situational choice of a change approach with the most leverage • Diagnosis: using multiple viewpoints to deepen understanding of change phenomena • Change agent: awareness of people's preferences, competence, limitations • Communication: common language among those involved enabling collective understanding and acting	Elaboration of key traits • Overview of colored diagnostic models • Overview of colored interventions • Roles, competences, intentions, and development of change agents • Role divisions between actors and type of collaboration • Change communication (goal, means, extent, style) • Success criteria • Color glossaries: typical words, phrases, idioms • Different depths of color/self-fulfilling prophesies Extrapolation to other aspects • Ideas about nature of reality and knowledge • Meaning of resistance and conflict • Ideas about teams and collaboration • Typical issues and situations • Contra-indications • Motivators/demotivators • Order of change and colors • Norms and values/morality • Personality traits • Organizational identity • Role of (middle) management • Color and culture Interaction between the colors • Contradictions and tensions between the colors • Power balance between the colors, competency traps • Persuasive language and magical solutions • Incongruence of intentions, language and behavior • Combining colors: types (intensity) and conditions • Contracting a color change, textual agency, managing contexts • Paradoxical interventions in terms of the colors	Case/sectoral application and translation • Care, cure, pharma • Education • Utilities • E-business • Consultancy • Financial sector • Diplomacy • Sustainable development • Food sector • Construction • Churches Application and translation to other management areas an methods: • Facility management, quality management, mergers, public private partnerships, mediation, systems thinking, roles of staff departments, Information & communcation technology (ICT), institutional change, sustainable development, innovation, strategy, project management, facilitation, other color theories in management Connection with other disciplines/fields • Marketing and communication • Learning and teaching • Art and design • Therapy and coaching	Examples of color • Case descriptions • Typical situations • Rich descriptions and narratives • Anecdotes, jokes, cartoons • Imagery (icons, photos, videos) • Typical books/music/ food/art • Reflections from the field Teaching formats • Games, puzzles, core quadrants • Exercises, instructions, cases • Presentations, syllabi • Lectures and interviews (audio/ video/text) • Microcosms ("rooms of color") • Accompanying workbook • Support sites Instruments • Color tests for change agents • Quick scan • Groupware facilitated dialogue

in our firm were using. The four of us exchanged our own materials and cases, asked our colleagues to "empty their cupboards" and share their concepts and case stories, and reviewed the literature. We used the gathered data to map the field and create a change management course and syllabus to professionalize our colleagues. One might say the impetus was a disconnect between the prevalence of change in the practice of our firm and the absence of common know-how.

A second tension was the nagging sensation that something was missing from our aggregated insights. We had conceptualized common elements of change processes, different change phases and their characteristics, and overviews of diagnostic models and interventions. While our colleagues welcomed these concepts and largely agreed with them, we were surprised to find that as soon as we discussed a concrete case, colleagues often interpreted the situation differently, and heated debates emerged. People had serious disagreements about how to best help clients and over which approach would be successful. How could it be that our year-long inquiry did not address these deep-seated differences in perspective? What did we miss? We had started out with the intention of finding one overarching approach to change, but the heated discussions hinted at the impossibility of doing so. How could we have a common language, if we sacrificed the idea of one approach to change? In hindsight, this felt contradiction was the trigger that spurred a search for a more pluralistic conceptualization of change.

Search

When our colleagues discussed cases, we noticed that the proponents of different approaches seemed to come from different planets, like that contemporary bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992). They appeared to have a hard time even comprehending why a colleague could see things differently. It seemed their perspectives were shaped by implicit assumptions about change—and we ourselves were not immune to this, either. The creative leap was to map the belief systems about change behind the case discussions, as well as behind the change strategies advocated in the literature (e.g., Bennis, Benne, & Chin, 1985). We noticed that people rarely select change strategies rationally to fit a case. Instead, they interpret and handle most cases in a similar way based on their underlying belief system. We began by delineating three belief systems based on previous work on a large project where we had distinguished three contrasting phases (de Caluwé, 1997. We included rational, motivational, and learning strategies first—not surprising, as those were the change strategies used most in our own work at that time. We did a round of testing with senior colleagues who pointed out the absence of political strategies and self-organizing strategies. This made us broaden it to a five-paradigm model. We decided at this stage to not use descriptive labels like "rational-empirical" or "motivational" for the paradigms. Even though such labels had been used before in the literature, it felt arbitrary to single out one characterization, as each of the paradigms stemmed from multiple and overlapping traditions. Moreover, the terms within each paradigm were as familiar to its proponents as they were unfamiliar to others. Because the vocabularies in each of the paradigms are distinct, and can easily elicit befuddled or allergic responses from outsiders, we chose to use metaphors as labels instead. We toyed with the metaphor of "planets" but choose "colors" instead, inspired by the association of "blue-print" with engineering type approaches (even though the other colors' connection to change approaches is less obvious).

K. G. Smith and Hitt (2005) emphasize how the search stage is strongly influenced by the context in which you work, your important peers and the people you partner up with to develop theory: All of these determine your intellectual influences and the opportunities you are offered. We were part of a company that was in a period of expansion, and thus a fertile ground for investing in product development that could expand services such as "change management." The topic fit the company's profile as it was recognized for a partner in implementation rather than an expert in strategic advice. We were influenced by our OD roots (e.g., Cummings & Worley, 1993; French & Bell, 1984) and aspired to the professional ideal of the "reflective practitioner" (Schön, 1983). As a result, we regarded knowledge as subjective, saw know-how as useful for learning rather than prescription, and appreciated authors who view organizations (Morgan, 1986) or research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) from multiple perspectives. With that in mind, it might not seem that big of a leap to come up with a model that stresses diverse viewpoints on change, and to present it as a reflection tool for change agents. At the time, however, we needed to live with the tensions for well over a year to do just that.

Elaboration

We continued by mapping all possible characteristics, including types of interventions, roles of change agents, typical outcomes, ways to safeguard progress, and so on (see Table 4), and described how different these look in each of the five colors. We linked the colors to the literature on change strategies and collected and described examples of typical situations in each of the colors. The emphasis at this stage was on creating an "advanced organizer" (Engeström, 1994): an overview of the different views of change, and the characteristics of each. We said that each of the views is self-referential, but this was not evident through the format in which we modeled it: large conceptual tables outlining the contrasting traits of each color. This format came across as rather technical, and it was incongruent with our soft-spoken message that reality is socially constructed.

In the same period, we started to teach change management to our colleagues. Their responses allowed us to see where the color model needed adjustment or clarification and helped us figure out better ways to teach it. An anecdote illustrates how we learned from these encounters: One rational-empirical colleague regarded the color model as a way to improve how we assigned consultants. Consultancy projects were often staffed based on personal networks—those who one knew well—rather than on who had the specific skills needed for the job. The company had grown too large and the competences were too diverse for anyone to have a good overview. After presenting the color model, our colleague suggested a way to fix the issue: label each of our consultants with a color (based on their abilities), and label each project by color (according to the client's issues). Then, the system could match consultant to client. To us, however, this proposal demonstrated how our model might stigmatize colleagues and reduce consultants' reflective choice in how to approach change. In our minds, it was clear that nobody was only "one color," and that an effective approach to change should be based on weighing more factors than just the type of change and the type of consultant, such as underlying causes of an issue or contextual pressure. We also learned by watching colleagues apply the model, for example, when designing change for real-life cases, discussing the change dynamics of certain sectors or types of issues (e.g., complex ICT projects), or linking the model to existing consultancy models. To our surprise, we noticed that the model started to take on a life of its own: Colleagues would not just use it internally, but shared it with clients and external peers as well. The model was somehow able to capture something complex, while it seemed simple enough to share.

Proclamation

This "leaking of knowledge" motivated us to publish about the color model sooner rather than later, in part to retain ownership. We now started regarding it as a color "theory" rather than just a model. A first article appeared in a Dutch journal aimed at reflective practitioners and practitioning scholars (de Caluwé, 1998). One year later, we published a Dutch handbook for change agents that allowed us to share the model more comprehensibly (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 1999). The book became one of the best-selling Dutch management books from the start and remains so to the present day with more than 100,000 copies sold, a significant number in such a small country. Within a time span of 2 years, we thus codified the color theory, and, in publishing it, decided to essentially "freeze" it for years to come. This included the use of the colors as labels and limiting the paradigms to five. Although we had mentioned two other paradigms in the publications, we decided against placing them in the model: the first, domination as change strategy, because it was not an approach most consultants would prescribe; and the second, providence as change strategy, because it had no real track record professionally. We reasoned that the model's utility required it to stay the same for at least a few years, if not longer. How could it become a common language among change agents or within organizations if we tinkered with it all the time? We began to codify some materials for teaching as well: course syllabi, exercises, presentations, tests and puzzles, and color glossaries of typical idioms and phrases. These materials were used by the people we taught. It became clear early on that it was not just the analytic distinction between the paradigms that resonated, but the stories that brought each of the colors to life. For at least a year, some colleagues would join us in teaching to supply such illustrations for colors the two of us were less versed in. We started noticing that teaching the model with a sense of humor made it easier for people to stomach the idea that their preferred view of change was not a cure-all. Instead of denigrating any approach to change, we suggested that all of them are one-sided and that each one's value is not absolute, but situated.

A Reconstructed History—Part II: Storming and Norming (1999-2006)

Tension

Publishing the book and going "on the road" with it made the color theory more visible, and as we received more feedback, it created new tensions. The first one had to do with a persistent difficulty in talking "colorlessly" about the colors. Whoever taught it would inevitably give their favorite paradigm a more positive twist: present more inspiring illustrations, have more ideas about interventions, and have a better feel for the craft of that approach. This was true for us as well. Colleagues started to critique us, noting that yellow-print thinking (politics as change strategy) in particular was not done justice in our publications. We wondered how to ensure that the colors be regarded and presented as of equal (but different) value.

A second tension stemmed from contrasting demands from the world of academia and the world of practice. Some academics critiqued the model for being too simplistic: They felt we tried to fit a complex subject in a neat, objectivistic model, as if the whole world could be subdivided in five colors. We heard of heated debates to that effect among the editorial board where the first article was submitted. On the other end of the spectrum, some practitioners called for further simplification of the model: They wanted it to be more concise (reducing the model to fewer colors, summarizing each color in fewer words) and to have clear-cut algorithms for application (like a rigid sequence of color phases). Not only were these demands pulling us in different directions, but each of the responses disturbed us in their own way. In our minds, the color model was a construct, not a representation of reality, so we felt critiqued by the academics for something we did not believe in. We were also worried about practitioners thinking the model would make their lives easier. In our eyes, the model derived its value not by making life easier but by helping deal with complexity. How could we take responsibility for being misread two different ways?

Search

The critique from the academic arena spurred us to delve into literature on meta-language (e.g., Pacanowsky, 1995), complementarity versus incommensurability (e.g., Scherer & Dowling, 1995) metaphors (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and the consumption of knowledge (e.g., Hassard, 1988). We recognized that while the model was social constructionist in our minds, we had not positioned it that way. The more we worked with the model, the more we felt that each of the colors represented a self-contained universe. Any inspection of a colored paradigm inevitably revealed more sophisticated layers of that color, like Russian nesting dolls. That metaphor pointed us to a possible antidote for the reductionist reflex of some practitioners: to make explicit the endless layers of each of the colors.

Since the inception of the model, we had regarded it as something to play with and to reflect on change dynamics and change preferences. Therefore, we had stayed away from providing guidelines for applications such as diagnosis. The same held true for incorporating the color model in specific disciplines (like marketing) or prescribing generic strategies for specific sectors (like education). We were wary of instrumentalism, believing that application rules might obscure the complexity of dealing with contrasting paradigms. However, observing that people tended to simplify the model as they applied it anyway, we chose "the lesser of two evils": We began to deduce and share subtler guidelines.

Our context evolved as well: In our own firm, the first "knowledge centers" were created, with the one devoted to "change management" at the forefront. It became a platform for professionalization, building a community of practice, exchanging lessons learned, documenting new applications, producing teaching materials, marketing new services, and so on. Within a few years, change management was formally recognized as a new core competence of the firm. As consultant-scholar hybrids, we ventured increasingly into the world of academia: One of us became professor, the other finished his PhD, and both participated in academic conferences. These activities helped us figure out our position in and contribution to the world of academia.

Elaboration

A first elaboration was to find better ways to frame and present the color theory. This was done first by positioning it as a meta-language and exploring complementary and incommensurability stances. This seemed especially appreciated by scholars and scholarly practitioners. A second elaboration was to minimize the use of neat table comparisons of the colors. Returning to the metaphor of planets, we started to present them as endless universes, emphasizing that each paradigm was best understood by the people "living there" rather than those who just ventured there occasionally. Such a framing was useful, as we had noticed self-fulfilling prophecies. Often, our consultancy clients struggled most with those changes that could not be addressed effectively with "more of the same," the change repertoire that had become most routine. While they could intellectually comprehend that their situation called for an approach based on a paradigm outside their comfort zone, it often failed due to their shallow understanding of its workings. As a result, they often concluded that such a new approach was just not that powerful and that they had good reason not to venture there. The new framing helped clients recognize that their experience said less about the potency of the new paradigm than about their own one-sidedness.

Our attention was also drawn to the relationship between the paradigms in terms of power: No matter the client or context, the rational-empirical paradigm and the political paradigm often appeared "stronger" than the others. We studied the dynamics behind such unwarranted domination and started to suggest ways to redress it. Monthly retreats with a group of 20 consultants from contrasting backgrounds allowed us to delve into the deeper layers of each color by interpreting the same case study over and over again from different perspectives. An example was a heated discussion about how to safeguard professionalism: One would insist on the need for evidence-based practices (blue-print), another wanted to rely on our professional association's standards, codes and procedures (yellow-print), while a third relied on regular reflection with others (green-print) or their gut feeling and philosophical ponderings (white-print). Whereas this would have led to ideological stalemates before, the color theory now assisted a common realization that once again contrasting convictions were colored by implicit assumptions. In this period, we inquired with more appreciation into the political and rational paradigms of change so we could present them as richly as those toward which we were personally biased.

Probably the most prolific development involved describing the many layers of the model, and deducing application guidelines. The colors were translated to certain sectors (e.g., e-business) and linked with existing methods (e.g., groupware facilitation). Colleagues, clients, and students were involved in these activities as the ideas were tried out in practice and in education. During this period, Dutch academics starting extending the theory as well (e.g., in relation to psychological tests or competences of consultants). We specified four main applications of the model: diagnosis (looking from multiple viewpoints at people, issues, organizations to create a better understanding), strategy formation (a situated choice of a leveraged approach given the crux of an issue, type of organization, etc.), self-reflection among change agents (awareness of one's own assumptions, style, and limitations), and communication (a common language enabling the first three applications). We spelled out rules of thumb for how to go about each of the applications, illustrated with examples. In hindsight, we recognize that we started using complementary ways of modeling, which is a fertile way to expand the practical use of any theory (Engeström, 1994). Our emphasis shifted from "advanced organizers" to "systems models" that could highlight change dynamics within and between change paradigms, and we expanded our use of "prototypes" (examples, narratives, cases, metaphors) and "germ cells" (microcosms representing a complex dynamic). For the main applications, we supplied "algorithms," or rules on how to use the colors.

Proclamation

We can track about 40 publications in this period that we coauthored. Half of these concern elaborations of aspects (competences, interventions, identity) or links to related professional disciplines (learning, coaching and therapy, communication). The other half focuses on translating the model to certain sectors (cure and care, education, consultancy). From 2002 onward, this included English publications such as a handbook for change agents (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003and about 10 papers (e.g., Van der Sluis, de Caluwé & Nistelrooij, 2006), articles (e.g., de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2004), and book chapters (e.g., de Caluwé, Que & Vermaak, 2004). While the first half of the 2000s was a period of productive divergence, in 2006, we felt a need to converge again, writing a second edition of the Dutch handbook (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2006), which doubled in size with the incorporation of new findings. To get the word "out there," we still reserved substantial time for lectures and interviews on the subject but more importantly, others were now joining in to teach the model. To support them, we shared didactic materials, including colored "experience rooms," small games, and so on. After a few years, other parties were proclaiming the theory in such a way that our consultancy firm was no longer at the center of it. The color theory and the handbook had become a common fixture in Dutch university education, commercial courses, and in company programs.

Though we trademarked the theory, we decided against licensing it to allow for free use and stronger diffusion: Everybody could use it as long as they acknowledged its origins. By and large, this worked to our satisfaction. We did withhold our support from those who propagated altered versions of the model (e.g., adding purple and orange paradigms), or the model's utility as a common language would suffer. We also spoke out against the model being co-opted into any other overarching paradigm (e.g., as "phases" of project management), or it might lose its value as a pluralist model. Weick (2005) argues that "sprawl" is part of theory development, but is also something to manage for its coherence to be seen "as distinctive and significant but something less than the totality of the human condition" (p. 395). Therefore, when a colleague expanded the use of the colors to spiritual guidance, we argued against it. While we value the ease with which people play with the theory, we also feel a need to emphasize its validity as being grounded in the field of organizational change and not beyond. This threshold was also crossed when people regarded the color labels as key content, and compared our theory to other "color models" such as de Bono's (1985) thinking hats, Birkman's (1995) personality traits, or Beck and Cowan's (1996) spiral dynamics. In response, we insisted that the least distinctive characteristic of the model are the color labels: They are useful as shorthand to distinguish contrasting paradigms only. It is not a theory about colors but a theory about change.

A Reconstructed History—Part III: Maturity (2006-2016)

Tension

Thus far, our emphasis had been on separating the paradigms: to deepen the appreciation of their differences, to advocate the situated choice of a change strategy, and to know one's own one-sidedness as change agent. Advanced practitioners were now starting to wonder about combining colors in change endeavors—bringing together contrasting interventions—to deal with more complexity (such as issues that are multi-actor and multi-factor). Coincidentally, economic crises led many organizations to undertake multiple, contrasting change efforts concurrently, such as cost cutting alongside innovation or mergers alongside networked cooperation. How could the colored paradigms be combined without losing the consistency of each approach and thereby its effectiveness? We knew from experience that, for instance, indiscriminately mixing a political approach (yellow) with a learning approach (green) would produce a dysfunctional hybrid that neither creates a robust consensus (yellow) nor meaningful learning (green). How to resolve this?

Another tension relates to our role in sustaining the theory's development and diffusion. By now, the color theory had become a common language among Dutch people studying or engaged in organizational change. The color thinking was also used more internationally, though often still related to our own involvement in consultancy, conferences, or business schools. The lack of (academic) critique lessened the impetus to develop the basic model further. The attention focused on questions about its application from practitioners. Given the growing diversity of people working with the model, their needs were markedly different. Next to the advanced practitioners who used the colors to deal with complexity, there was a steady demand from less experienced practitioners for more "how to's" (exercises, examples, instruments, tips) as well as requests from people new to the field of organizational change for basic introductions. Each group required something else for their further development, and we clearly reached the limit of what we could manage. How would we assure that the theory stayed alive, coherent, and accessible at this scale?

Search

We could not help but be triggered, professionally, by the issue of complexity in relation to the color theory. This included our own research, like an 8-year multi-case study we conducted with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It also included supervising PhD research (e.g., Reitsma, 2014) and master's level research of advanced practitioners (Vermaak, 2011as well as our involvement as consultants in complex change efforts. In these contexts, we looked at the (im)possibility of designing multicolored change, the types of issues that warrant it, and the contingent factors that would allow such change to be successful. We had always been aware of our tendency to value ideas that not only add to our academic discipline (Mode 1 knowledge) but also prove their worth in practice by increasing insight or offering action perspectives (Mode 2 knowledge; Gibbons et al., 1994). Fueled by critiques from philosophical scholars, we now questioned the values, morals, and politics of change efforts more (Mode 3 knowledge; for example, Kunneman, 2005). These efforts were accompanied by a growing interest in literature on paradoxes and contradictions (e.g., W. K. Smith & Lewis, 2011), dealing with complexity by working with small wins (e.g., Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006), institutional complexity and textual agency (Hardy, 2004; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013), the role of positive deviants and political entrepreneurs (Buchanan & Badham, 2008; Warren, 2003), the morality behind change and research efforts (e.g., Adler & Hansen, 2012), and the emergence of dialogic OD (e.g., Bushe & Marshak, 2009). Our readings in these literatures pushed our thinking where our interest was: in more complex territory away from the basics of the color theory.

Elaboration

One avenue of research involved creating complex change using combinations of color strategies, which led to insights about maintaining equality between contrasting approaches, furthering the competence to distinguish and switch between such approaches, decreasing competency traps for lesser used approaches, and creating loose couplings between contrasting approaches so that they can reinforce one another. Other insights focused on ways to create the cognitive, emotional, and relational space to cope with difference and incompatibility, and the role of textual agency to enhance this space. Another line of inquiry was on looking at the colors with a paradoxical lens, exploring color combinations that are based on a collective ability to play instead of situated change design. It revealed powerful practices of groups that organically switch between "moments" of color and transient possibilities of transcending color. This research is ongoing. We were involved but no longer in the lead in other ongoing elaborations such as describing more aspects of the colors, incorporation in existing methods or disciplines. To allow the model to be used by a wider group of people without our direct involvement, we co-developed multimedia formats and interactive platforms with peers, publishers, and webinar providers. Increasingly, researchers use the model without our knowledge, for example, in relation to sustainable cities. At the end of this period, we began reviewing 20 years of developmental sprawl.

Proclamation

Several texts on colors and complexity were published, ranging from a book with 20 peers (de Caluwé, 2015), book chapters (e.g., Vermaak, 2009to papers (e.g., Zandee, Vermaak, Jonkers, 2014). We can track about 20 publications on aspects of the model (e.g., on communication, ways of learning, competences of consulting), its application in certain methods (e.g., causal loop diagramming) or its use in other disciplines (e.g., marketing, art and design) and the further refinement of a color test for change agents (de Caluwé & Vermaak, 2017). We also produced more application aids and teaching materials, including video/web-lectures and a simulation game. The Internet version of the Dutch and English color test for change agents is an open resource and widely used. An interactive platform for a community of practice was launched in 2012 where peers exchange instruments, cameos, cases, and tips for teaching and using the color theory. It led to an accompanying workbook titled *Learning to Work with Learning to Change* (Boersema-Vermeer & de Groot, 2016). A third edition of the Dutch handbook that includes multimedia resources is in the works.

By this time, three teaching insights have become quite clear. First, there is no single way to teach the color theory effectively, as the audiences vary widely in their experience as change agents, in their familiarity with the model, in the complexity of their change work, and in their appreciation of pluralism. For instance, introducing the color theory in the full Dutch radiologist community, a group unfamiliar with change theory, is done by presenting a simple overview and a straightforward exercise in applying the model (Vermaak & Maas, 2017).). In contrast, applying the color theory to the transition of the whole system of youth care from a national level to a municipality must address the necessity of a combination of colors and the complexities that are involved (Vermaak, 2012). A second insight is that no conceptual overview brings the theory to life as much as a collection of stories, imagery, and movies. Such materials allow people to make better sense of the values and mechanisms behind the colors and the typical interaction between them. We find that once people gain an understanding of these underlying dynamics, they can often surmise the aspects and traits of the colors on their own, even if these have not been discussed. A third teaching insight is that people's defensiveness can be easily triggered because the colors are value based. Such defensiveness can be reduced by taking an "observer stance" in describing the colors, by using humor and irony, and by playful interaction with their responses. Taking an observer stance means talking about the colors as five different planets, with different inhabitants and cultures that we explore and are surprised about together. Humor and irony allow us "to name the unnamed, confuse sense with non-sense, and create disorder in our ordered thought systems" (Weick & Westley, 1996, p. 451). It allows the audience to explore a more pluralistic universe without it necessarily having any consequence in real life; it creates a safe space to explore other realities. Responding to questions or criticism in a playful way allows for demonstrating that reactions are often based on a certain colored view of the world. It offers a microcosm for pointing out change dynamics. To quote Weick (1969), "people find propositions non-interesting that affirm their assumption ground (that's obvious), that do not speak to their assumption ground (that's irrelevant), or that deny their assumption ground (that's absurd)" (p. 51). The only way to enable this balancing act is to abandon a standard narrative and to create learning situations on the spot that stretch those involved as much as possible. This kind of teaching is powerful but requires people to have worked with the colors for many years. Thus, the basics of the model can be easily taught by many and to many. However, an appreciation of its deeper layers has to be earned.

Reflection

Theory

The color theory seems to fit Gioia and Pitre's (1990) definition of a theory as "a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs." The five color concepts focus on *why* change comes about, and the underlying assumptions, values, and dynamics are core components. Within each color, the key traits and aspects chart *how* that type of change occurs. In terms of the three components of a theory (see Table 1), we recognize both a collection of *concepts* and underlying *paradigms*. The *interrelationships* between concepts are probably the component that has developed the most. The key applications of the color theory involve the relationships *between* the colors: using the colors as common language, as viewpoints for diagnosis, as situated model for strategy choice, and as reflection aid. The insights about combining the colors also address interrelationships between the colors. Interrelationships *within* the colors are clearest in terms of how congruency of aspects reinforce each other and enable a deeper type of change. More specifically, we regard the color model as the result of *meta-theorizing*: staying away from for a synthesis between different perspectives but, instead, trying to comprehend paradigmatic differences, similarities, and interrelationships and highlighting contradictions and interdependence to invoke creative tensions: an approach called "interplay" by Lewis and Grimes (1999).

The color theory does not equally meet the criteria of originality, utility, validity, and resonance (see Table 1). The theory scores well enough on *originality* and *utility* for the world of practice. To this day, it is able to broaden people's perspective and to confront them with their own bias. It aids diagnosis and offers action perspectives. Though the theory scored well enough in terms of originality and utility for the Dutch academic world where it sparked debate, new teaching and testing in the late 1990, this is much less so for the international arena who were exposed to it less intense and years later when our first English publications came out. By that time, others were developing similar concepts in a context where an appreciation of socially constructed realities was rising (e.g., Caldwell, 2005; Huy, 2001). In contrast, the *validity* of the theory has increased over the years especially by different forms of action research complemented by a firmer grounding in the literature. In the early years, the color theory was more the product of a creative leap than a tested concept. The research efforts ranged from cooperative enquiry in communities of practice (e.g., Heron, 1996) to collaborative insider/outsider research in relation to specific change efforts (e.g., Shani, Mohrman, Pasmore, Stymne, & Adler, 2008) to a grounded theory approach to case studies (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998): different modalities to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice in a participative pursuit of practical change, professional learning, and organizational theory (Schuiling & Vermaak, 2016). Quantitative research was used only in a supportive role, like in the empirical studies on the color test. The color theory probably scores best on the last criteria: *resonance*. Having our primary base of operations in consultancy can explain this. Our first impetus was to create a model for our firm and our clients, to be used in consultancy and teaching. The development was done with that in mind. When it succeeded, we strove to have it taken up by other change agents and to be taught in academic and corporate curricula. It created a widespread community of users.

The four criteria can be at odds with one another. The emphasis we put on resonance has had a downside. We could enable more powerful teaching by prioritizing narrative richness over conceptual precision. While this increases resonance, it also allows the color theory to be many things to many people. When the precision of the concept suffers, utility and validity may suffer too, as the power of application and testing is proportionate to the depth of understanding of the theory. Similarly, when the concepts are simplified to match the experience of an audience, the originality of the color theory also decreases: Going back to basics makes the concept less novel. Conversely, in the maturity period, the theory's further development was sparked by a deepening complexity of issues. We may have broken new ground in studying more complex combinations and issues, but this appeals to a more select audience of advanced practitioners. Originality and utility thus come at the expense of resonance. We agree wholeheartedly with DiMaggio's (1995) conclusion that "the researcher who tries to combine [contrasting criteria] faces not a list of bright line standards, but of vexing choices" (p. 392).

Theory Development

We have found K. G. Smith and Hitt's (2005) four-stage model very useful for reconstructing the development of the color theory (see Table 2). The interpretative frame did not feel constrictive, but rather helped us to develop a new appreciation and a better understanding of the development process. Scrutinizing our data with the aid of the stage model made us rethink the—sometimes contrasting—recollections of those most involved. Without trying to be comprehensive, we want to highlight three such insights: tensions fuel development, searching is shaped by context and serendipity, and development is an incremental process.

First, we have become more aware of how *tensions* seem to fuel different periods of development. Initially, a tension started within us, as we perceived a void of know-how on change and a gap between different schools of thought; we saw a need and were eager to fulfill it. In the second period, we were faced with a tension originating externally, from the contrasting needs and criticisms from the world of practice and academia that were partially caused by the ease with which the model could be misread. In the third period, the tension came from a more select group of practitioners and academics who inquired into the value of the color theory to address and research complex issues.

Second, the influence of *context and serendipity* in the search stage is apparent: We see how societal trends, consultancy fads, and academic debates affected the development process and how our own affiliations and backgrounds influenced both the direction we took and the resources we had. In this respect, it also becomes clear that we couldn't help but stay true to our OD roots. We might have developed and internalized a theory that regards OD as just one of several equally valuable change paradigms, but using the theory as a dialogic and didactic tool and seeing reality as socially constructed implies that although we might be aware of our preference, we have not lost it.

Third, we have a deeper appreciation of the development process as causally ambiguous, taking many years of *incremental development* that might seem logical looking back but much less so looking forward. K. G. Smith and Hitt (2005) may critique academics for having rationalistic ideas about theory development, but this misconception may be at least as widespread among practitioners. When we started developing the color theory, we were more rooted in practice than in academia and inclined to regard theory development as a linear empirical endeavor that bore little resemblance to what we were doing. While we might have discarded such a naïve view of academia over the years, we are still somewhat surprised that the choices we made seem more robust in hindsight than we believed at the time. It makes us reevaluate how theory development works.

Our case also raises two points of discussion about the four-stage model. First, K. G. Smith and Hitt (2005) discerned the stages as common steps in the development journeys described in their book, and noted that the stages may overlap and that some move back and forth between stages. Rather than experiencing overlapping stages, we discerned three *consecutive periods* sparked by a different type of tension, and thus resulting in different types of search, elaboration and proclamation. We wonder whether this might not be true for other theory development as well. Second, we notice in our case much more *emphasis on the proclamation stage*. This involves additional types of activities listed in gray in Table 2. In the original model, proclamation exists primarily of publishing findings and responding to critique, which makes sense given that all "great minds" brought together by Smith and Hitt have their base of operations in academia. In our case, this is supplemented by substantial teaching, forming communities of practice, creating education programs, and providing teaching and consultancy aids. This shift makes sense given our position as academic practitioners. To give the four-stage model wider applicability, we suggest adding these types of activities to the model.

Finally, we can't help but wonder about a possible fourth period of development of the color theory from 2017 onward. While we can't predict what that will look like, we do feel a tension that might spark new development. This has to do with the *continuity of the color theory* in both practice and academia. In the field, the model stays "alive" while its originality remains and if there is enough of a community of practice around the model to use it in change efforts and teaching. However, during the last years, the model's originality has become focused on dealing with complexity, which makes for a smaller audience. In the world of academia, the model stays alive by breaking new ground: sparking debate with original ideas that are grounded in research. The validity might increase as time passes, but originality decreases as ideas become accepted. In both arenas, we thus feel a puzzle when it comes to the theory's continuity.

Concluding Remarks

At the start of this article, we referred to a frequent call to bridge the gap between academia and practice and how this call is mostly interpreted as a need for academics to inform practice with new insights. However, if it is true that most ideas in management come from the world of practice rather than academia (Bartunek, 2008; Corley & Gioia, 2011), an argument could be made that academics would be better off researching theories that become popular and have proven versatile in practice rather than importing new ones. Why not harvest the experience of practitioners instead of, or at least in addition to, informing practice? When we look back, we have learned the hard way: making our way into academia as practitioners and living in two worlds with contrasting demands (Schuiling & Vermaak, 2016). Though we have enjoyed this journey, we would also have welcomed academics to join forces with us. It would have accelerated the development of the model, compensated for our lack of experience in research, and have led to more timely publication in the academic press. We think it is an interesting avenue to explore.

A last remark concerns the downside of originality. In academia, we try to push the boundaries of our knowledge. Journals put emphasis on authors contributing something new. In practice, publications become and remain popular as long as they are fresh and accessible. In both arenas, this can be at the expense of a "repository of robust ideas" that are valid and useful. For instance, in the practice of OD, we still find that group dynamics and facilitation are at the heart of our profession; they require years to handle deftly and they are quite complex phenomena. However, this know-how has only become less visible over the years in both arenas. Similarly, we observe the color theory is able to profoundly shift the perceptions of those who are learning to deal with change anew as well as provide a versatile model for experienced change agents. But here too, we wonder about its longevity. We place a high premium on classics: a traditional pot roast, classic Coke, a perfect apple pie. Why not do the same with "management classics?" Of course, education publishers produce books that present some of those classics, but the power of any management concept decreases when it gets simplified and reduced to text. Just as a classic meal tastes delicious when crafted with know-how, concepts stay powerful when they are alive in practice, teaching, or research. We think it is worth pondering about how to do that with our classics and thus give theory development more lasting relevance.

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