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Interview

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An Interview with Robert Chia: Talking about Practice Theory and Social Change

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Abstract

Studies of organisational change often treat stability as the norm and change as something that happens to otherwise settled entities. Robert Chia challenges this view, starting with the claim that change is continuous, pervasive, and prior to the temporary stabilisations we call organisations or structures. Drawing on Bergson, Whitehead, James, Bourdieu, and Dreyfus, Robert develops a processual account in which practices emerge through situated coping and responsiveness rather than through moments of deliberate intervention in otherwise stable systems. In discussing this approach, our interview with Robert ranges across questions of agency, purpose, environment, materiality, and the distinction between ‘owned’ and ‘unowned’ change. We consider what it means to understand structures as ossified practices, how practitioners respond to unfolding situations, and how an emphasis on process reframes familiar debates about intentionality, stability, and transformation.

Keywords

coping; purposeful; purposive; response; owned/unowned; ossified

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Introduction

Inspired by the theme of the special section of this second issue of *The Journal of Practice Theory* on 'Practice Theory and Social Change', Manuel Baeriswyl and Elizabeth Shove interviewed three scholars working across different disciplines: Organisation Studies (Robert Chia, Professor of Management at the University of Glasgow), Archaeology (Duncan Garrow, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Reading) and Sociology and Biology (Megan Warin, Professor in the School of Society and Culture at the University of Adelaide). Together, the interviews provide insights into different ways of understanding change and into points of connection and difference across disciplinary and theoretical traditions.

We chose to speak with these scholars not because they are in any sense representative of the disciplines in which they work, but because of the ideas they develop and the approaches they take. The conversations that follow are revealing in their own right but also bring into view points of overlap and difference in theory and method, and in understandings of scale, comparison, and materiality.

The interview schedule was shared with the participants in advance. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited. The interviewees reviewed the transcripts, provided corrections, and added references.

In this interview, Elizabeth Shove and Manuel Baeriswyl talk with Robert Chia about his work on organisations and process, beginning with his account of continuous and pervasive change and exploring what a processual worldview means for understanding practices, agency, stability, and transformation.

Robert Chia is Professor Emeritus of Management at the Adam Smith Business School, University of Glasgow. After studying mechanical engineering and accumulating significant experience in manufacturing management, he received his PhD in Organisational Analysis from Lancaster University in 1992. Throughout his academic career, Robert has contributed to scholarly and practical understandings of organisations by developing and adopting a process ontological worldview and exploring its implications for organisational practices and performance. He has also contributed to debates in the field of strategy-as-practice, mobilising phenomenology to understand the strategic dimension of situated practical coping. Taken together, these different strands of work challenge established notions of social change and the performativity in and of organisations.

Elizabeth Shove: We'd like to talk with you about practice theory and change, and since that is a huge topic, we are going to focus on just two of your articles. One is from 1999, 'A 'Rhizomic' Model of Organizational Change and Transformation' (Chia 1999) and one from 2014, 'Reflections: In Praise of Silent Transformation' (Chia 2014). We want to start with the second and with the idea that

change is a ubiquitous notion that fascinates and frustrates.

Manuel Baeriswyl: In both contributions, you focus on what you call endemic change or ongoing change, as well as deliberate change in organisations, so our first question is this: How did you come to write about the topic of change?

Robert Chia: Can I give you a bit of background to explain where I'm coming from? I'd like to start with my experiences as a business practitioner. I was in the Air Force, and then I ended up running a large can manufacturing operation, a soft drink and beer can operation that made a million cans a day. One of the things that I tried to do was to improve performance in the factory, so I tried to implement small changes and quite a few times they backfired - they generated unintended consequences. What puzzled me was how difficult it was to grasp what was going on in reality and how that affected the way we intervene, both in terms of timeliness and magnitude.

We have a kind of perception of what is happening, but what we think is going on and what is actually happening do not always connect. In fact, there always seems to be a gap between the two, and one of the reasons why our change initiatives fail is because of this gap - we misread the reality of situations. I have come to realise that this is because we take stability as the norm and change as exceptional - our perception of change is based on the foundation of stability, and as such, we do not really understand change in changeful terms!

So, this is what intrigued me. It was this frustration and puzzlement of a perennial 'gap' between perceptions/representations and reality that led me to take a break and go to Lancaster (Management School). I joined what was then the Department of Behaviour and Organisations. It was there that I met Bob Cooper, who became my mentor. He was into poststructuralism, you know, Derrida and Foucault and Lyotard, and he was talking about things that I had never, ever heard of. But essentially it revolved around the critique and inadequacy of symbolic representations.

One unlikely connection, therefore, was this shared interest in the problem of representation. To me, that made a lot of sense because I was puzzled about this perpetual gap between reality and representation and, especially, between what people say they will do and what is actually done. Ronseal (a varnish manufacturer) had an advertisement in the 1990s saying "It does what it says on the tin", but in my experience we often don't do what we say on the tin; representations often do not match reality. What we say will happen or has happened often does not match what actually does/has happen/ed! So that was the gap that intrigued me.

I was nearly 40, but I decided to give everything up and find some answers to this puzzle. I became an accidental academic and unexpectedly did my PhD on deconstruction because it seemed to resonate with my own puzzlement. Besides Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and other 'postmodernists', I ended up reading Whitehead and Bergson and William James and I thought, yes, this is the real reason why our metaphysical assumptions are not appropriate; in William James's (1911) words by assuming stability as the basis of reality and hence the adequacy of linguistic representations, we 'falsify as well as omit' crucial aspects of reality. We commit what Alfred North Whitehead (1925) calls the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. It was an aha moment when I realized that we only ever take 'cinematographic' snapshots of reality (Bergson 1911), and that this is why we can't really grasp processes of change in their own terms.

Process metaphysics and process philosophy helped make sense of the gap that puzzled me, but then I asked myself, how do we see what we see? Why don't we see reality in processual terms? Why do we focus on entities, fixed states, and structures, and why

do we take these for granted? I'd been trained as an engineer and, up until then, a substance metaphysics had underpinned my thinking. But I realised: "Oh my goodness, perhaps that's not quite right" - it was a profound existential moment of doubt, doubting almost everything that seems common sense and obvious.

So that's the long story. That is why I wrote that piece. I thought if change is pervasive, heterogeneous, and continuous, what does that imply for organisational change? It would mean that change is not exceptional - change is always already happening all the time, even if we do not notice it because of our tendency to attend to events, states and entities. From a processual worldview, it is order and organisation that are the exception. That was a kind of dramatic reversal in the way we think about change.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Thanks, that is useful background. Our next question is more specific, and it is about your contribution to Organization Studies. In the 1999 paper and in others as well, you raise a lot of questions about organisations, and you contrast a view of them as static entities with an account of process and ongoing change. Do you think this proposition has caught on?

Robert Chia: The word 'process' has definitely caught on, but most theorising about organisational change is still predicated on a substance metaphysics: the idea is that things change, not that change produces things, so to speak. When the word 'process' is used, it usually means the 'transition' between two otherwise stable and identifiable 'states'. This is not a processual worldview. Change is still thought of as an epiphenomenon - it is something that happens to pre-formed entities. I think that is the wrong way to think about it.

I agree with Schatzki's idea that organisations are bundles of practices. I would say they are bundles of ossified practices, and to me, a structure is an ossified set of practices. But the important point is the focus on the primacy of practice. We practice and are socialised into reenacting social practices well before we consciously think about such practices. This is the point Bourdieu and Dreyfus make about children learning practices through observing adults and mimicking them.

Elizabeth Shove: That's fine, but I'd like to push you a bit further. It is one thing to equate change and process, but do you think there are different kinds of change, different sorts of flows, and different relations between organisations? Ted Schatzki talks about significant change and less significant change, but you might also talk about change rooted in technology or in paradigms, in things of nature - for example, in the 2014 article you talk about nature as an ongoing background.

Processes of climate change are probably not the same as the sorts of changes that happen as people get older, so what do you think about this? Do you think there are different types of change?

Robert Chia: I think this is where my orientation is probably slightly different. I am trying to understand change not so much as an academic, but as faced by a practitioner - how to cope with relentless, pervasive change. Academics come up with all sorts of typologies. They classify change in terms of significance and so forth as detached observers, but the distinctions and labels they come up with are for academic labelling purposes. I am more interested in the practitioner who is immersed in change and who confronts it - what does she do? How does she respond from her 'worm's-eye view'?

For me, identifying and apprehending ‘significant’ change can only happen retrospectively. It depends on the time frame involved. Climate change is a good example of something that we have only become very aware of after several hundred years of industrialisation. I’m always wary of what Bourdieu calls ‘intellectualocentrism’: as academics we try to explain change in our terms rather than in terms of how practitioners themselves experience it. From a processual worldview, change is not just all around us - even we ourselves are changing relational configurations. Our identities are themselves merely temporary stabilisations

Elizabeth Shove: Your practical focus on change as seen by a practitioner makes a lot of sense of what you’ve written. That’s helpful, and it may relate to our next question, which is about temporal and spatial scales and the situated character of your work (or not). In the 2014 article, you suggest that there is a Western mindset shared by Western practitioners. What does this mean for your own views of change: are they Western? Are they contemporary? Are they of global relevance?

Robert Chia: It is true, I’m guilty of using East and West as if they are just two geographical areas, but for me the more interesting question has to do with how ideas circulate. It is not really about East or West, but about dominant and subsidiary or supplementary ways of thinking in each geographic region. Currently, a substantialist worldview dominates the processual worldview in much of the West, whereas implicitly it is less so in the East.

Aristotle’s insistence that something ‘is’ or something ‘is not’ excludes what you might think of as the middle ground. It leads to the creation of ‘pseudo’ entities.

David Bohm, the theoretical physicist, had a very nice example of how language can sometimes lead us a bit astray. He gives the example of someone looking out of a window and seeing rain falling. He says, “Oh, it is raining”, but what is the ‘it’ that is doing the raining? Do you know how the Chinese say rain? *Xià yǔ* – falling rain. There is no ‘it’ in the description. As both Ernest Fenollosa and Walter Ong have observed, the Chinese language is essentially a language of ‘movement’.

Elizabeth Shove: This might be a bit of an unanswerable question, but how do you think ideas about change themselves change? We are talking about papers you wrote more than 20 years ago. If we think 20 years into the future, maybe nobody will be dealing with binary opposites!

Robert Chia: I believe ideas about change are changing. The dominant way of thinking about change as ‘transition’ from one state to another (as in Lewin’s (1974) Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze) is giving way to an acceptance of relentless, non-linear change as the reality of the world we face. More and more people seem to accept the idea of process and continuous change as a more accurate and coherent representation of reality and of understanding what is going on in the world, and that it is on this basis that we can understand practices and the phenomenology of the senses. I think we’ve been stuck for a long time on divisions between structure and agency; voluntarism and determinism; individualism and collectivism, but these dichotomies are not very satisfactory. I think focusing on practices offers a plausible way out.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Now that we’ve got a better sense of your position on some of these big topics, we would like to go back to the 1999 paper and to ask you about the role of

deliberate human intervention in change. In that paper, you explain that scholars who study change, for example, Van de Ven (e.g. 1987), feel they have to write about how organisational structure and purposive action are linked. So, they talk about how change is produced by individuals who act 'internally' (within an organisation) and whose actions are also oriented by external factors. You have been critical of this approach, so we're interested to learn more about what you mean by structures and how they change, and also about the place of deliberate human intervention.

Robert Chia: Thanks for the question. This is something I grappled with for quite a while. Let's talk about structure first. As I have mentioned before, when we talk about structure, it is shorthand for a bundle of ossified practices. So how do you remove or change structure? Actually, by relaxing it. By relaxing those ossified bundles of practices that no longer serve the purpose, that do not generate desirable outcomes. Practices become obsolete precisely because they do not ultimately deliver some level of satisfaction. Like the traditional tribal practice of doing a 'rain dance'; they are much less practiced now because there are other more satisfactory and efficient ways of making 'rain' happen.

Ossified practices that work ensure regularity and predictability - they become practical routines. They have proven valuable in lifting humans up, giving us an advantage and enabling us to free ourselves from environmental constraints. But environments change. Situations change, circumstances change, therefore, the structure can, over time, become an impediment rather than an aid. Ultimately, practices help economise

effort and conserve energy while satisfying need.

Marshall Sahlins, for example (e.g. [1972] 2020), talks about how our actions and practices contain a principle of economy of effort; they help conserve energy, the surplus of which can then be deployed to explore and lift our ways of life to a higher degree of freedom from environmental limitations and constraints. Practices involve advantage-gaining moves, but when they do not deliver, they become obsolete and have to be let go of. That's how I think about structure.

The other part was about human intervention. This is where I have found Hubert Dreyfus' work insightful. He makes a very important distinction between purposeful and purposive². To him, purposeful means you have a prior goal or plan to which you intentionally aspire to - it involves means-ends thinking. This is the traditional way of thinking about how we act: we pre-specify what to do before we act.

Purposiveness, on the other hand, is more about immediate responsiveness and coping in the here and now - it is 'non-deliberate'. This distinction is crucial because it suggests that much of our coping actions are 'pre-cognitive' - that they do not involve prior cognitive assessment. For me, this is the real potential of the 'practice approach' to understanding human action, that we can act as a result of internalised habit and predisposition and not because of prior cognitive evaluation. This is why I think that Dreyfus understands the practitioner viewpoint a lot better than a lot of practice theorists - many still think of practices as necessarily guided by prior thought.

Manuel Baeriswyl: That brings us to our next question. In your 2014 paper, you debunk the

² For an elaboration of this distinction in Dreyfus' work, see Chia and Holt 2023.

myth of the hero leader who drives change, but you still use the concept of intentionality to describe how the 'natural' flow of change is steered, and you still write about goals and intentions. How do these concepts relate to process and ongoing change?

Robert Chia: I think your comment is quite accurate. However, I do not believe I used the notion of 'goals' as part of my terminology, and in that paper, I did not deal with the concept of intentionality sufficiently - something I did do with Robin Holt in our 2023 paper, where we reconstrued 'intention' as being 'in-tension' resulting from experiencing a situationally-based suboptimality. So, agency is more 'distributed' and resides in the circumstances and not just in the mind.

As for 'letting happen', in the paper, the emphasis is on emergent change through small adjustments as situations evolve and adjusting accordingly. There is a sense of purposiveness, but not purposefulness. I should have made more of this idea of non-deliberate coping, which is missed in much of the literature. In the 2014 paper, I wanted to show how almost habituated, spontaneous acts aggregate and snowball to form a favourable or an unfavourable outcome, non-deliberately.

Manuel Baeriswyl: Well, you did write about intentionality in practices later on, in your recent papers on strategy (see Chia and Holt 2023; Chia and Mackay 2023).

Robert Chia: Yes! As I said, I learn as I go along. But if you read carefully, our account of 'intentionality' is not simply a property of the mind but evolves from 'pre-cognitive' bodily interactions with a surrounding environment - it is about 'tensions' felt whilst immersed in a particular environment.

Elizabeth Shove: Let's retrace our steps a bit. If I've got it right, you are focusing on how things happen and on response and reaction, but you're also hanging on to the idea of goal and purpose. Is this a tension that practice theory helps you negotiate? Are you interested in the conjunction of what you call 'owned' (purposeful) and 'unowned' (purposive or responsive) change?

Robert Chia: No, I am trying to get out of the 'goals and purpose' mentality, which is part of the 'cognitivism' that Dreyfus identified as a major obstacle to understanding a phenomenology of practices. In terms of practice theory, I'm more enamoured with the work of Bourdieu and Dreyfus than with Giddens or even Schatzki. I believe that you can think about practices as following cognition (or intent), or you can think of practices as prior to cognition - 'pre-cognitive'. And for me, this latter way of thinking about practices is critical - most practice theorists still do not 'get' this. In other words, we practice before we think, just like we acquire rituals, habits and predispositions through socialisation, childhood, and upbringing before we come to think about them. Social practices precede cognition. That's why for me 'culture' is not about 'values' and 'beliefs' (these are abstractions) but simply about rituals, practices, and ways of doing.

Elizabeth Shove: I'm still a bit puzzled. Are you saying that practices precede owned (intentional) change and that they also precede unowned (responsive/environmental) change?

Robert Chia: Practices certainly precede 'owned' (intentional) change. But no, they do not precede 'unowned' change for the simple reason that practices are the result of our coping responses to environmental solicitations and changes. Practices help us

find an advantage, a foothold on the environment in order to help us advance as an organisation or society.

Elizabeth Shove: Why do you say that?

Robert Chia: Practices are dependent. To me, practices are dependent on environmental signals. You know, we develop practices in engagement with an extended environment. And the environment has a say in how we shape our practices. So, the reason why it has a say is because environments and situations have their own configuration of forces. And this configuration of forces constitutes what you might call unowned change. They change of their own volition regardless of my intervention. I have to learn to 'bend' to the imperatives of an extant environment, otherwise, it would mean expenditure of wasteful energy or even my extinction.

Elizabeth Shove: So, are unowned changes not also ossified practices?

Robert Chia: No, because the environment is not within our control; it changes of its own accord regardless of our agency. That's why they are called 'unowned'. Changes in the landscape, weather, etc. and even the process of 'ageing' are beyond agentic control - no amount of independent 'practices' can deal with them without first acknowledging the force of their inevitability. We have to respond to the environment, and our responses add up together to make up practices as long as they give some satisfaction. That's the reason why unowned change is, if you will, very fundamental to how we act. We have this tendency to think that as agents we can make independent choices. But this idea of choice is actually quite illusory, because our choices are determined by socialised norms, habituated

tendencies, and by situational circumstances that we inherit or are born into.

Elizabeth Shove: It still sounds to me like you want to hold on to the notion of choice and to the notion of a natural environment that exists beyond practices. Is that right?

Robert Chia: Not really. I want to say that the idea that agency and choice determine outcomes has to be moderated by unowned forces that are situational and inherited, so to speak. So, when I say "my choice", it's not really my choice. It carries the weight of my prior socialisation, my habituated disposition and my awareness of situational demands.

Elizabeth Shove: I agree with you about that, and I'm sure there's more we could say, but it is time for one last question

Manuel Baeriswyl: We are interested in the coexistence of different rates or registers of change and the anchoring and stabilising effect of material arrangements. Wanda Orlikowski (2006) writes about materials as stabilising and also transformative features of organisational life – materials can have both effects³, but we'd like to learn more about immanent processes in the realm of devices, objects, and infrastructures. Do you think processes of change are 'carried' by materials, or do you think changes are carried by something else, but have material side effects? Where does the hardware of organisational life fit into your analysis of change?

Robert Chia: I don't feel very comfortable with the idea that materials can have some kind of agency. I think agency comes from an impulse associated with living systems. Not with non-living systems. I don't see materials as having the ability to transform themselves or have transformative features. They do

³ See also Shove and Baeriswyl's interview with Orlikowski in this journal (Shove et al. 2025).

contain the traces of change that delimit and constrain or enable action possibilities, just like the environment affords and constrains possibilities for action.

In a process view, reality is not pre-shaped. At the end of the day, it is about how we see and feel differences in the material world, but we don't need to say that materials have agency. It is always through interaction with people that outcomes are realised. I have an impulse, an *elan vital*⁴ – and that's the reason why it is purposive and not purposeful. It is about detecting the affordances that are available to me in the moment.

Elizabeth Shove: That is interesting. We're using software now to talk to each other and all sorts of organisational changes are undoubtedly connected to these technologies, but your position is that what matters is how we mobilise the software, and how we decide to organise meetings using Teams. So, the focus is still on the practitioner?

Robert Chia: Yes, very much so. The software and technology orient us to what practices satisfy better and fulfil our needs. So, we develop practices accordingly.

Elizabeth Shove: We need to finish soon, and to do that we want to take a broader view of change. We talked earlier about process theories taking over the world. That is maybe too ambitious, but do you see relevant parallels in other fields? Are there others who have been thinking along similar lines in biology or physics or maybe sociology?

Robert Chia: The funny thing is that in the early part of the 20th century, process theories were part of a whole movement. There were people like Whitehead, and there were also biologists like Waddington and later physicists like Bohm and Prigogine. Bergson's book, *Creative Evolution* (see Bergson [1911] 2022), was an attempt to modify Darwin's idea that organisms adapt to the environment and the idea of creative evolution suggests that organisms have ways of mobilising the environment to their advantage, autopoetically. The term 'exaptation' has been used by Gould (1991) to refer to this coopting and repurposing of the environment to meet one's needs.

Elizabeth Shove: It may be that Organization Studies are late to this party, not the other way around?

Robert Chia: Yes! I think Organization Studies are too instrumentalised. They have become very ahistorical, and they don't understand the past or that it matters. The past, from a processual worldview, is very much in the present, but only immanently. As Bergson puts it well, it is the "... continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances..." ([1911] 2022, 10). This is how to think about change from a genuinely processual worldview.

Elizabeth Shove: It has been great to learn more about where you come from, and about your ideas on practice and change, so thank you!

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⁴ See Bergson ([1911] 2022).

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