

Accounting for radical change: framing in a social movement leading to a radical change decision

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper accounts for radical unplanned change driven by marginalized workers at the society-organization intersection in an emerging market context (South Africa). The purpose is to provide a contextual understanding of radical organizational change, highlighting local and national conditions and illustrates frame extension via collective identity.

Design/methodology/approach – An interpretive case study explored the #Outsourcingmustfall process at Uptown Academy, a large urban university in post-Apartheid South Africa. Data from 18 interviews, observations, documents and social media were analyzed using grounded theory.

Findings – The findings demonstrate the origin of collective action frames in discursive material rooted in contextual conditions and cultural narratives, shaped by historical context, socio-economic conditions and political opportunity. They highlight the power of frame extension linking the plight of outsourced workers to a culturally resonant collective identity, enabling alignment between different activist groups. Key mechanisms driving the change included relational activism, appropriate framing to shift management sense-making and creating a crisis through coercive tactics which included the use of social media.

Research limitations/implications – The study offers practical insights for leaders on recognizing vulnerability to societal pressures, understanding the dangers of framing complex issues solely through a market logic, managing communication via social media platforms and appreciating the tactical responsiveness of marginalized groups. Theoretically, it aids in refining change theories in challenging contexts and understanding how framing influences organizational change.

Originality/value – This paper contributes a contextual understanding of radical change in the global south, provides insights on frame extension through collective identity and explains how social movement mechanisms precipitate radical organizational change.

Keywords Organizational change, Outsourcing, Social movement, Framing process, Decision-making, Emerging economies

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Organizations are facing more volatile and disruptive change and do not always have the luxury of instituting planned change (MacKay Bradley and Chia, 2013). Instead, they are increasingly facing radically forced, unplanned change that necessitates an urgent response, often driven through social mobilization (i.e. social movements), which is speculated to increase (Eisenstein, 2020). By *et al.* (2017) warned that most models of change leadership and management are incomplete, and theories are still lacking in explaining how and why some organizations are pushed to abrupt unplanned radical change by impending catastrophe. According to Plowman *et al.* (2007) while radical change is triggered by unexpected external shocks, the formative conditions build slowly and in environments where destabilizing conditions exist. In their 2007 case study, they demonstrate frame bending change (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996) which, through a series of small changes, saw a shift in focus from a silk-stocking church with a decidedly homogeneous racial makeup to a diverse congregation that gained media attention as a haven and advocate for the city's "marginalized." Plowman *et al.* (2007) overlook the possibility of disruptive events that unfold rapidly. These types of changes may require organizations to respond quickly without the luxury of a planned process. Radical unplanned change in organizations is a consequence of major unanticipated events or crises in the internal and external environments and may include a major threat to the organization's mission and ideology, limited time to prepare a rational response and severe enough to require some level of change within the organizational system and behavior (Doeze Jager *et al.*, 2021). The aim of this paper is to provide an account of radical unplanned change situated at the intersection of society and the organization, and in the dynamics of the local and national setting, in an emerging market context characterized by socio-economic disadvantage and cultural marginalization. Organizational change is desired in so far it provides a space for democracy and valuing agnostic pluralism by creating spaces where dissent is interpreted constructively (Manetti *et al.*, 2021).

Social movement theory has been influential in contributing toward the understanding of radical change in and through organizations, leading to transformative social change (DeJordy *et al.*, 2020). While the existing literature on radical change provides insight on the relationship between power and change, scholars have called for more research to understand the nuances or tactics of such powerful movements in change (Vincent *et al.*, 2020; Schirmer and Geithner, 2018). Activism is predicted to occur when contextualized conditions appear more favorable (Briscoe *et al.*, 2014), however, current research is sparse on understanding the role of national and regional circumstances especially in emerging market contexts (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). Finally, while social mobilization is a well-established phenomenon (Briscoe and Gupta, 2021) and has been positioned within organizational change theory (Germain *et al.*, 2019), what is not yet known is how social movements can merge with internal stakeholders to create forced unplanned radical change (Pacheco and Dean, 2015).

The case of Uptown Academy discussed below provides an account of radical unplanned change. Uptown Academy is a large urban university with more than 55,000 students, and close to 1,500 staff. Over the years, it had gradually transformed its demographic profile in alignment with the South African post-apartheid transformation agenda but had been criticized for the slow process of transformation (Badat, 2015). In exploring the case, the paper makes three contributions to our understanding of radical unplanned change. First, it explains the mechanisms of social movements in driving the organization toward a radical change decision which led to a 17-year practice of outsourcing being overturned in a matter of days. Second, it provides a contextual understanding of change, highlighting the role of

the local and national conditions underpinning the cultural narrative as sources of discursive material for the change imperative, through framing. Finally, the case applies frame extension through collective identity and provides insights on how social movement actors united with outsourced/contract workers and students, to drive the radical change decision.

Literature and theoretical frame

Our research focused on the key question of how marginalized workers in tandem with societal movements can create a disruption sufficiently strong to trigger a change process that moves an organization to become a more just and humane workplace. A richer understanding of these types of change requires a deeper process-oriented understanding of how and why change emerges (Chia, 2017; Langley *et al.*, 2013), especially unplanned change (Bartunek and Woodman, 2015; Schirmer and Geithner, 2018). The rapid rise of radical, unplanned change has shifted the paradigm from viewing it as an exception to considering it the norm (Wu, *et al.*, 2021).

Social movements and organizational change

Contemporary research is challenged to offer a clear understanding of the relationships and processes between “market” and “non-market” agents (de Bakker *et al.*, 2013). Scholars increasingly use social movement theory as a lens through which to understand the dynamic relationship between organization and society (Briscoe, *et al.*, 2014) and there has been a steady growth in studies integrating organizational theory and social movement studies (McAdam and Scott, 2005; Etchanchu *et al.*, 2018). Social activism within organizations is a prime example of a “voice” behavior as employees seek to instigate social change in their workplace (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016; Germain *et al.*, 2019). Within accounting studies specifically social movements highlight the importance of accountability, highlighting the “other,” and holding individuals or organizations to account (Kavada, 2015). In addition, studies have explored how corporate disclosure mobilizes collective action and pressures (Islam and Van Staden, 2018) and the ideology of activism in shareholders (Michelon *et al.*, 2020), and how a social movement like #MeToo can change the dynamics of accountability and power relations (Goncharenko, 2021).

Most of the research focussing on the intersection of organizational change and social movement has focused on movement outcomes (Walker, 2012), on intended rather than unintended consequences (de Bakker *et al.*, 2013), and how it influences organizational policy and practice (Germain *et al.*, 2019a). Often, the emphasis in organizational change theory tend to lean more toward activism alone, as one aspect within social movement. In their seminal paper on social movements in and around organizations, Briscoe and Gupta (2016) define activism as instances in which individuals or groups of individuals, who lack full access to institutionalized channels of influence, engage in collective action. The aim of such action being to remedy a perceived social problem or to promote or counter changes to the existing social order (King and Soule, 2007).

Social movements

Defining social movements has been contentious but simultaneously has led to continuous enhancement in the understanding of the concept and its underlying dynamics (Nulman and Schlembach, 2018). Developments in the field allowed for a conceptualization based on the level of analysis be it micro-, meso- or macro-level analysis. From a focus on resource mobilization (see Jenkins, 2008) the focus turned to the analysis of political opportunity structures developed as a means of looking at social movements within broader socio-political contexts to see how these constrained and molded movement actors, organizations,

tactics and strategies (e.g. [Nulman, 2015](#)). The framing perspective grew in popularity ([Benford and Snow, 2000](#)) and more recently the role of technology has also been influential in our understanding ([Earl and Kimport, 2011](#)). Because the marginalized worker featured prominently in our study, we decided to center our conceptualization of a social movement in the work of Tilly. [Tilly \(1999\)](#) defined a social movement as:

a sustained challenge, by persons successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, to power holders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those power holders by means of repeated public displays of that population's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (p. 257).

The social movement studied here demonstrated collective action conducted in the context of dense "inter-organizational networking" between actors linked by solidarities and shared identities that preceded and survived any specific coalitions and campaigns but with fluid boundaries ([Diani and Bison, 2004](#), p. 283).

[McAdam \(2017\)](#) highlights the importance of three key factors that impact social movements in creating change:

- (1) the political opportunities and constraints confronting any would-be movement;
- (2) the organizational vehicles available to embryonic movements as sites for mobilization; and
- (3) the collective processes of interpretation, attribution and social construction that mediate between opportunity and action (p. 193).

[Diani and Bison \(2004\)](#) cautioned that we must identify the distinctive analytical properties of social movements, differentiating them from other instances of collective action, and these may include networks of informal exchanges between multiple actors based on a shared collective identity. A movement's frames can reflect the collective identity or can help create a new one ([Benford and Snow, 2000](#); [Karagiannis, 2009](#)).

Framing

[Buchanan and Dawson \(2007\)](#) emphasized change as a multistorey process illustrating how contrasting versions of the same change event can be crafted by different stakeholders. The framing process in relation to social movements ([Benford and Snow, 2000](#)) has been conceptualized as a form of meaning construction, an active and processual phenomenon that implies "agency and contention at the level of reality construction" (p. 614). Framing is rooted in the work of social constructivism and symbolic interactionism more broadly, with a basic premise that meanings arise from interpretative processes mediated by culture, referred to as "schemata of interpretation" ([Goffman, 1974](#), p. 21). These frames enable people to locate, perceive, identify and label events and experiences within the world to render occurrences as meaningful or not, subsequently organizing experience and guiding action ([Goffman, 1974](#), p. 21; [Benford and Snow, 2000](#), p. 614). Framing has been applied in critical accounting studies, particularly to examine how accounting practices shape, reflect and legitimize social, economic and political agendas, and applied to critique the narrow economic rationalities and expose the power-laden narratives embedded in accounting discourse. For example, [Munkuli et al. \(2025\)](#) explored the ways in which accounting discourse and techniques helped shape policy responses to racial inequality, highlighting the complexity of power relations in the process of change. However, a caution should be noted. Framing racial inequality as problematic and solvable simply through metrics can also reduce complex social issues to targets that may be superficially met without achieving real transformation ([Makgoba, 2019](#)). This highlights the importance of precision in framing

(Benford and Snow, 2000) which is demonstrated by McLaren and Appleyard (2021) who show how constructing a benchmark from accounting disclosures allowed for accuracy in framing as part of a social movement in animal welfare.

Identity constructions are an inherent feature of the framing process and are implicated in linking individuals and groups ideologically (Benford and Snow, 2000). Framing processes do this in two ways: at a general level, “by situating or placing relevant sets of actors in time and space and by attributing characteristics to them that suggest specifiable relationships and lines of action” (Hunt *et al.*, 1994, p. 185).

Background to the case [1]

While higher education institutions in South Africa had been transforming slowly since the advent of democracy in 1994, the pace of change was slow and while the student population had become more diverse, changes in the profile of professional support and academic staff were minor. 2015 was a tumultuous year for public higher education institutions in South Africa as the drive for transformation moved to the heart of the national discourse through the #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF) campaigns (Habib, 2016). These campaigns, driven by students, played out in a context of economic downturn and political instability providing a fertile ground for political parties and ideological groups to project their own educational and political demands. Initial demands were focused on decolonization of the curriculum and the provision of free education. One of these demands then evolved into a campaign for the insourcing of contract workers – #Outsourcingmustfall (#OMF) – spearheaded by students with the support of outside activists.

During cost-saving exercises some 20 years earlier South African public universities had resorted to outsourcing all non-core services, due to a decrease in government funding and increased private funding, the stakeholders of which demanded more corporate like efficiencies. Non-core services included catering, gardening and security which had provided employment to potentially vulnerable groups in South African society. This meant that workers, primarily Black African, moved from a formal employment agreement with significant benefits to contract work which was neither permanent nor secure. Their wages were halved from approximately R3000pm with benefits such as medical aid, provident fund, low interest-bearing loans, housing subsidy and bursaries for dependants to R1000 without any benefits (Johnson, 2001). These conditions exacerbated the vulnerability and disenfranchisement caused by years of Apartheid, and the agreements, while arguably cost-effective, did little to support the much-needed transformation of society. However, given their lack of qualifications and desperate need for employment, these workers had no choice but to accept conditions as they presented themselves. In the case organization, these outsourced workers had in the interim been managed as part of a service level agreement (SLA), contracted with 3rd party service providers who took formal responsibility for the workers, who despite carrying out their duties at the case organization, had no formal employment relationship with Uptown Academy. The insourcing settlement agreement at Uptown would see the workers earn the minimum wage of R10 000 per month over a period of three years and have generous benefits.

Methodology

Research design

We conducted a case study combined with grounded theory analysis to understand how unplanned radical change occurred in response to the interaction between an external social movement and internal power dynamics (Yin, 2014). Case studies provide a means to examine a contemporary phenomenon (Klarin and Sharmelly, 2019) and are a common

strategy used in change research to uncover principles that may be transferable to various organizational contexts (Gioia, 2021; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2016). We followed an interpretive approach that allowed us to capture the interpretation of real-life events from the actors experiencing the change dynamics (Van Maanen, 1979).

Public higher education in South Africa also presents a unique example of historical shifts in employment practices associated with the nature of employment (Johnson, 2001) and historically has been the sector where socio-political change has been spearheaded. Uptown Academy, one of the largest and most established higher education organizations in South Africa was our research site. Typically, in a bureaucratic governance structure such as the Academy, the magnitude of the decision to change the employment status of over 1,000 contract workers with major organizational implications are not taken in a matter of days and thus presents a unique case of a forced unplanned radical change. The impact of the change decision proved to be much greater than just higher financial costs, as emphasized by management immediately following the decision. Salary costs ballooned to provide for statutory benefits and other operational costs (e.g. uniforms), expanding service delivery added additional costs (Habib, 2016; Jansen, 2017) and structural changes were necessary along with changes in the role of managers (Jansen, 2017). Further, the anarchy surrounding the events was experienced across employee groups (Habib, 2016) with new unions wanting to infiltrate the organization (Luckett and Pontarelli, 2016). These were just some of the cascading consequences for the Academy. The magnitude of the changes indicated the Academy was facing a radical unplanned change event.

Sample and data collection

Consistent with case study design, we collected multiple sources of data as recommended by Yin (2014) to improve the rigor of the research by ensuring trustworthiness, confirmability, credibility and dependability (Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010). The main source of data consisted of 19 semi-structured interviews with a representative group of stakeholders supplemented with observations, documentary evidence, video footage and social media accounts of the events. The interview protocol included the following questions:

- What were the specific events prompting the change? Tell me about the timeline
- Did you notice key decisions/milestones/tipping points in the process?
- What information informed the decisions?
- How was information gathered?
- Was there a specific goal/vision set? Or was the decision more emergent?
- How was leadership involved? Who else was involved? How and when?
- Was there a specific approach followed to this change process?

Following a process of theoretical sampling (Flick, 2014) participants were selected based on their involvement in the change process and their ability to provide first-hand accounts (Fendt and Sachs, 2008). Table 1 presents the types and number of stakeholder groups and sources of information. The initials in the code column are used in the findings section to indicate the source for the quotes.

The first author was busy with doctoral studies during the commencement of the protests and the second author is an employee of the case organization. Both authors were thus on and around campus during the protests and were able to observe several of the events first-hand. For example, the first author was caught in a protest in the cafeteria and the second author attended a student rally and a faculty meeting with the protesting students. As an experienced change consultant, the

Table 1. Participant codes

Participant position	Code	No. or types
Managers at the case organization	IL	8
Employee representative/union leader at the organization	U	3
Student representative	S	2
Contract worker	C	1
Employee at the organization involved in the process	IE	5
Direct observations	DO	4 Months during student protests Situating on campus since September 2015; eight months on campus following decision to insource continuing observations and conducting interviews
Student rally, staff meeting with protesting students, during staff/students evacuation of campus, observed multiple examples of protest action unfolding on campus, observed the staff (insourced contract workers) orientation when contractors were on-boarded; HR employee engagements with contract workers		
<i>Document types</i>		
Organization documentation		
Uptown academy website communication	UAM	5
UA draft strategy was made available and here I confirmed that insourcing was never considered nor was student protest indicated as risk	UAD	4
National HE report on insourcing		
Change management plan for insourcing		
[Confidential] agreement with students and summary of insourcing agreement [institutional plan]		
Social media	SM	9
Twitter feeds		
Facebook posts		
Video footage in public domain		
Websites	WS	21
Blogs		
News articles		

Source(s): Authors' own work

first author was intrigued by what was happening, and began to gather documentary evidence of the process, that included communications from the institution to students and the public and newspaper clippings reporting on the #FeesMustFall Movement across the country.

After receiving formal approval, the first author began gathering interview data. A total of nineteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, over a period of six months, between May and November 2016. This entailed over 21 h of interview data which formed the basis of the data corpus and was supplemented by documentary evidence. All interviews were held on campus and lasted between 30 min and two hours. An organizational representative (OR), close to the process facilitated all introductions with participants, and this expedited access to especially senior executives. Interviews centered around a broad question: Share with me your experiences of the organizational change process pertaining to the insourcing of contract workers, underpinned by several prompts. Memos written during the observations allowed for further, more meaningful probing.

To provide meaning and context to the interview, the OR allowed the first author on site during fieldwork and data analysis, allowing for greater understanding of the dynamics and

context of the process. Observations during this time included protest action on multiple occasions, informal chats with students and other protestors on and around campus, human resource (HR) personnel engaging with contract workers after the decision to in-source workers, staff orientation and the sessions during which the HR team issued new employee contracts and two orientation sessions for new employees (contractors on-boarded as employees). While it was not easy to gain access to interview more students or contract workers, as a fellow student, the 1st researcher had several informal conversations during this time with these stakeholders to explore their state of mind and their interpretation of the events. The first author prepared extensive notes that captured what was occurring, the actors involved and what the contractors said and asked, their body language and the interaction among themselves and the HR team.

Documentary evidence was used to provide an understanding of the events leading up to the unplanned change process, and included aspects related to the socio-political context and history of South Africa, information related to the practice of outsourcing in higher education, media reports as well as photographs and videos. The additional observation and documentary evidence provided further support for the interview data and allowed us to triangulate multiple perspectives and iteratively test emerging theoretical insights (Yin, 2014).

Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed by the first author. Coding was done following the grounded theory prescriptions described by Charmaz (2006) and included initial coding (both open and focused), axial coding and theoretical coding. The analysis process flowed between data interpretation and our emerging theory discussed in the findings (Merkus *et al.*, 2017). Emergent analytical codes were tested across the various data sources allowing us to ultimately formulate a storyline grounded in the ‘participants experience and their understanding of that experience’ (Gioia, 2021, p. 22). During the entire process, we were able to test emergent themes and research propositions with the organizational representative who had been closely involved with the insourcing process and who acted as a “conversational partner” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 11).

Coding was done by the first author and reviewed by the second author with differences in interpretation discussed until consensus was reached. The first author’s immersion in the study area and the themes occupying the actors was offset constructively by the second author’s lack of first-hand knowledge of the interviewees, thus “combining intimacy with local settings and the potential for distancing” (Langley *et al.*, 2013, p. 6).

Findings

We could account for radical change by exploring how framing in a social movement led to a decision to in-source in 2016, while for almost 2 decades this was deemed not a viable business decision. The difference in these two moments in time was that earlier attempts were isolated instances of activism while the 2015 / 16 mobilization was part of a social movement grounded in an injustice frame of marginalization. The discursive material from which the injustice frame was developed was drawn from the cultural narrative which in turn was influenced by the historical and socio-economic context, and fanned by political opportunity (Benford and Snow, 2000). Aligned to this frame, the movement had salience because of narrative fidelity (Benford and Snow, 2000). The master frame of the social movement was deployed through a series of action frames namely #rhodesmustfall, #feesmustfall and #outsourcingmustfall, each aimed at change in the higher education sector in South Africa. We will show how #OMF was framed in light of the earlier action frames,

highlighting three key components of the social movement, namely relational activism, frame extension and creating crisis. The data structure is depicted in Figure 1.

Three theoretical dimensions are depicted in the boxes as context, frame extension and mechanisms. The categories include an injustice frame of marginalization, collective action frames and mechanisms of relational activism, framing the change and creating crisis. The second-order concepts contained within each are explained in the findings.

Context- informing an injustice frame of marginalization

Collective action frames originate from material located in the contextual conditions (Stahl et al., 2023) and cultural narratives present in the environment and the meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives on which these are built (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 629). The particularities of the action frames in this study can be understood in line with the story of democracy in South Africa with its complex history, diverse society and the multiple identities embedded in its social fabric (Booyesen, 2007). Entwined in the cultural narrative were three main drivers of the marginalization injustice frame – namely the historical context, socio-economic conditions and political opportunity, each of which will be discussed briefly below.

Historical context: South Africa has a history of colonialism and enforced, legislated discrimination known as Apartheid, a system which came to an end in 1994, ushering in an era of democracy. Space does not permit a detailed overview of the evils of the system but suffice to say, it left the country with deep structural inequalities and a legacy of poverty and marginalization, which also manifested in the higher education space, the context of our case organization. Under Apartheid, Uptown Academy had been predominantly reserved for White Afrikaans students but over the preceding years, changes in the socio-political environment had created a shift in the organization’s profile and affiliations, as students from all race groups joined the university. The diverse student and stakeholder profile resulted in a more diverse range of cultural and political affiliations which grew increasingly dissatisfied with the lingering cultural and symbolic ties to what was viewed as the Apartheid past. Despite being a demographic majority in the country, Black (non-white) African students (in particular) continued to feel culturally isolated within higher education institutions in South Africa. This gave rise to the #Rhodesmustfall movement at another higher education institution (HEI), which reflected the discontent present with Uptown Academy:

Uptown academy has been in existence for more than 100 years, but non-white students were only started to be admitted from the 1980s. After years of slow transformation, it resulted in the

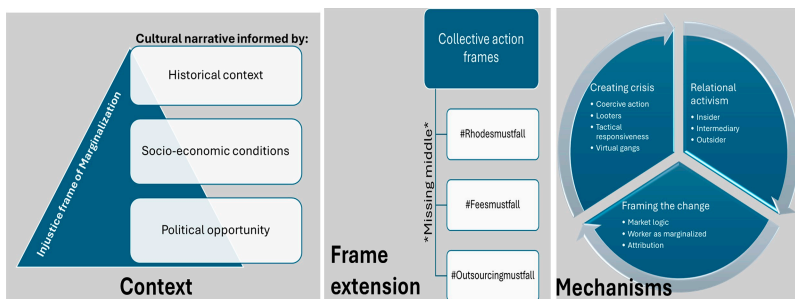


Figure 1. Data structure
Source: Authors’ own work

introduction of a dual-lingual mode of instruction, large numbers of students of all races, and an employee demographic shift. However, there remained a perception that the cultural symbols on campus remained largely of white, Afrikaans culture and tradition. This perception led to a political movement at the Academy early in 2015 aimed at highlighting experiences of cultural supremacy and marginalization (TM1).

Socio-economic conditions: While South Africa has a robust constitution with strong protections for socioeconomic rights, it remains one of the most unequal countries globally (Boëttger and Rathbone, 2016). As a result of the historical conditions described above it is often referred to as a blended economy (DeWaal, 2014) characterized by a predominantly capitalist economy but experiencing very high levels of poverty and inequality. Consequently, there is a disconnect between the provision of rights as outlined in the constitution, and the reality for most of the population who continue to live in poverty with little or no access to service provision (Moodley and Shabodien, 2016). The resulting discontent is expressed daily through various forms of mobilization and protest, and at the time, South Africa had the dubious title of “protest capital of the world” with an average of 35 protests every day (Moodley and Shabodien, 2016). A culture of protesting was thus normalized, and those in authority seldom responded until some form of protest (some of which turned violent or destructive) occurred. This had been the case at Uptown Academy where internal activists had, over a period of seventeen years, highlighted the plight of the contract workers but without success. The idea of protest, as a solution, was also echoed by Professor Habib at WITS when he noted that “*some even had the temerity to articulate views that suggested that violence may be a necessary protest strategy in certain institutional contexts*” (Habib, 2016, p. 3).

Political opportunity: Given the historical context sketched above and dire socio-economic conditions experienced by many South Africans, the opportunity of political parties to use the resulting discontent was inevitable (Habib, 2016). As noted, a shift in student demographic had led to a change in the ideological pool underpinning student political bodies, most notably the economic freedom fighters (EFF) student party. Julius Malema, the leader of the EFF had been expelled from the governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), in 2013 and subsequently formed his own party, using the widespread discontent to drum up support for his party (Nicolson, 2016 [2]). Another prominent social activist, David Sebei, the leader of the Workers and Allied Socialist Party (WASP), was also instrumental in several of the campaigns and had been speaking to outsourced workers, who had long complained about their pay and conditions (Nicolson, 2016).

Frame extension through the “missing Middle”

While the cultural environment is a rich source of material for the development and entrenchment of collective action frames, the meanings and framings of these do not emanate automatically but are in fact “meaning work,” and result from “the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meaning” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 613). Actors central to a movement act as signifying agents who are actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for their intended audience (Snow and Benford, 1988). The collective action frames in the case study included #Rhodesmustfall, #Feesmustfall and #Outsourcingmustfall. Within each of these, different types of agents were active, and these will be discussed in detail in the section on collective action frames. Central in the framing of the wider social movement was the use of a collective identity (Diani, 1992), the “missing middle,” which allowed for concise framing of socio-economic marginalization and provided a powerful means of rallying support for the movement. The “missing middle” is an established common-sense classification in South

Africa referring to *students who are too poor to afford higher education but not poor enough to qualify for government or public funding to support the latter* (Fernandes, 2011). While #RMF highlighted cultural marginalization, the #FMF campaign highlighted the plight of the under-privileged student, while #OMF spotlighted the marginalized worker. This collective identity will be expanded on under the type of collective action frame of #FMF.

Collective action frames. #Rhodesmustfall.

#Rhodesmustfall as a collective action frame originated at the University of Cape Town and was initially directed against a statue on campus that commemorates Cecil John Rhodes. It quickly became a rallying point for decolonization efforts across the country aimed at the fall of white supremacy and privilege which dominates the higher education university sector. It released a flurry of protest action across the country shifting the discourse surrounding and framing of higher education nationally, including conditions at Uptown Academy, where protests focused on the continued use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction. On February 22, 2016, Uptown Academy proposed a change in its medium of instruction, to English only. The #RMF action frame was predominantly located in the cultural narrative underlying the injustice frame, and while the collective identity of the “missing middle” was yet to emerge as a binding force, the foundational framing drew attention to the outrage of cultural exclusion. This laid the foundation for the socio-economic narrative, creating a link to the nation-wide #FeesMustFall movement.

#FeesMustFall and #OutsourcingMustFall.

While #RMF was predominantly focused on changing the historical cultural-political narrative, #FMF and #OMF were driven by largely socio-economic and political motivations with specific emphasis on highlighting inequality. Given the shift in the higher education sector, sketched above, access to quality education was now a possibility for all demographic groups, but the dire socio-economic conditions experienced by many, meant that a large majority of students were unable to afford tertiary studies (Jansen, 2017).

The #FMF campaign centered on a concept of the “missing middle” which drew attention to those who were historically disadvantaged. This proved to be a powerful form of framing in that it drew support from a wide portion of the population, including the privileged and shifted attitudes toward those who were struggling to afford higher education. The campaign, manifested across the higher education sector in South Africa, was marginally successful, and resulted in increased access to higher education and a greater awareness of challenges experienced by disadvantaged students. However, it was the campaign which emerged from #FMF that would achieve success at Uptown Academy, and become the source of radical unplanned change, the insourcing of contract workers through the #OMF campaign:

This thing started by the very same students; the outsourcing came after the #FMF campaign. The #OMF campaign became part of the #FMF agenda. The students talked on our behalf. The outsourced employees themselves also find their voice through the students (C1).

The #OMF campaign emerged from the tail end of the #FMF campaign and had as its focus contract workers who had been outsourced in an industry wide trend in the 1990's. Governed by a SLA, the conditions of which left the contract workers employed thus not considered poverty-stricken, yet paid a wage that made it impossible for them to afford higher education for their own children, a benefit offered by the university to all its staff. Given the socio-historical context, there was a sense that Black workers previously exploited under apartheid were once again exploited and excluded in the name of neutral economic imperatives (Lockett and Pontarelli, 2016). This situation was compounded by the fact that, historically, these services were part of the organization's operating model and some of these workers had been employed by the Academy:

These students realize that with a qualification, you can improve your circumstances in life, and this is something being withheld from these workers because if they were employed at Uptown Academy, they would have access to educational bursaries for themselves and their children (IE3).

Despite the contract workers not being staff members, their plight had been highlighted on different occasions by the recognized union between 1999 and 2015, who as internal activists (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016), had attempted to draw attention to the exploitative nature of their employment conditions:

The discontentment of contract workers had been tabled by in-house unions in the past and there were whispers on campus of unhappiness regarding the situation of the contract workers, but it did not surface at the key decision-making level (E1).

It was not until 2016, when the plight of the contract workers was taken up by the students, as they recognized in them the conditions of disadvantage present in their own parents, albeit in different organizations (IL4):

We cannot allow this exploitation of our parents to go on (S2).

Thus, the #OMF campaign was birthed from the #FMF campaign, linking the plight of disadvantaged workers to the already recognized identity of the “missing middle.”

Benford and Snow (2000) suggest that the resonance of a collective action frame is determined by the salience it has with the targets of the mobilization. Given the historical context of the country and the continued dire socio-economic conditions facing a large portion of the population, both the master frame and its specific foci, had considerable resonance with its targets, ensuring the change (Snow and Benford, 1988). Central to this process was social media where, in the socially connected digital world, public opinion can have as much weight as physical mobilization, especially where this is driven by the public support of credible, public figures, which proved to be the case (Jansen, 2017):

The fight for fairness was very visible across the country where children of prominent public figures spoke for the cause, often with the support of their well-known parents, for example, the then public protector, Thuli Madonsela, who had a reputation for fighting for justice and fairness. Her daughter was a student at the organization and although she was not part of the ‘missing middle’ she was prominent in demonstrating for the cause as part of the intermediary activists. At another prominent institution, the son of the vice-chancellor was an active participant in the #FMF movement as well as the sons of Brian Molefe and Reverend Frank Chikane, both high profile South Africans who can be classified as privileged (IL).

Having described the salience of the social movement and the impact of the relational patterns underpinning it, we now focus on the mechanical components of achieving radical change through 1) relational activism, 2) framing the issue and 3) creating a crisis which tipped management sense-making.

Mechanisms

Relational activism. The spectrum of activists included insiders to complete outsiders to the organization on a continuum based on their relationship with the target organization (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016). Three types of activists were identified, insider, intermediary, as well as outsider or external activists (Briscoe and Gupta, 2016) each of which acted as signifying agents who contributed to framing the change and creating the crisis. Insider activists refer to the recognized union within Uptown academy, who despite not representing the contract workers formally, nevertheless brought their plight to the attention of management. The students in this case were categorized as intermediary activists as they are not “formally” a

part of the organization (insider) but are also not complete outsiders (Rojas, 2012). Finally, outsider activists are categorized as those external to the structure and various types were identified. These included political parties supporting their student chapter (external activist-political) and opportunistic activists in the form of looters (external activists-looters). The insider activism by unions between the 1990 and 2015 was unsuccessful as there was no collaboration outside of the organizational network. This can be contrasted with the configuration of networks active during the 2015 / 16 mobilization which was rooted in a social movement (Diani and Bison, 2004), framed through the concept of marginalization. These activists and their role in the social movement will be discussed as part of framing the change.

Framing the change. Collective action frames are established as participants negotiate a “shared understanding of a problematic condition or situation in need of change, and attribute some blame, while urging others to act” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 615). Each of the groups of activists played a role in framing the change, although the first of these, the internal union leaders, did so outside of a collective action frame.

At Uptown academy, *outsourcing was an old issue* (U); as the internally recognized employee unions had tabled the issue over an extended period but without success. When the unions first tabled the plight of the outsourced workers, they framed it in terms of low wages and poor working conditions, amidst other employee matters. Interpreting the worker’s plight framed through a market logic meant that management missed the genuine sense of misery, disenfranchisement and exploitation experienced by these workers and the situation perpetuated (Benford and Snow, 2000). It led them to perceive the contract workers, not as “people” or “employees,” but rather as objects situated in a SLA and thus part of the supply chain process (Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006). The existence of an “agreement” may have been true for the organization and the service providers but certainly not for the contract workers, some of whom referred to the practice as a form of modern slavery (Winkler-Titus and Crafford, 2022):

My interpretation was that of being in slavery and there is nothing that you can do. You can also liken it to slavery or what we had during Apartheid (C1).

From a change management perspective, management thus missed these workers as potential stakeholders (Lewis, 2007). Although unsuccessful in driving the change to completion, the internal activists laid the foundation for a shift in management thinking. Thus, while Briscoe and Gupta (2016) suggest that insider activists have more access to knowledge of the institution and are thus better positioned to frame an issue, this may not be the case if it is framed using the same logic that informs the practice requiring change.

On the back of the #FMF movement, intermediary activists, in the form of students, then aligned themselves with external activists, as part of the #OMF movement, framing the outsourced workers as marginalized and part of the “missing middle.” While the intermediary activists did not always have the insights to frame employment related matters appropriately, it was clear they were being coached by the external activists (political) on how to shape the perception of social reality (Reinecke and Ansari, 2016). The central framing tasks we identified were attributional process and frame extension.

Social movements seek to remedy or alter a problematic situation and therefore a core framing task is to direct action toward a source of blame, an attributional process (Benford and Snow, 2000). The initial protest action by the students, #FMF, involved marching to the seat of government demanding change at ministerial level. The president announced a decision, which accommodated some of their grievances but not all, and not being satisfied with the response, the students directed their discontent to higher education institutions,

including Uptown Academy. In the process of negotiating with management, students then took it upon themselves to include the issue of the contract workers, and in so doing directed responsibility to the institution, extending the frame of marginalization and the collective identity of the “missing middle” (Diani, 1992) to include the contract workers as well. While the #FMF campaign highlighted the plight of the under-privileged student, #OMF spotlighted the marginalized worker and actors connected through identification with race and socio-economic class. Linking the concept of the contract worker to underprivileged student, they tabled the insourcing of these workers as part of their negotiations of student fees with management, ensuring that action and discussion occurred within their specified boundaries:

This thing started by these very same students, outsourcing came after the #Feesmustfall movement and they added it to the agenda, these students talked on behalf of the workers. Students seem to be getting the upper hand in most of these issues. When they make a move, it does shake up the institution. They have the power to destabilize (IL7).

The frame extension allowed the intermediary activists, the students, to align themselves with external movement actors, greatly increasing their capacity for impact. Caught up in the aftermath of the #FMF movement management was caught off-guard by this frame extension. Challenged by the alternative framing, management started making sense of *the practice of outsourcing as a deeper socio-political argument and felt surprised at their own ability to get away with it for such an extended period of time before being confronted with the inequalities that have been taking place* (IL9).

In their sense-making around the issue, management contemplated the morality of the issue at hand and were convinced at a very personal level, of the deep financial exclusion and cultural alienation for students and contractors alike (Jansen, 2017):

It may have appeared that social cohesion and impact on society was at the opposite pole of the vision of becoming a world class higher education institution, but it was not. The organization makes up a community of people and the people were the drivers of the reputation of the academy (IL9). It became a kind of a moral or ethical dilemma (IL7).

In addition to the alternative framing, the creation of a crisis by the #OMF movement was a key lever in creating the conditions for radical unplanned decision-making.

Creating crisis. A social movement usually represents collective action on behalf of relatively marginal actors against a powerful elite (Medearis, 2004). Due to the power imbalance, it is difficult for marginalized groups to achieve their ends by deliberation and framing only, and in these contexts, coercive activity is a necessary means to achieve a more democratic dispensation (Medearis, 2004). Coercion refers to “actions that compel by force or threats” (Medearis, 2004, p. 56) and is considered a form of power (Fleming and Spicer, 2014).

The coercive activity was triggered by the entry of additional movement actors in the form of looters, a more violent type of protestor, which initially took the form of protests on the campus. In the words of the first author as observant:

Protest action on campus was a daily occurrence. Today I had lunch at the cafeteria, and someone ran in telling us to evacuate because the protestors are heading this way to vandalize the venue. Bummer, I left my jacket on the chair. Last week one of the faculty members told me while lecturing, protestors came into the lecture hall and disrupted class. Last night on the news, I watched how looters highjacked the student protests at WITS, causing immense damage to property and inciting fear. I know these news events has an influence on the stakeholders here on our campus as well. It is very intimidating (PO).

While framing the plight of the contract workers through marginalization and the “missing middle” had caught management’s attention, it was the actions aimed at instilling fear or intimidation that forced their hand. The threat of violence meant that *parents could move their children as the perception of the institution as a safe space comes into question* (IL4). In addition, the ongoing mobilization at other Higher Educational institutions made employees at the Academy anxious, as one informant noted, *the country was burning* (U1). A context characterized by turmoil heightened the urgency and need for a peaceful resolution, and in keeping with their values, management wanted to *assure all stakeholders that safety comes first* (U1). An interesting observation was that *during the 1990’s the process to outsource took months of engagement with all stakeholders* (IL3) whereas in 2016 *the decision to insource happened very quickly* (IE3).

The creation of the crisis was characterized by two mechanisms that allowed for speed and responsiveness on the part of the social movement actions which management was unaccustomed to. These two mechanisms were tactical responsiveness (weapons of the weak) and the power of social media acting as “virtual gangs [3]”.

As Scott (1985) has pointed out, the weapons of the weak are not the same as those used by powerful elites as highlighted by one of the participants:

[...] what matters for the weak and or powerless is not strategy. The weak do not have time to design strategy and yet in times like these they will win because they are more flexible than the big strategy (IL4).

Tactical responsiveness is more important than strategy in some situations and the flexibility of the activists trumped the strategic strength and structured ways of the organization. The tactics of the activists included how they would “re-group” and plan for the next day after every evening of negotiations. This was something the organization was not equally good at:

In the words of one informant, small tactics build slowly and it is in the moments, the little gaps, the lapses in concentration, in the little remote village that no one cares about, the people who look too stupid to bother with, when tactics find their voice (IL4).

In this case the “little remote village” referred to the voiceless contract workers whose plight management had ignored, but who were eventually able to “find their voice” through the students and broader #mustfall social movements.

Social media platforms have become a great source of communication in the 21st century but when applied to manipulate, could be considered unsocial media platforms or *virtual gangs* as suggested by participant IE:

Social media has created a platform to fast-track mobilization and at times through virtual gangs (IE).

Virtual gangs hoist a metaphorical banner saying, *“sorry for the inconvenience, we are trying to change the world”* (Hill, 2014). They often enter, not necessarily always in the physical realm, a terrain not traditionally theirs, speaking on behalf of some collective identity or group of people. They do not always identify themselves or physically confront their target, nor do they necessarily have a mandate from the group they are representing. They continue applying pressure on the organization through the manipulation of public sentiment. In respect of the current case, Findley (2023) [4] analyzed social media throughout the #movements in higher education South Africa over the 2015 / 6 period and demonstrated how it fast tracked the campaigns. He suggests:

The resulting social movement has been unprecedented in its scale and earnestness. In addition to taking to the streets, students (and many other South Africans) took to social media to voice their frustration and articulate their demands.

A particular challenge presented by social media campaigns lies in the potential interpretation attached to news events shared not only through official media statements but also by the commentators. Most of the population have access to social media and do *not have to comply with journalistic rigor and authenticity* (IE2) before publishing commentary or news. Content can therefore be published without being validated. To drive a successful hashtag campaign, activists must own the conversation, and in doing so can influence a broader discourse against the organization.

Discussion and contribution

The findings shed light on the conditions which precipitated radical unplanned change situated at the intersection of society and the organization, in the dynamics of the local and national South African context. This responds to calls for more research toward understanding the nuances or tactics of powerful movements causing change in organizations (Vincent *et al.*, 2020; Schirmer and Geithner, 2018), particularly in the global south, a highly unequal and typically under researched context (Barnard, 2020). We contend that three key factors are central to this process. First, the role of the context and cultural narrative in providing discursive material for the frame driving the radical change. Second the power of frame extension through collective identity. Finally, the mechanisms of activism, framing and creating crisis that tips management sensemaking to enable change. The study makes three key contributions.

First, the study provides a contextual understanding of change, highlighting the role of the local and national conditions underpinning the cultural narrative as sources of discursive material for the change imperative, and validates the significance of context as suggested by Van Wijk *et al.* (2013). In a macro context where the socio-political climate and socio-economic conditions lead to inequality in societies (of which South Africa is a prime example), organizations find themselves increasingly vulnerable and susceptible to pressure from societal movements but typically fail to recognize the potential dangers. The conditions of extreme poverty and deep-rooted socio-economic inequality are not unique to South Africa and these allow us to develop deeper insights to help scholars refine and review change theories, as a challenging societal context often affects the workplace (Barnard, 2020). The case demonstrates the dangers of misrecognizing injustice and the vulnerability of outsourced workers as a potentially crucial stakeholder (Lewis, 2007), especially in an emerging market context. Moreover, it highlights the danger of framing a practice such as outsourcing through only a market logic which reinforces the “dark side of accounting” (Pinto and West, 2017, p. 322) and perpetuates continued colonial exclusion, exploitation and marginalization (Norris *et al.*, 2022). The way in which injustice is framed in social movements, especially in culturally resonant ways, can significantly influence whether and how organizational change occurs. This suggests that framing can be applied in both a transformative manner to shift mindsets and create new sensemaking for change, or more tactically to influence behavior change only. For example, Büchs *et al.* (2015) explored framing strategies applied to promote a low carbon lifestyle in the UK and found that organizations avoided transformative frames and rather opted for tactical interventions as the latter lacked resonance with broader audiences. In our case, despite the issue being highlighted by the internal trade unions who attempted to intervene as change agents, managers still did not make sense of the deep exploitation the outsourcing created. This illustrated that the union leaders’ application of the market logic to frame the issue, focused on tactics for change and was ineffective. Thus, while Butler and Tregaskis (2018) highlight the role of trade unions as change agents, we argue that such efforts risks becoming ineffectual when incorrectly framed. If marginalization is framed only through a market lens

(“cheap labor”) rather than a community or moral logic, it may fail to provoke organizational reflection or transformation.

Second, the case provides insights on the power of frame extension. While [Benford and Snow \(2000\)](#) warned that frame extension can lead to frame dilution, our study presented a powerful example of frame extension. Management failed to anticipate the shift from the students’ demands for access to affordable education to the contract workers whose terms of employment prevented their own children from accessing such valuable opportunities, ignoring the power of collective identity ([Diani, 1992](#); [Fominaya, 2018](#)). [Kann et al. \(2023\)](#) challenge the strength of the role of collective identity, but our findings illustrate how it enabled a frame extension that created momentum to force management decision-making. Moreover, in line with [Kapetanovic \(2023\)](#), we found that collective identity provides culturally meaningful symbols, language and stories that can be used to enable a moral connection between outsiders and insiders, in an ethnically divided society. We suggest that in highly unequal contexts, such as South Africa, the success of frame extension can also be attributed to the cultural narrative closely mirroring the large-scale injustice experienced by many marginalized workers including the outsourced ones in our study.

Finally, the study explains the mechanisms of social movements in driving an organization toward a radical change decision, which include relational activism, framing the change and creating crisis.

In this study we highlight various types of relational activism, insider, intermediate and outsider ([Briscoe and Gupta, 2016](#)) related through collective identities and connected via social media. While insider activists are considered to have greater access to knowledge of the institution and are thus better positioned to frame an issue ([Briscoe and Gupta, 2016](#)), our findings suggest that their change efforts can be undermined when they frame the issue in line with the dominant logic of the very practice they aim to challenge.

The study demonstrated the power of social media in change efforts since despite their lack of resources, intermediary activists were successful in mobilizing because their activities achieved a broader reach amongst critical external stakeholders who can step in as activists ([Earl and Kimport, 2011](#)). This lends support to existing work on the power of social media in change efforts through amplifying the constitutive meanings and collective identities central to the change narrative ([Chen et al., 2023](#); [Foust and Hoyt, 2018](#); [Goncharenko, 2023](#)).

While the framing of the cause was essential in unifying the relational activists through collective identities, it was the coercive creation of a crisis that built momentum through intimidation and the disruption of business as usual, that drove the change decision. This supports the assertion of [Caiani \(2023\)](#) who suggested that eventful protest can be understood as a social mechanism in the reproduction of protest, due to the relational, cognitive and affective mechanisms that are activated. Although [Germain et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that creating a crisis may have the capacity to act as a driver of change, our findings suggest that through framing, activists unite and create crisis which informs sense-making by those responsible for the change decision.

Practical contribution

For change practitioners and managers, this paper explains a set of circumstances in the macro context and how these can create a force for change. By understanding the dynamic process in which change can occur, this study aims to contribute to the improvement of how organizations deal with change. In the current world dynamic, where activism is rife and contributes meaningfully to unplanned change in organizations, the change leader and facilitator will benefit from understanding how these mechanisms operate.

Further, this study sheds light on the less strategic but more insidious conditions that are often missed in the grand scheme of strategy but can create a force for change with far-reaching implications. The flexibility of the marginalized, who often rely on tactical responsiveness, have an advantage when compared to the strategies of management, which emphasize long range strategy and planning. Organizational leaders need to include in their assessments an understanding of the societal and macro level shifts that are happening, and account for how these inform the business architecture and practices.

The case demonstrates the power of virtual gangs on social media, and organizational leaders must learn to work with and through social media platforms, not only to anticipate change but also to manage communication, image and stakeholders proactively. Social network scholars have shown that activists who perceive the social networks in an organization more accurately can act more efficiently and improve their odds of successfully influencing the organization (Kilduff and Tsai, 2003).

Limitations and future research avenues

The present study has limitations which also present opportunities for future exploration. First, the main source of data was interviews, which have been found to be susceptible to bias through retrospective sense-making (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). However, we believe that through data triangulation including participant observation and secondary sources as well as sense-checking with the organizational representative, the bias was managed with acceptable limits. Moreover, both authors were on campus as the events described here unfolded. While the second author was not involved in the interview process, she assessed the interview transcripts to corroborate and challenge the findings and interpretations of the first author.

A multiple case study design may have provided a more complete and comparable analysis, especially since the event occurred at multiple institutions. Nevertheless, data saturation did occur in terms of the themes identified which contributes to the generalizability of the findings from an analytical perspective (Yin, 2014). While the aim of this paper was to report on how the disruptive change process unfolded, a reviewer commented on the process of facilitating/leading through this disruption. This therefore, presents a future explorative question on how organizations manage through disruptive change. For more on this, see Winkler-Titus *et al.* (2024).

The events of the hashtag movements in South Africa during 2015 / 16 were experienced as a traumatic and stressful time for the participants in this study, most of whom were involved in the process. They welcomed being able to participate in this project as it presented an opportunity to reflect on what had happened and its effect on their own emotions. In so doing, some mentioned that they found the interview session helped them to process their emotions and stress. Ultimately, this study reminds one that power is never absolute, and must always consider balancing the power relations between management, disenfranchised workers and activists. A risk for any party lies in becoming complacent by the entrapment of power. The data collected in this study provided an additional opportunity to explore how power and identity unfolds and specifically, power mechanisms applied through all four faces of power, in and around organizations. This has been reported on in Winkler-Titus and Crafford (2022), where further research opportunities are explored.

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Notes

- [1.] As authors we have had conflicting feedback in respect of positioning the case, with one reviewer suggesting this be moved to the method section. We have decided to place it before the method section to provide context for the reader.
- [2.] Greg Nicolson, an international journalist covering power and politics, wrote a number of articles related to the #Feesmustfall and #Outsourcingmustfall campaigns.
- [3.] One of the participant's means of phrasing.
- [4.] Kyle Findley is a Director of Data Science and a research scientist. During the hashtag movements in HE in 2015, he analysed over 4,00,000 Tweets and published an article unpacking the events of the movement based on Twitter data, with a heavy focus on networks.

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