Robert Chin and Kenneth D. Benne: Change Management Biography

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Mary A. Barnes

Abstract

Robert Chin and Kenneth Benne spent key years in the middle of their careers working and collaborating with each other. Chin came from a social psychology background while Benne was from an educational philosophy background. During their time together, they founded an interdisciplinary Human Relations Center at Boston University, cowrote a seminal book on planned change with Warren Bennis and, within that text, developed three key strategies for implementing a planned change. Even in their organizational change work, there was always a social undertone to their work. Perhaps more important than the seminal work in planned change that is still referenced today was their individual and collaborative goal to help others accept and leverage – and not just tolerate – diversity in the social system. This chapter discusses their individual influences and motivations, their collaborative work and contributions to the change community, and how their work, both together and separate, inspired others.

Keywords

Planned change • Change strategies • Organizational change

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M.A. Barnes (✉)
George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA
e-mail: barnesma@gwmail.gwu.edu

Introduction

When I was asked to write about Kenneth Benne and Robert Chin as great change thinkers, I enthusiastically volunteered because of their seminal work on planned change strategies and how much the concept of normative-reeducative change strategies resonated with me and my work as a scholar practitioner/change agent. Until I started researching the comprehensiveness of their work, I had no idea how influential they both were, in their own ways. Benne and Chin found each other when Benne came to Boston University in 1953. At various points in their lives, both had experienced periods of isolation and/or ridicule based on prevailing social norms to which they did not conform. This seemed to bring them together and provided a social undercurrent to their work. While Benne and Chin are known in the organizational change realm, they had much more impact on social change and diversity than I initially realized. Hopefully, the story of Chin and Benne's work and journey will provide the reader with the context and perspective on their work that I found so valuable.

Influences and Motivations: Isolation Leads to Inspiration

Kenneth D. Benne (1908–1992) was born to German immigrants in rural Kansas. Benne's values were strongly influenced by his father's democratic and unprejudiced attitudes and behavior (Nash 1992). This concept of democracy became a prevailing topic in Benne's work throughout his career.

That career started when Benne became a school teacher in rural Kansas. Benne moved on to complete his B.S. degree in 1930 at Kansas State University with a double major in science and English literature. He completed an M.A. in philosophy at the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1944. After the war, he joined the University of Illinois. He came to the university with glowing recommendations from well-known scholars in the field. John Dewey wrote that he "has one of the most gifted minds in philosophy that I have come across" (Feinberg and Odeshoo 2000, p. 12). W.H. Kilpatrick called him "the most brilliant student who studied under me at Teachers College" (Feinberg and Odeshoo 2000, p. 12). The Dean of the University of Illinois, in justification for the appointment, wrote, "Professor Benne is perhaps the most distinguished scholar who has been brought to the faculty of the College of Education in the past 25 years" (Feinberg and Odeshoo 2000, p. 12).

Benne's earliest influences of his father led him to the first of several distinct concepts for which Benne came to be known. His first focus was as a social

philosopher of education in the vein of John Dewey. The concepts of democracy and democratic education resonated with him, and he focused his theoretical works on this concept. However, theory was not enough. Much like Dewey, he also founded a laboratory for the practical application of theory. In 1947, Benne, along with Kurt Lewin, Ron Lippitt, and Lee Bradford (you can find separate chapters on Lewin and Lippitt in this book), cofounded the National Training Laboratories (NTL) Institute for Applied Behavioral Science. The NTL Institute became a major influence in corporate training of the day and developed the T-group methodology for interpersonal sensitivity training, which is still in use today. His career got off to a great start at Teacher's College and continued to gain momentum at the University of Illinois. However, that only lasted until he was forced to resign in 1953 because of his sexual orientation. In a letter to George Stoddard, the president of the University of Illinois at the time, Benne wrote that "after the initial shock. . . to [his] self-esteem. . . [he has] reassessed as self-objectively as possible my value to the teaching profession. I have concluded that I am worth rehabilitating in the profession, if such rehabilitation is at all possible" (Feinberg and Odeshoo 2000, p. 13). His ability to reflect objectively and willingness to sacrifice in order to spread knowledge as a professor is indicative of his passion for learning and sharing knowledge. After that reflection, and a letter of recommendation from Stoddard, Benne rejoined academia and came to Boston University. At Boston University, his career quickly regained momentum, and he met Robert Chin.

Robert Chin (1918–1990) was born to a Chinese immigrant father and an American-born mother, whose parents had also come from China. His experiences while growing up in New York City (in a neighborhood without other Chinese Americans) left him feeling very different and alone (Saxe and Kubzansky 1991). This early experience seemed to leave an impression on him and found its way into his research and work combatting prejudice and creating social action and change. When World War II began, Chin was a psychology student at Columbia University. He earned his B.A. in 1939, his M.A. in 1940, and his Ph.D. in social psychology in 1943. In 1943, he enrolled in the US Army's Office of Strategic Services where, along with other psychologists, he served in counterintelligence.

At the conclusion of the war, he became a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University. He subsequently moved to Boston University in 1947 where he became a critical part of the institution for the next 32 years. In those first few years at Boston University, he researched and worked with his mentor, Otto Klineberg. Their research looked at the intelligence scores of minorities and challenged the notion of the time that minorities were intellectually inferior to Whites. This work was part of the psychological foundation that contributed to the Brown v. Board of Education decision (Klineberg 1986). Chin met Benne when Benne came to Boston University, and they both became founding members of the Human Relations Center. It was the collaborative nature of the Human Relations Center that produced some of Chin and Benne's most influential work in the organizational change field.

Key Contributions and Insights: Strategies for Change

Human Relations Center

In 1953, shortly after Benne joined the faculty at Boston University, the Human Relations Center was created. Endorsed by Harold Case, Boston University's president at the time, Benne was chosen as the center's Executive Director, with Chin from the Department of Psychology, Theodore Berenson from the School of Education, and Francis Hurwitz from the School of Public Relations and Communication as founding members, serving in various roles as administrators, faculty, and staff.

The Human Relations Center had three goals (Choi n.d.):

1. Education – to provide instruction on human relations issues to students, administrators, and faculty
2. Research – to develop and engage applied social science methods to study group and organizational dynamics
3. Community service – to foster best practices on human interactions at the grass roots and local level

A 1956 brochure describes the center not as a school or department, but instead a "university-wide facility which attempts to stimulate and support, in all schools or departments, programs of instruction, research, and community focus in human relations. Its initial focus in the broad spectrum of human relations is upon problems of change in relationships within small groups, organizational, and community settings" (Choi n.d.).

The real power of the center was the collaborative and interdisciplinary environment it fostered. It was here that Chin and Benne began their collaboration. Chin came from a social psychology background, and Benne brought his educational and group dynamics background. At the Human Relations Center, they placed both psychology and social sciences at the center of confronting societal prejudices such as racism and anti-Semitism. It was here that their unique experiences of nonconformity to social norms inspired their research and work. Together, they challenged the limitations of scientific studies on human behavior and relationships.

The Planning of Change

The Planning of Change (1961), written by Warren Bennis, Kenneth Benne, and Robert Chin, was another significant outcome from the collaborative nature of the Human Relations Center and remains one of the most important pieces of literature on understanding organizational planned change. The book is comprised of various works that support the authors' goal to help "the reader in the application of valid and appropriate knowledge in human affairs for the purpose of creating intelligent action necessary to bring about planned change" (Bennis et al. 1961). In the book,

planned change is described as a "conscious, deliberate, and collaborative effort to improve the operation of a human system" (Bennis et al. 1961). Within this book, Benne and Chin bring together the three strategies for implementing change that has become one of their lasting contributions to the study of planned change.

Strategies for Change

Within the pages of *The Planning of Change*, Chin and Benne partner up to provide three approaches, or strategies, for implementing change in organizational and social contexts. The chapter, which was specifically developed for the second edition of the book, built upon an original paper that Robert Chin developed for a Denver conference in 1967 entitled "Designing Education for the Future – An Eight State Project." Kenneth Benne partnered with Chin in adapting and revising the original paper. In that revision process, a practically new paper emerged. One can see some remnants of the educational focus and first person nature of the paper. Chin and Benne chose to specifically address a planned change. They expanded on the definition of planned change in the broader book by stating that planned changes are "attempts to bring about change [that] are conscious, deliberate, and intended, at least on the part of one or more agents related to the change attempt" (Chin and Benne 1989, p. 22). They further explained that, in planned change, there is "the conscious utilization and application of knowledge as an instrument or tool for modifying patterns and institutions of practice" (Chin and Benne 1989, p. 22).

The strategies of change outlined are empirical-rational, power coercive, and normative-reeducative. They provide a framework for the planning of change that continues to take place in the management of change in organizations and social settings today. The brief description that follows is only meant to provide an overview. For a more detailed understanding of these strategies, explore the other readings suggested in the last section of this chapter.

Empirical-Rational Strategy

The empirical-rational strategy is founded on the assumption that stakeholders of a change are rational individuals and will change as long as the case is made that it is in their best interests. Furthermore, it is assumed that they will support and enact the change as soon as they understand how the change will benefit them. This strategy, then, is reliant on communicating the benefits convincingly to all concerned and affected parties and delivering appropriate incentives for them to accept the proposed changes.

By looking at Fig. 1 (below), one can see the various components that Chin and Benne attributed to this strategy. Taylor and the concept of scientific management fall under this category, as well as social research and more psychology-driven work. It also makes sense that mass communications is a consideration in this strategy, given the importance of communicating the rationale for change has to the strategy. Components of research and development centers, including Benne and his contemporaries, are also included. While maybe not intuitive, a component of this strategy
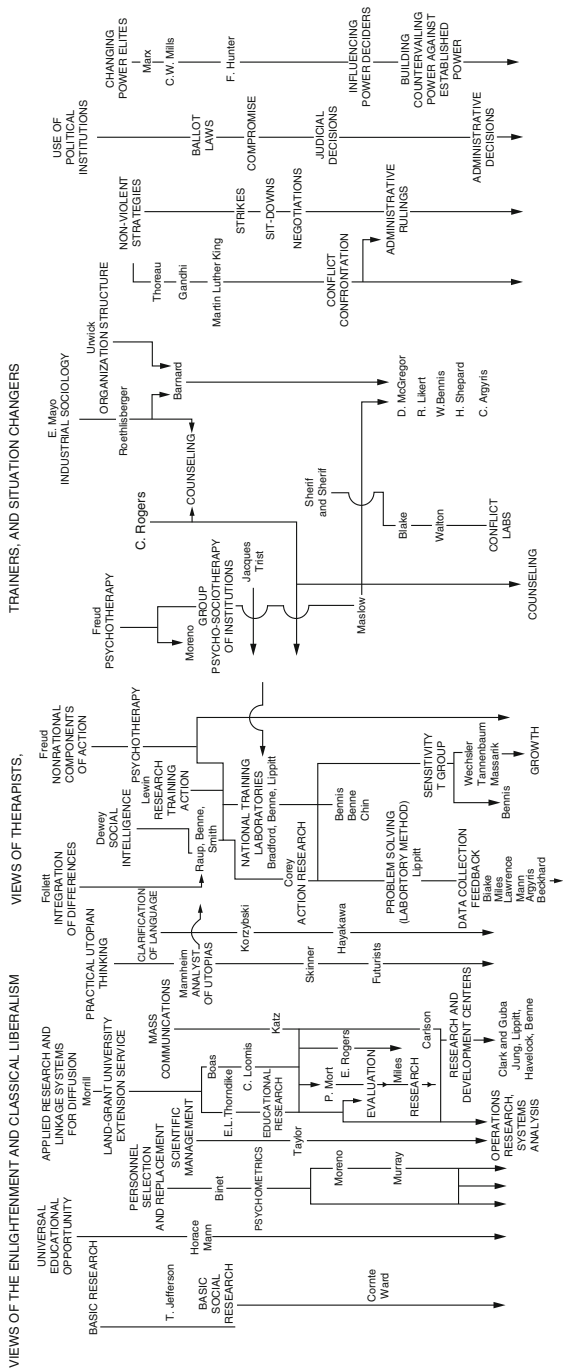
Fig. 1 Strategies of deliberate changing

is understanding the needs of the stakeholders so that a message can be crafted that will show the stakeholder how the change will meet their needs and/or solve their problems. The psychology and research centers played an important role in figuring out those motivations.

Power Coercion

The power coercion strategy is best utilized when the urgency for change is high. The basic assumption for this strategy is that the stakeholders of the change will, ultimately, do what they are told. The individual in power assumes the role of a change agent and exercises that power to effect a change. This power may range from subtle manipulation to the application of physical force, and anything in between. The main benefit of this approach is that it is an efficient way to change when urgency is high. However, the presumed benefits of this approach come at the expense of relationships, trust, and the individual commitment and motivation of the employees.

Interestingly, Chin and Benne made specific note that the power can come from a grassroots movement as well. As shown below in the Fig. 1, the nonviolent change strategies of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., union workers, etc. are all listed under this power-coercion strategy. The thought is that the power of numbers and grassroots movements can be used to shame or embarrass leaders into taking the desired action or making the desired change, in effect changing the paradigm and giving the power to coerce and force a change to the masses.

Normative-Reeducative Strategy

The normative-reeducative strategy is based on the assumption that stakeholders of the change are guided by the desire to conform to social norms and will eventually adhere to the new cultural norms and values established by the social system (normative). This change process is founded on the concept of changing the existing values and norms and developing stakeholder commitment to the new values and norms. Changing values and norms is not as easy as it might sound. This process emphasizes changes in stakeholder skills, knowledge, competencies, and relationships – providing a "reeducation" of the behaviors and values that define the targeted change.

For changes to occur with this strategy, the stakeholder is engaged in the change process. In order to conform to the new social norms, the stakeholder must reflect and reconsider the habits, normative structures, values, institutionalized relationships, and roles that define how they fit into that organizational or social structure. This strategy is reliant on change agents who encourage and support the reeducative process, helping stakeholders develop the new skills and behaviors needed to successfully change. The success of these change agents is dependent on their ability to support learning and to work collaboratively with the stakeholders they are meant to help change.

Chin and Benne note that the normative-reeducative strategy gradually emerged as an effective approach in more modern times. The normative-reeducative strategy emphasizes participation, emergent processes, fair negotiation, trust, and

transparency. This strategy, while seemingly a simple concept, is more complex than the other two and in line with complimentary concepts such as organizational learning.

The figure below provides an overview of the three strategies for change and the various types of change and scholars associated with each strategy. You can see how grassroots, nonviolent strategies find their way under the power-coercive heading. In contrast, their contemporaries, many of whom are in the various chapters of this book, are classified under normative-reeducative.

New Insights: Continuing on Their Own Path

After Chin and Benne left the Human Relations Center in the 1960s, they continued to expand on their own interests. Kenneth Benne pursued further work on educational theories, building on the concept of reeducation of adults and reconceiving pedagogical authority as "anthropological authority." He expanded his participation and leadership in the Psychology of Education Society (PES), where he collaborated, inspired, and learned from other well-known scholars in the same circle. One such scholar, Maxine Greene (1993), had this to say about Kenneth Benne and his presence at the PES meetings: "when Professor Benne attended meetings of the Philosophy of Education Society, he seemed to many of us to be younger in spirit than the solemn, sometimes cynical, certainly skeptical postmodernists among us. Calling for acknowledgment of an often noble (and too frequently forgotten) past, he was at once beckoning towards a future, trying to move the faithless to a common faith." He continued to write and lecture to attempt to demonstrate, both in theory and in practice, a value in diversity and how we can all come to see that value. Additionally, he explored his passion for poetry, eventually publishing a book of his poems, many of which he had shared in personal correspondence over the years (Nash 1992).

While Benne went back to his academic roots, Robert Chin went back to his ancestral roots, working and studying in Asia. He was a Fulbright scholar at National Taiwan University in 1963 and directed the Social Research Center at the Chinese University in Hong Kong in 1971. In 1969, he and his wife, a sociologist, coauthored a book, *Psychological Research in Communist China*, *1949–1966*. This book, as the title suggests, is an attempt to summarize and analyze the scientific research in the field of psychology from the rise of the Communist Party through the first phases of the Cultural Revolution on mainland China. Beginning in 1979, that collaboration led the Chins to travel throughout China, where they lectured and consulted at major universities, bringing the concept of organizational theory to China, not exactly an easy task. Chin did not spend all of his time after the Human Resource Center in Asia. He participated regularly in the academic and scholarly communities in the West as well. As I spoke to folks about my task of writing this article, I heard personal stories of Chin inviting scholars over to his house to eat Chinese food made from scratch and continue the scholarly conversation with him and his wife in their home. By all accounts, he was a humble, friendly, and brilliant man who enjoyed his

work and colleagues in a pure way. Although both Chin and Benne went their separate ways, their work continued to be influential in the field of social change.

In terms of change, you can see the concepts developed by Chin and Benne in several models and strategies for change developed since, whether they actual cite Chin and Benne and their strategies or not. Some strategies and models – both scholar and practitioner centric – have built on the Chin and Benne model indirectly, addressing perceived shortcomings or creating a more marketable step-by-step process for change agents. Other scholars have taken the three strategies for change outlined by Chin and Benne and built on them more directly.

Quinn et al. (2000) analyzed the common change practices of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus Christ. The nonviolent change strategies of Gandhi and King were previously placed in the power-coercive category by Chin and Benne. Quinn, Spreitzer, and Brown (2000) saw a different common thread among those change agents and developed what he called Advanced Change Theory. At the heart of this change theory is the "transforming strategy," a proposed fourth change strategy (Quinn and Sonenshein 2008) for the model Chin and Benne outlined previously.

Szabla (2007) used the Chin and Benne change strategies as his organizing framework to look at resistance to planned change and eventually developed that into the Perception of Change Strategy Scale (Szabla et al. 2016). Nickols (2016) built onto the three original change strategies by Chin and Benne and proposed a fourth, environmental-adaptive. This proposed fourth strategy adds the environment as an additional element and is based on the assumption that people adapt rather easily to new environments, even when they resist change. This fourth strategy advocates creating a new environment and slowly moving people from the old to the new environment and letting undesirable environmental components "die on the vine."

Legacies and Unfinished Business: Quite Elusive Men

For me personally, the legacy of Chin and Benne has evolved as I researched this chapter. At the start, I would have stated that their concepts around normative-reeducative change strategies, and everything that means to scholar practitioners like me, were their legacy – that their concept of culture and learning as the foundation to a successful planned change has helped me build a reputation as someone who successfully creates the desired change with some sense of regularity and reliability. However, as I read and researched their lives before and after their time at the Human Resource Center, I have to say that my understanding of their work and their legacy has deepened. From different perspectives, and founded in different disciplines, Chin and Benne have explored changing hearts and minds, helping people embrace – and not just tolerate – diversity and put their theories into practice in order to actually impact real people in a real way. It is true that Robert Chin and Kenneth Benne have provided important contributions to the organizational change field. However, they have contributed more than that. They each held

true to their early influences and kept a social undertone in their work. Together, they left us the tools and inspiration to leverage, not reject, our differences; to challenge social norms; and to create social change. It is clear that their work is not yet complete and, perhaps, is needed now, more than ever. I feel it is fitting to end with one of Kenneth Benne's poems entitled *Epiphany* from his 1979 Christmas letter (Raywid 1993):

> Others one day, you must agree,
> will voice last words of me.
> Foe, partisan and lover and
> value-free professor.
> Each will think he's true to the man he knew
> Or knows, he feels, from the book.
> Each will say "Look!
> Here he is, this is he;"
> will deal justly,
> Justly as he can, with a quite elusive man.

Both Benne and Chin were elusive in their own way. I'm sure each of them was much more complex than anything I could have pulled up through researching their academic history and work. They seemed to have a passion for their work and let their work take the spotlight. However, I hope that they would think I have captured their essence justly.

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Further Reading

Below are a few ideas for further reading about Chin and Benne, their influences, and their work. The reference list also has several works to look into, including detailed biographies and tribute articles as well as scholars who have used the Chin and Benne strategies in their modern research.

If you are interested in learning more about the social motivations – about how Chin and Benne were driven to focus on social action and to combat prejudice – you should take a look at historical nonfiction works that describe the prejudice people throughout history have been subjected to.

One to try: Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W., Castaneda, C., Hackman, H. W., Peters, M. L., & Zuniga, X. (Eds.) (2013). *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd edn.). New York: Routledge.

If you are interested in their work around social action and planned changex. . .

NTL Institute (http://www.ntl.org/?page=Publications)

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The Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont has a collection of Kenneth Benne's professional papers and correspondence. While the collection is not online and can only be accessed via a trip to the reference library in person, a link to the table of contents can be found here:

http://cdi.uvm.edu/findingaids/resources/bennekenneth/bennekenneth.pdf

In addition to being a great scholar, Kenneth Benne was also a prolific poet, sending a poem each year to friends and family as his Christmas card and eventually self-publishing a collection of his poems

Teach me to sing of winter: Selected poems, 1930–1987 (self-published in 1988)

Box 7 of the archives of Benne's work at the University of Vermont contains his poetry.

Information on the Human Resource Center at Boston University

http://www.bu.edu/cgcm/research/korean-diaspora-project/institutions/human-relations-center/

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