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The six emotional stages of organizational change

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Abstract

Purpose: This work's purpose was to define a model that both describes the evolution of the emotional stages of individuals during perceived negative organizational change and explains the evolution of their behavioural patterns and the effects on relationships with social environments (family, friends, co-workers, supervisor and organization).

Design/Methodology/Approach: A qualitative methodological research design was adopted, using individual interviews as the primary method of qualitative data collection. Fifteen people who experienced perceived negative organizational changes participated.

Findings: Through empirical qualitative research, an adapted Kübler-Ross (1969) model was used as a starting point. Co-occurrence analysis of the interviews led to the combination of the first two stages (denial and anger) of this model because they always appeared together. Two new stages (revising and deserting), based on the research of Schalk and Roe (2007), complete the model. Subsequently, the model comprised six emotional stages: denial and anger, bargaining, depression, revising, deserting and acceptance. Results show that individuals can move freely between the first four stages, but deserting and acceptance are always the final stages. Experiencing these emotional stages can influence relationships between individuals and their social environments. During denial and anger and bargaining, relationships with family, friends and co-workers improve, but during depression, relationships with family and friends deteriorate, but because co-workers become much more important, those relationships improve. Relationships with supervisors deteriorate during denial and anger and depression but remain stable during bargaining.

Research limitations: Time's passage became an inconvenience accounted for during data collection. Over time, separate events can be confused, and nuances that were once determinants

can be eliminated. Longitudinal studies at various stages of the change process would complement these results.

Practical implications: These results can guide managers in foreseeing and anticipating actions that would reduce the emotional impact of organizational change and mitigate the impact of individuals' negative emotions on the organization.

Originality: This paper extends existing theory about the strategies of coping and organizational changes.

Keywords: Organizational change, Coping, Organizational behaviour, Employee-organization relationship

Introduction

The purpose of organizational change is to improve the current state of the organization to achieve better adaptation to its environment or to adjust to changes in mission and objectives. Although organizational change should foster resource optimization and organizational adaptation, literature shows numerous examples where it produced the opposite effect, reducing productivity and shareholder value while increasing direct and indirect costs (Bowman and Singh, 1993; Bowman *et al.*, 1999). Organizational managers might not consider the impact of organizational changes on morale, productivity (Cascio *et al.*, 1997) and satisfaction (Wah, 1999) of employees because their future predictions are based solely on beliefs or past experiences (Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008). This planning error in the change process has serious consequences for the organization, such as desertion (Brennan and Skarlicki, 2004) or absenteeism (Martin *et al.*, 2005).

A recent literature review by Oreg *et al.* (2011) analysing 79 articles published between 1948 and 2007 that focus on employee reactions to organizational change indicates the importance of conducting research from the individual's perspective. The authors highlight the importance of emotions during the change process, whether positive or negative. The evaluative judgement (positive or negative) depends on employee attitude toward the change (Lines, 2005; Elias, 2007). Organizational changes lead to chaos in normal tasks (Tombaugh and White, 1990), which leads to a significant change in work environment, generating uncertainty. Uncertainty then generates high levels of job insecurity among employees (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006), and this generally translates into job stress (Lazarus, 2006). In this situation, employees tend to resist change (Hobfoll, 2002) through coping strategies (Lazarus, 2006). These strategies are defined as a set of behavioural and cognitive changes that employees adopt to meet domestic (how they

feel) and external (stress caused by work) demands imposed by the organization and which go beyond employees' own resources (Lind and Van den Bos, 2002; Van den Bos and Lind, 2002).

Oreg *et al.* (2011) call for empirical studies addressing the emotional changes through which an individual moves during organizational change; and it is that recent literature shows a relationship between the emotions of individuals and their reaction to organizational changes (*e.g.*, Hareli and Rafaeli, 2008). But they do so by focusing on the individual's emotion at the end of the process of change (*e.g.*, Huy, 1999), so they are disregarding the naturalness of emotions and thereby do not studying how they evolve throughout all the process of change.

Based on the above, we observe how the literature shows a gap yet to be filled: how do the emotions of the individual evolve during a process of organizational change perceived as negative? Of the emotions in the processes of change we know that they originate through the lived events and that these can have repercussion in the moment of generating uncertainty (Tiedens and Linton, 2001), but there is a lack of research for identifies the evolution of emotions and if whether they are classified in different states. Given that organizational changes occur in several phases that may be totally different (*e.g.*, Armenakis and Bedeian, 1999), we cannot ignore that the emotions of individuals can also evolve along with the process of change. So, if individuals are able to observe different motivators throughout the whole process of change, they will develop different evaluation processes which will lead to the evolution of their emotions (*e.g.*, Scherer, 2005). But how do we identify the different emotional stages of individuals during the organizational changes? To start answering this question was adopted as the starting point the five stages of grief model (Kübler-Ross, 1969).

This model was originally designed for terminally ill patients or relatives who are facing shocking change in their lives. The model anticipates an emotional evolution of the individual

during the grieving process and classifies the emotions in five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Although the context of the terminally ill is very different from that of organizational change, we consider it useful to explain Kübler-Ross' (1969) model profusely because this model, unlike the existing literature (*e.g.*, Huy, 1999; Kiefer, 2002), contemplates the relationship between the evolution of emotions and the changes. Therefore, this research was designed to allow development of a model of the emotional stages of individuals experiencing perceived negative changes starting from the Kübler-Ross model (1969).

At the same time, through the study of the model of emotional states, we must analyse how these are interrelated with the social environment of the individual (family, friends, co-workers, etc.). Since, as some research suggests (Barsade, 2002; Hareli and Rafaeli, 2008) there is an influencing power between emotions of different individuals, being one subjected to the others. Therefore, once the model of emotional stages is defined during the organizational change, we must answer the question: how does each stage affect the relationship with the individual' social environment?

Through our findings, we bring to literature a different way of looking at organizational changes in which emotions are not a final result of these, if not a continuous nonlinear process of evolution, something that stands out in contrast to other researches such as Huy (1999), Liu and Perrewé (2005) or Maitlis and Sonensheim (2010). As a result of identifying the emotional stages during the organizational change perceived as negative of our study, the further researches and the change leaders would be able to exercise control and follow-up on these. According to the literature, this control over the various emotions of individuals during the change process can mitigate or eliminate individual resistance (Fox and Amichai-Hamburger, 2001). So, understanding the emotional stages of individuals not only represents a powerful force to

moderate resistance, but also serves as an indicator of successful change implementation (Mossholder et al., 2000).

As we can see in the aforementioned, this knowledge of the individual's emotional process during organizational changes also has important implications for managerial knowledge. For example, the emotions derived from organizational changes when it is perceived as negative often produce counterproductive work behaviours and performance drops, which are the most detrimental consequences for the organization (e.g., Bennett and Robinson, 2000; Lee and Teo, 2005). Therefore, knowing how the individual evolves emotionally can help managers to take preventive actions, such as improving communication with workers at each stage of change, which generates confidence and mitigates uncertainty (Saunders and Thornhill, 2003).

Literature Review

Emotions in organizational change

Organizational change is a natural process in the working lives of employees (Leana and Barry, 2000); it is present in everyday situations such as business relocations (Daly and Geyer, 1994), mergers (Schweiger and Denisi, 1991) or salary freezes (Schaubroeck *et al.*, 1994). It is often perceived negatively because the changes are seen as threats or injuries (Scheck and Kinicki, 2000). Other research (e.g., Fay and Frese, 2001; Luthans *et al.*, 2007; Fugate *et al.*, 2012) addresses organizational change from a different approach, stating that the perception of change, positive or negative, is an individual trait that is context-dependent. Negative perceptions of change have given rise to great interest in organizational research, given its importance in the aftermath of organizational changes (e.g., Scheck and Kinicki, 2000; Weeks *et al.*, 2004; Bankins, 2015).

Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) found that employees react in one of three ways during organizational change: passively, aggressively or honestly. Current literature on organizational change focuses on the causes of stress in individuals undergoing change, studying how it affects their satisfaction, behaviour, uncertainty, etc. (e.g., Gupta and Singla, 2016; Lawrence and Callan, 2011; Oreg *et al.*, 2016; Ybema *et al.*, 2016). More specifically, recent studies attach particular importance to individuals' emotions as organizational change is resisted. For example, Jones and Van de Ven (2016) indicate that employees' feelings of commitment to the organization and the organization's perceived effectiveness are strongly negatively related to change resistance. On the other hand, Aslam *et al.* (2016) state that resistance to organizational change is based on cynicism; they concluded that trust in change leaders could increase job satisfaction. Researchers are currently seeking the causes that provoke change resistance and are studying its emotional consequences; however, the emotional stages have not yet been addressed. While various points of view have been addressed (see Mathews and Linski, 2016), additional studies of individuals' emotional evolutions during organizational changes are needed, especially when those changes are perceived negatively.

The literature provides a few models to explain the emotional evolutions experienced by employees during organizational change. Huy (1999) defines a multilevel theory of emotion and change, facilitated through individual (emotional intelligence) and organizational (emotional capability) attributes. This adaptation can occur through one of three dynamics: receptivity, mobilisation or learning. Liu and Perrewé (2005) divide the emotional process into four stages: *primary appraisal*, where individuals look for incongruities in how change is presented, *secondary appraisal*, where individuals make sense of change in terms of its relationship to the well-being of self, a *coping stage*, where individuals try to actively cope through actions such as

information gathering and issue selling (this sometimes results in unwanted outcomes such as counterproductive work behaviours (Bowling and Eschleman, 2010; Fox *et al.*, 2001) and the *outcome* of the planned change. Depending on an individual's evolution, this outcome can be resignation regarding change, acceptance of change or successfully resisting change.

These two models give us insight about the emotional consequences for employees, but give us little insight into individuals' feelings through this process. Huy (1999) focuses on the interaction between the individual and organizational attributes during change processes, and Liu and Perrewé (2005) focus on individuals' behaviours rather than on the emotions that drive them. The latter model does not contemplate the influence of the social environment on the individual, and it assumes linearity between various stages. Luce (1995) states that organizational change must be considered nonlinear.

To develop a model of the emotional processes of individuals during organizational change, the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief was chosen as a starting point. This model has been applied in various studies of organizational change (*e.g.*, Blau, 2008; Davey *et al.*, 2013; Marks and Mirvis, 2001; Zell, 2003). Because it was designed to model coping with grief, it was found to be an adequate starting point when organizational change is negatively perceived.

Additionally, this model was selected because: (1) it allows for non-linearity between the stages, since as Ashford and Thylor (1990) and Scheck and Kinicki (2000) determine, organizational changes should be considered as discontinuous and therefore flexible processes. If our purpose is to find a model that identifies the emotional stages of change when it is perceived as negative, we must predict that it will allow for non-linearity. In this sense, the Kübler-Ross model (1969) determines that the individual can move forward and back through the different

emotional stages without maintaining a linearity, something that it adapts with what happen in the process of organizational change; (2) it has previously been used in research on negatively-perceived organizational losses (*e.g.*, Newman *et al.*, 1983; Worden *et al.*, 1997), this demonstrates that the five stages of grief can be applied to the context of organizational change and that therefore the emotional stages defined by Kübler-Ross (1969) have a close relationship with the emotions experienced during organizational changes; (3) it allows reactions to be grouped into well-defined categories, where from the emotional classification the emotions are no longer seen as a whole at the end of the process of change (*e.g.*, Huy, 1999; Liu and Perrewé, 2005) and are contemplated in different stages that can be clearly numbered and differentiated; and (4) it demonstrates a psychological association between the emotions of the individuals and the situation lived by them, allowing to have a clear idea about the information in the memory of the individuals and to give access to the meaning that have of a specific concept creating a subjective code of reaction (Figuroa, González and Solís, 1981). That is to say, the use of Kübler-Ross's model would not only allow us to know the emotional states of individuals, but also the meaning they have for them and their reactions that derive from this meaning. Furthermore, it has been applied in organizational change research (*e.g.*, Blau, 2008; Davey *et al.*, 2013; Marks and Mirvis, 2001; Zell, 2003), but using the original stages, which were defined to model grief among the terminally ill. To define a model more specific to negatively-perceived organizational change, it was necessary to verify the adaptability of the Kübler-Ross model in this context. Table 1 defines the five stages of grief in this model.

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The theory behind the Kübler-Ross model is that the terminally ill and the bereaved experience reactions that allow them to protect themselves from the threat of imminent loss. While it is true that a terminally ill patient is in a different situation than a person coping with organizational change, an analogy can be established if definitions are the focus; organizational changes are also seen as threats or losses (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000). In this sense, Luke *et al.* (1973) presented use of this model when individuals perceive losses. The sense of loss is translated, for example, into affectations of personal identity such as self-esteem (van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2014), self-efficacy (Vardaman *et al.*, 2012) and social identity (van den Heuvel *et al.*, 2014). Newman *et al.* (1983) and Worden *et al.* (1997) state that the five stages of grief could be used in any situation where an individual perceives significant loss. Hobfoll (2002) explains that the loss perceived during organizational change is directly related to the resources of the individual. The theory of resources distinguishes between social resources (supervisor support, autonomy at work, relationships with co-workers, etc.) and personal resources (skills, knowledge, character traits, etc.) Furthermore, perceived losses during the change process affect not only current resources but also future resources the individual feels entitled to (Van den Bos and Lind, 2002).

Ávila and de la Rubia (2013) empirically tested the Kübler-Ross model, finding it amply explains the experience of a terminally ill patient. Although the context is somewhat different, a similar model of emotional stages can be defined to describe a person facing negatively-perceived organizational change (Worden *et al.*, 1997).

Schalk and Roe (2007) report that when employees feel their workplace conditions have been infringed or violated, they can present a range of corrective responses using self-regulation to address discrepancies. These actions can be classified into balance (negative actions on the

part of the organization are answered in the same way by the individuals), revising (employees reconsider the terms of their jobs) and deserting (individuals leave the organization, usually through waivers). The emotional evolution experienced by an individual causes strong tension, generating the need for resistance to organizational change through coping strategies (*e.g.*, Huy, 2002; Waldron, 2000).

Coping strategies

Coping strategies are defined as transaction processes between individuals and their social environments, and they emerge as a result of individuals' cognitive assessments of stressful situations that are sometimes caused by organizational change (*e.g.*, Cooper *et al.*, 2001; Lazarus 1991, 2001; Beehr and Newman, 1998). The decision to use a specific coping strategy during organizational change depends on the cognitive perception of the individual (Lazarus, 2006). Skinner *et al.* (2003) presented three coping strategies that might be used when facing stressful situations: (1) harmonizing the change, (2) fighting the change or (3) preferring the change. These coping strategies comprise twelve classes of higher-order strategies.

Instead of defining taxonomy of independent coping strategies, others (*e.g.*, Ashford and Thylor, 1990; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000) suggest this process is continuous and non-linear and must be explained through a model that considers an individual's advance, recoil or jump between emotional stages. These two streams of research can be considered as complementary rather than oppositional. A synthesis of the two streams can be achieved by defining an evolutionary model of the emotional change perceived as negative and for which the individual moves through a number of emotional stages. The coping strategies available to an individual depend on their emotional state at the time. A model such as this can aid change leaders in anticipating and responding to individuals' reactions.

Because emotions are strongly linked to coping strategies, they can be used as proxies for the state of the organizational change (George and Jones, 2001; Mossholder *et al.*, 2000).

According to Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), the primary reasons people resist organizational change are self-interest, misunderstanding and a lack of trust, a difference in the assessment of the change, and low tolerance for change.

Coping strategies not only depend on individuals and their perceptions but also on their relationships with their social environments, such as friends and family (Chan, 2006). More specifically, the social environment is defined as the five external agents with which individuals can relate in their daily lives: family (including partners), friends, co-workers, direct supervisors and the organization. For this reason, when anticipating individuals' coping strategies, their emotions and reactions to their social environments must be considered.

The social environment of the individual

Because organizational change takes place in a social context, social interactions play central roles in shaping the evolution of the individual through the emotional stages and must be considered when defining the model. Turnley and Feldman (1999) found that individuals attempt to actively participate with their superiors or co-workers to improve the situation in front of an organizational change, leading them to act differently than they did prior to the change. Other studies (*e.g.*, Kinicki *et al.*, 1996; Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999; Schweiger *et al.*, 1987; Terry *et al.*, 1996) show that social interactions play key roles when coping with stress. Stress is a possible consequence of organizational change, because organizational change may generate uncertainty, and employees may feel that their needs are neglected by the organization (Lazarus, 2006; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). On this basis, Hobfoll (1989, 1998, 2002) states that stressors affect individuals because they exhaust their personal resources and reduce links to their social

environments, such as family or friends. Consequently, these individuals often must replace their sources of support.

Cross and Prusak (2002) emphasize the importance of considering individuals' social environments during an organizational change process because they affect the success of the change. Social networks of the individuals are growing sources of interest for organizations because these networks give rise to, for example, the unconditional support for an organizational change or the urge to resist and fight it (Kilduff and Brass, 2010). Thus, it is important to identify the kinds of relationships between individuals and their social environments at each stage of change because they are antecedents of their reactions to change (Chan, 2006; Chuang, 2007; Montes-Berges and Augusto, 2007). Social environments can drastically influence individuals and can determine their behaviour toward change. Therefore, understanding the relationships between individuals and their social environments can help change leaders to better choose their strategies.

This research was designed to adapt and expand the Kübler-Ross model, the five stages of grief, to apply to negatively-perceived organizational change. This model will allow the identification of transitions between stages and how individuals' social environments relate to them.

Methodology and Analysis

Selection of study methodology

The purpose of our research is define a model that both describes the evolution of the emotional stages of individuals during perceived negative organizational change and explains the evolution of their behavioural patterns and the effects on relationships with social environments (family, friends, co-workers, supervisor and organization). These emotional stages that an employee

experiences through organizational change depend on a set of complex personal and social phenomena. To elucidate these stages an inductive research design was adopted, relying primarily on qualitative data. This decision was based on the findings of Patton (2005), who indicates that qualitative research is more useful than quantitative research when the aim consists of formulating propositions or hypotheses in a minimally-explored field. The Kübler-Ross model has been applied in organizational change research, though the stages were defined for a medical field. Unfortunately, no studies address whether the stages originally defined by Kübler-Ross (1969) can be applied directly to organizational change processes.

The literature on the use of qualitative research (*e.g.*, Patton, 2005; Silverman, 2016; Sofaer, 1999) maintains that when there is insufficient evidence in a field, it is necessary to carry out an exploratory study to establish a knowledge base. On the other hand, qualitative research makes it possible to be more flexible during interviews with individuals and thus to explore in greater depth the relationships that exist with, for example, their social environment. In this case, interviews provide first-hand knowledge of how individuals endured organizational changes, and theory can be generated from that knowledge. If quantitative research is performed directly, a questionnaire about the five stages of grief in organizational change must be defined. The scales devised by Ávila and de la Rubia (2013) were used to develop open-ended questions which formed a semi-structured interview. Although the Kübler-Ross model has been employed in a few studies of organizational change processes using the original stages devised for medical application, its adaptability to organizational change processes warrants testing (*e.g.*, Zell, 2003; Davey *et al.*, 2013). Based on Barker (1968), a naïve approach was adopted that led to the exposure of every aspect of the phenomenon as if it were new and unfamiliar. A descriptive model of emotions experienced during organizational change was considered to be significantly

different from models defined in unrelated contexts, (*i.e.*, direct use of the Kübler-Ross or other models was not advisable). Understanding how negatively-perceived organizational changes affect individuals is a primary task.

Selection of study sample

The sample was selected following a strategy of quotas. Inclusion criteria were: minimum of one year seniority in the company where the negative organizational change occurred, the negative changes were experienced within three years and the organization was located in Spain. As proposed by Marshall (1996), Patton (2002) and Crouch and McKenzie (2006), intentional selective sampling of individuals was used. Various familiar companies and partners were contacted to find and preselect individuals who experienced organizational change in Spain in the three previous years. No relationship existed with any prospective participant prior to being selected. Of twenty prospective participants, the fifteen who met the inclusion criteria were selected. These individuals came from various professional backgrounds. In particular, the final sample consisted of five individuals from companies that serve the public sector (Participants A, B, C, D and E), five from private companies (Participants F, G, H, I and J) and five from public sector companies (Participants K, L, M, N and O). Participants N and O were from a public university. Participant information about change are shown in Table 2.

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Method of data collection

Because of the complexity the social processes involved, a protocol was developed as a conceptual guide and practical on data collection during interviews. The protocol was based primarily on the instrument developed by Ávila and de la Rubia (2013) to evaluate the five

stages of grief in terminally ill patients, which is divided into five sections comprising 66 items answered on a Likert scale. Based on these items, the protocol proposes a semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions and no time limit so that unexpected results can be captured, and the interview can be redirected based on interviewee responses. The protocol specifies a location of the interviewee's choice to maintain comfort and privacy and recording the interviews to allow for further analysis. The protocol also suggests noting interviewees' reactions (*e.g.*, behaviours or nonverbal communication) when responding to questions. This is a reason to use interviews instead of questionnaires. As Kvale (2011) argues, the best way to know the reality of an individual is to speak directly with him. In this way, directly asking questions of the individual and watching for reactions provides a better understanding of how negatively-perceived organizational changes were managed. In interviews, we asked respondents how they had experienced the organizational changes. And, at the same time, we ask about how it was during the process of change the relationship with their closest social environment: family, friends, co-workers, supervisor and organization.

Data management

Interviews were transcribed using Transcriber software following a double review process. They were then codified using the methodological proposals of Rodriguez et al. (1996) using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. Codification began with identifying the blocks or paragraphs where interviewees spoke about events before or after the organizational changes. This allowed defining the starting point for analysing the consequences of organizational change. Although coding used only two codes (BF, before and AF, after), several paragraphs contained both types of events and required coding several times. The second phase of codification consisted of assigning to paragraphs preconceived codes from the theoretical framework of this research.

Specifically, paragraphs coded AF were further coded with the five stages of the Kübler-Ross model: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Subsequently, an overview of the five (or fewer) stages of grief were obtained for each participant. The third and final phase consisted of coding the paragraphs using a more inductive approach (encoding in-vivo), recoding some interviews as new codes emerged. A total of 65 codes were used and categorized into the following blocks: time frame (before, during and after), emotional stage (*e.g.*, denial, depression and acceptance), relationship with the social environment (*e.g.*, co-workers, friends and family), external aid elements (*e.g.*, psychologist, sport and massage), perception of organizational justice (procedural, distributive and interactional) and consequences (*e.g.*, stress, uncertainty and hope). The Table 3 shows the full list of codes.

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Analysis of data

After codification, each interview was analysed in whole and then in blocks, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Jurgenson (2007), to obtain a specific view of each participant and conclusions across all participants. Code analysis began with grouping codes into families (*e.g.*, external aid and environment), allowing identification of codes by subject and a preliminary analysis without focusing on the reality of each interviewee. Using these code families, the predominant concept of each segment of an interview was quickly identified. Relationships between codes were then examined across all interviews, and co-occurrence was analysed. Co-occurrence analysis is useful for finding relationships between concepts and

repeatability of codes (Friese, 2014). The Atlas.ti software provides co-occurrence using the C-coefficient, which ranges between 0 and 1; the co-occurrence between any pair of codes (n_i , n_j) and the co-occurrence for the combined pair of codes (n_{ij}) provides C via the following formula (García, 2004):

$$C = \frac{n_{ij}}{(n_i + n_j) - n_{ij}} \quad (1)$$

When co-occurrence is below 0.05, a relationship between codes is unlikely, when it is between 0.06 and 0.15, a relationship is moderately probable, when it is between 0.16 and 0.50, a relationship is highly probable and when it is above 0.5, a systematic relationship between codes is indicated. The result of co-occurrence analysis is a conceptual map of the case studies where relationships between codes are highlighted, and transitions between emotional stages, emergence of new stages or interaction between the organization and the employees during organizational change are identified and tracked. Co-occurrence analysis is important in this study because it can be used to establish whether the Kübler-Ross model appropriately describes the emotions of individuals during negatively-perceived organizational change. Additionally, interrelated stages of the model can be detected along with an individual's evolution between the stages. Finally, co-occurrence indicates whether a relationship with an individual's social environment is positive, negative or indifferent in each emotional stage during a negatively-perceived organizational change.

Results

The results of the qualitative analysis are threefold. First, a model of the emotional stages experienced by individuals during a negatively-perceived organizational change was defined. It has six emotional stages, which arose from a modification of the Kübler-Ross model, wherein two stages of grief were combined, and the addition of two stages identified by Schalk and Roe

(2007). No evidence of a balance stage was found, but it may exist. Second, transitions between emotional stages were established. Relationships between the emotional stages and how employees can jump from one state to another were identified. Third, the influence of an individual's social environment (friends, family, co-workers, supervisor and organization) on these emotions was elucidated.

Stages of organizational change

Interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes. Codification was performed based on individuals' verbal responses and nonverbal reactions. Co-occurrence analysis of the codes showed a process similar to the five stages described by Kübler-Ross (1969) for terminally ill patients, but with some relevant differences.

Co-occurrence was found to be 0.31 for denial, 0.30 for anger, 0.88 for bargaining, 0.91 for depression and 0.82 for acceptance by software Atlas.ti; however, an overlap was reflected between the first two stages (denial and anger). A considerable level of co-occurrence (0.61) was found if the two were combined, thus explaining these two stages better ($0.61 > 0.31$ or 0.3).

Therefore, the two stages were combined into one, called *denial and anger*. Overlapping of these two stages is illustrated in Participant J. This informant admits to not accepting changes from the outset, but felt supported by a colleague because both experienced the same process. The informant was then asked about his feelings about his social environment outside of work. He replied:

"Same... even of anger with my parents. Because my parents did not say anything, well at first they said to me: wait, wait, wait, wait (silence). And I told them, I cannot stand it anymore. I cannot stand it anymore. (...) Because they did not live through it, I do not know ... it's a little

hard for me to explain them. I do not know if I explained them well." (Participant J, translated from Spanish).

This informant had rage in his face and was in disbelief because he was not feeling understood by the people around him. His face showed not only denial, but also anger, and his reactions and gestures expressed rage. The emotion of anger appeared in every participant when admitting that changes were not accepted (denial). Kübler-Ross (1969) related this with the anger stage.

Co-occurrence analysis showed two additional stages through which individuals pass during organizational change based on Schalk and Roe (2007): revising, with a co-occurrence of 0.82 and deserting, with a co-occurrence of 0.85 by software Atlas.ti; Evidence exists in the literature to support including both stages in the model. Participant J ended up leaving his job to release himself from the organization and overcome the change process (deserting). Participants A, K and O recognized they wished to leave the company (revising) because of disagreements with the organization at some point during the change process. Furthermore, Participant A indicated during the interview that she sometimes felt defeated by the organizational change. When asked about her feelings when she said she lost the strength to cope with organizational change, she replied:

"I wanted to desert... many times, especially at the beginning (...) It was like a lot of changes, a lot, and suddenly it was like "pfft," I must not spent... more tasks to do and (...) I could stand any more (...); After, I adapted more or less to changes, well, I resigned myself to them." (Participant A, translated from Spanish).

At the time, her face showed defeat from exhaustion rather than sadness. Her attitude indicated it was time to leave the organization, and her face brightened as he spoke of the

possibility of leaving the organization. When an individual wants to leave the organization, all hope that the change will provide benefits is lost, and commitment to the organization disappears. In the Kübler-Ross model, a stage analogous to "a desire to leave the organization" is not identified. While depression, in the five stages of grief, is characterized by the individual considering that it would be better to die, in the context of organizational change, the desire to leave the organization is specific for this stage. Schalk and Roe (2007) suggest that the revising and deserting stage are experienced during organizational change, and the sample data support this. Therefore, Proposition 1 is put forth without implying that the order of appearance of the stages corresponds to the order of transition:

Proposition 1: The emotional stages of organizational change when it is perceived as negative by the individual are: (1) denial and anger, (2) bargaining, (3) depression (4) revising, (5) deserting and (6) acceptance.

Transitions between stages

Although the Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grief suggests a certain linearity in the transition from one stage to another, these empirical results show that individuals can start at any of the six stages. To identify the most probable initial stage, the relative probability of adding the total number of segments relative to the codes for a specific stage (*e.g.*, depression and acceptance) presented in questions were calculated. The values were normalized with all the segments codified at any stage, and denial and anger was found to be the most likely (50.70%) first stage. This was followed by bargaining (22.54%), depression (11.27%), revising (7.04%), acceptance (5.63%) and deserting (2.82%).

A second goal of the study was to identify transitions between the emotional stages. The co-occurrence values were used as proxies for direct transitions between two stages. Analysis of transitions between stages reveals forward and backward transitions, perhaps because organizational change is a continuous and non-linear process. These results agree with the proposals of Ashford and Thylor (1990) and Scheck and Kinicki (2000). Figure 1 summarizes the identified transitions between stages and their co-occurrence values.

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INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
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Levels of co-occurrence between various stages arise from transitions described, directly or indirectly, in the interviews. Although memories of events fade over time (Levine *et al.*, 2012), the largest temporal distance between events reported by individuals was three years. Furthermore, Talarico *et al.* (2004) indicate that in some cases, despite a lack of memory, the emotions of the moment prevail and improve the memory of what was experienced.

The period of completion of the organizational change process of each individual is shown in Table 2. While some transitions were identified during interviews, the final image (Figure 1) could be determined only through co-occurrence analysis. Individuals were not aware of the stages, and for this reason, when they spoke of the organizational change, they did not do so sequentially. For this reason, the subsequent interview analysis was important. The motivators of transition were not identified; this is reserved for future research.

Identification of when an individual was in denial and anger was achieved, and transitions to one of three subsequent stages were found using co-occurrence values, which were 0.24 for

bargaining, 0.12 for depression and 0.08 for revising. Co-occurrence for remaining in denial and anger was 0.56.

Four transitions from bargaining were identified: to denial and anger (0.24), to depression (0.07), to deserting (0.03) or to acceptance (0.04). Co-occurrence for remaining in the bargaining stage was 0.62.

When depression was the initial stage, four possible transitions were identified: regression to denial and anger (0.12) or to bargaining (0.07) or progress toward deserting (0.36) or acceptance (0.09). Co-occurrence for remaining in the depression stage was 0.36.

When starting from revising, four possible transitions were identified: regression to depression (0.36), denial and anger (0.08) or bargaining (0.03) or evolution toward deserting (0.29). Co-occurrence for remaining in the revising stage was 0.24.

Results did not show transitions from the deserting or acceptance stages. They are considered final stages in that deserting is leaving the organization, ceasing to be part of it without possible return, and acceptance is the end of grief after facing organizational change. Therefore, only two endings are possible: individuals embrace the change with all its consequences, or they reject it, either openly or indirectly. Based on the results found for transitions, Proposition 2 is put forth:

Proposition 2: During the organizational change process, an individual can transition between the emotional stages of denial and anger, bargaining, depression and revising. Deserting and acceptance are final stages; therefore an individual will not return to any other stage from either of these.

Influence of stages in relationships with the social environment

Table 4 shows the co-occurrence values between stages and the agents of an individual's social environment, indicating the evolutionary trend, either positive (+), negative (-) or neutral (=), in relationships between individuals and their social environments. Three stages, acceptance, revising and deserting, were not found to be related to changes in these relationships. The change in a relationship was determined, relative to the relationship prior to organizational change, by reviewing all interview extracts where a stage and an external agent were encoded. For instance, if the relationship between an individual and friends worsens when denial and anger is experienced, the corresponding co-occurrence will be negative (-).

According to Cacioppo and Gardner (1999) and Larsen et al. (2001), emotions (positive and negative) are not strictly bipolar and orthogonal; therefore, they can be concurrent. Lazarus (1991) argued that variables for positive and negative emotions should be considered and that organizational members can respond to organizational change with a higher or lower value for both. In addition, positive and negative emotions can increase simultaneously but not in the same proportion (*e.g.*, Cacioppo and Gardner, 1999; Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000).

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Table 4 shows that the individual tends to relate to family and friends positively during denial and anger and during bargaining but negatively during depression. In all participants, the relationships with co-workers during denial and anger, bargaining and depression evolved positively. This coincides with the results of Turnley and Feldman (1999), who posited that individuals attempt to positively interact with their co-workers during organizational change processes. In this study, participants considered their co-workers to be support and allies in a

fight against organizational change, empathizing for others in the same situation. Participant J explained that at the beginning of the change, he felt much rage and anger. When asked about relationships with co-workers during these moments of rage and anger, he replied:

"This improves. (...) Because it is shared we are all going through the same thing, so that has created a group among us." (Participant J, translated from Spanish).

When describing this response, his face was relaxed. He seemed to be feeling the support of his co-workers. He was excited to remember the team formed between himself and his co-workers while facing the organizational changes. In this response, the contributions of Turnley and Feldman (1999) are seen. In adverse times of organizational change, relationships with co-workers improve, not only because they are the only ones who can truly understand the situation, but also because they are feeling the same feelings.

Relationships between supervisors and employees tend to evolve negatively during denial and anger and during depression, but it remains stable during bargaining. All participants in this study regarded their organizations and supervisors as the chief culprits of their situations and of the organizational change. Colquitt *et al.* (2013) found that the perception of justice in all its dimensions is related to the confidence and commitment felt toward the organization. Negative perceptions about organizational changes and the associated sense of injustice cause relationships between individuals and their supervisors and the organization to deteriorate. An excerpt from the interview with Participant O reflects this fact. The informant was asked about his feelings at the beginning of the change and whether he lost commitment to the organization at any time. He replied:

"(...) I was pissed and furious. I could say... I did not have bad blood, but... I had some fear; as well (...) I had bewilderment (...) because they had promised us something, but are doing another thing (...) I had disappointment (...) I did not believe in the tasks that I did. (...) Totally, of course, obviously (...) I have no commitment. And still more when I am seeing that... "Puff" to the organization does not care about this situation. If you do or not do, it is just that. From here...(...)" (Participant O, translated from Spanish).

In this reply, Participant O was very disappointed. His reaction was one of spite and betrayal. Although he spoke directly about his supervisor, he extrapolated his discomfort to the organization, and they became one and the same. In this answer, the conclusions of Colquitt et al. (2013) can be seen. Individuals lose confidence in their supervisors, they feel cheated and consequently, they lose their commitment to the organization.

Finally, results also highlight that greater co-occurrences with the five external agents occur during denial and anger. According to Kübler-Ross (1969), during the stages of denial and anger, individuals experience a strong emotional outburst, and their psyches are rebelling; therefore, they intensely refuse to accept the situation. In the context of organizational change, these feelings lead to a closer relationship with surroundings, which is manifested in many ways: against the instigators of the organizational change (organization or supervisor), against those close to the individual (friends or family) or against third parties not clearly identified (the government, God, etc.) Thus, relationships with the social environment will be more intense in the early stages of organizational change. Therefore, Proposition 3 is put forth:

Proposition 3: In the stages of denial and anger and bargaining, relationships with family, friends and co-workers will evolve positively; however, in depression, relationships with family and friends will evolve negatively, but those with co-workers will evolve

positively. Relationships with the supervisor and the organization will evolve negatively during denial and anger and during depression, but they will remain stable during bargaining.

Discussion

One purpose of this research was to define a model of the evolution of individuals' emotional stages during a negatively-perceived organizational change process that will help explain the evolution of individuals' behaviour patterns and how individuals' relationships with their social environments (family, friends, co-workers, supervisor and organization) is affected. The starting point, the adapted Kübler-Ross model of stages of grief, was applied in this context because the model has already been used in previous studies of organizational change. The stages used in the field of medicine were always applied (*e.g.*, Blau, 2008; Davey *et al.*, 2013; Marks and Mirvis, 2001; Zell, 2003), so this study was designed specifically to verify the adaptability of the five stages of grief to the context of negatively-perceived organizational change. Although the literature defines some models of emotional stages during change processes (Liu and Perrewé, 2005), extant research does not focus on the feelings of loss that individuals experience during these processes (*e.g.*, Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000). The Kübler-Ross model has been applied to loss processes (Worden, 1997) and was therefore adapted to organizational change processes.

Interviews of fifteen participants who experienced negatively-perceived organizational changes were conducted using a protocol based largely on Ávila and de la Rubia (2013), allowing evaluation of the Kübler-Ross model in this context. Interview analysis provided a model based on the five stages of grief suggested by Kübler-Ross (1969).

Because the stages of denial and anger were continuously linked and shared the same level of co-occurrence, the two stages were combined. This is justified for two reasons. First, Kübler-Ross (1969) indicates that sometimes the five stages of grief can be superimposed, and individuals can experience more than one stage at a time. Second, Dueñas *et al.* (2010) related anxiety, one of the elements that can appear during denial (Kreitler, 1999), with anger. Because both stages always appeared concurrently in our participants, they were combined into a single emotional stage, termed denial and anger.

The results of this study also reveal that some emotional stages did not correspond with stages in the Kübler-Ross model. They were associated with the intention to leave or desert the organization. Though a desire to abandon could be related to the "death wish" stage (depression) in the Kübler-Ross model, it was more appropriate to define specific stages for these feelings. A stage that better defines the feelings of individuals who were not sad, angry or in denial, but wanted to change their lives and wished to leave the organization was needed. Schalk and Roe (2007) defined two emotional stages, revising and deserting, that fit these needs. Individuals experiencing revising reconsidered the terms of their jobs, and those who left the organization, usually through waiver, were experiencing deserting. The resulting model defines six emotional stages: denial and anger, bargaining, depression, revising, deserting and acceptance. The definitions suggested by Kübler-Ross (1969) and by Schalk and Roe (2007) were maintained.

Extant research has applied the Kübler-Ross model directly, and the stages developed for grieving death or terminal illness were not adapted to the situation (*e.g.*, Blau, 2008; Davey *et al.*, 2013; Marks and Mirvis, 2001; Zell, 2003). However, future research modelling emotional processes using the Kübler-Ross model should test the pertinence of the specific stages for the particular phenomenon studied.

A second purpose of this study was to describe the evolution through the various emotional stages when experiencing organizational change. Because organizational changes are dynamic and nonlinear processes, (Ashford and Tylor, 1990; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000), and because individuals can move between the stages in the Kübler-Ross model, probabilities of an individual moving forward or backward through the stages were defined using co-occurrence analysis. Results show that during negatively-perceived organizational change processes, the individual can move between denial and anger, bargaining, depression and revising, but end with desisting or acceptance. Because these probabilities were calculated using a small sample, more precise values could be obtained using a qualitative, confirmatory research design on a larger sample of informants.

In addition to the non-linear appearance of progression through the emotional stages, transitions between them were compared to theory and confirmed. For example, Wortman and Silver (1989) indicate that emotional evolution caused by pain resulting from loss cannot be understood as an ordered sequence of events but rather by a succession of states. Individuals evolve through each moment of organizational change, and this process corresponds to a period of cognitive and emotional adaptation (Huy, 2001). Thus, the transition between stages is a natural, intrinsic part of the change process.

The final purpose of this work was to determine how relationships between individuals and their social environments are affected by negatively-perceived organizational change. Previous research, such as that by Hobfoll (2002), stresses the importance of individuals' relationships with their social environments during organizational change processes. Results showing that relationships with family, friends and co-workers evolve positively during denial and anger and during bargaining, but that only those with family and friends do so during

depression supports other studies (Griffin *et al.*, 2007; Parker *et al.*, 2006). Those studies indicate that co-workers are among the primary supports that individuals turn to at work, especially during hard times such as organizational change processes.

Relationships with supervisors and the organization were found to evolve negatively during denial and anger and during depression but remain stable during bargaining, and this can be explained by the Kübler-Ross model. Relationships with family, friends and co-workers are positive in the early stages because individuals need support from them not to be outdone by the novelty of the changes. As organizational changes occur, individuals can perceive their social environments as something to rely on. However, during depression, they blame their loved ones for their strife. Because they can find nobody who understands them, relationships with friends and family deteriorate. The literature provides examples such as the study by Hobfoll (1998), who indicates that stress generated via an organizational change process affects relationships with family and friends. Similarly, Kübler-Ross (1969) indicates that during depression, individuals experience strong tensions and stresses precipitated by the situation being experienced. On the contrary, during depression, relationships with co-workers improve, because individuals feel that because their peers are experiencing the same loss, they are the only ones who can understand them. In the Kübler-Ross model, individuals blame God (a higher entity) for their problems; likewise, during the worst stages of organizational change (denial and anger or depression), relationships with their supervisors and the organization (superior entities) deteriorate. Individuals blame their supervisors and the organization for the changes, and they see them as enemies. However, this feeling is minimized during bargaining, when individuals seek reasons to overcome the organizational change. One explanation for this result is that during bargaining, individuals seek reasons for, and try to convince themselves to accept the

changes. It is at this point that individuals become oriented to the change and subsequently with their relationships with supervisors (Detert and Burris, 2007; Van Dyne *et al.*, 2008), and the organization becomes a source of support for the individual during the process (Ng and Feldman, 2012; Ng and Sorensen, 2008; Tekleab and Chiaburu, 2011). If individuals intend to accept the changes, they will feel that the organization and their supervisors are supportive and therefore, at this stage, relationships with them should not worsen. Instead relationships with supervisors and the organization can revert to what they were before the organizational changes.

Only the evolution of relationships as organizational change unfolds were evaluated during analyses of relationships between individuals and their social environments. Exploring the nature of these relationships in-depth at each emotional stage is a promising avenue for future research, along with considerations for exploiting the model. For instance, it would be interesting to extend the research from the individual level to the organizational level using social simulation (Squazzoni *et al.*, 2014) to assess how organizations evolve during negatively-perceived organizational change processes.

In this study, individuals experienced denial and anger simultaneously, and the two were combined. Kübler-Ross (1969) predicted this overlap. Future research should explore the reasons for this systematic overlap in the context of negatively-perceived organizational change, examining its consistency through confirmatory research design. Future research could also explore explanations for why organizational change is perceived as negative (*e.g.*, organizational justice). Cropanzano and Schminke (2001) and Konovsky (2000) indicate that individuals construct their perceptions of organizational change assessing the justice of decisions and actions taken by the organization. Other research, such as that by Clay-Warner *et al.* (2005) suggest that

organizational changes such as downsizing affect and influence the perception of distributive justice, making this the most important predictor.

On the other hand, the roles of the individuals in the organization were not considered in this work; nor were the contents of the tasks performed before the organizational change. Future researchers can pursue the influence of an employee's organizational role and of the content of tasks performed on the emotional stages during negatively-perceived organizational change processes.

Finally, researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies in which individuals are interviewed while organizational change takes place. Interviewing an individual a long period (up to three years) after an event can lead to distortion of the events. Levine et al. (2012) indicates that individuals tend to reconstruct events over time and they cannot remember all the emotions experienced. While it is true that other studies such as Talarico *et al.* (2004) indicate that the passage of time may help improve the memories of emotions experienced, but faulty memories must be expected and taken into account (*e.g.*, Howe, 2010). Several researchers report that people, when in altered emotional states, encode their experiences differently (*e.g.*, Storbeck and Clore, 2005; Schaefer and Philippot, 2005). Future research can mitigate this limitation by giving notebooks to informants for recording experiences as they occur. Explanations of their feelings at each moment could be subsequently provided (Mazzola *et al.*, 2011).

The practical implications of this research include serving as a guide so that managers can foresee and anticipate actions for reducing the negative impact of organizational change on employees. Behaviours and corrective actions can be planned. This point is very important for organizations (Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008) because these actions could reduce, for example,

negative effects on productivity or an increase in direct and indirect costs (Bowman and Singh, 1993; Bowman *et al.*, 1999). Leaders of organizational change can use these results in a way to reduce the stress and emotional tension generated by organizational change (Kelloway *et al.*, 2005) by generating confidence in their subordinates in the initial stage of denial and anger (Harvey *et al.*, 2003). In addition, they must know the needs of each of their subordinates by measuring communications and considering the period of emotional adaptation (Huy, 2001). So, the knowledge of the emotional stages of change when it is perceived as negative can help to the managers to take preventive actions, such as improving communication with workers at each stage of change, which generates confidence and mitigates uncertainty (Saunders and Thornhill, 2003).

The theoretical implications of this work include the provision of a cognitive and emotional perspective that identifies six stages through which the individual moves during a negatively-perceived organizational change. Agents of change must know that when initiating organizational change, the predominant stage in their workers will be denial and anger. According to the Kübler-Ross model, individuals will experience sensations such as anger toward those in their social environments, disbelief over the even or irritability. In addition, these results tune the use of the Kübler-Ross model, which was originally defined for medical application, for the context of negatively-perceived organizational change. Future researchers should use this six-stage model in studies of organizational change. For example, previous studies such as Huy (1999) or Liu and Perrewé (2005) conclude that employee coping is only affected by the end result of organizational changes. With our model, we provide tools to examine the individual throughout the process of organizational change and not just focus at the end of it (when everything has already happened). Thus, future research can easily find in each

stage the motivations that lead the individual to coping with changes, which can help to predict and counteract them. On the other hand, future researchers can now treat the change in six different stages by evaluating in each one how it affects, for example, their performance or behaviours, being able to find different results for the same individual and the same process of change. In addition, through our model, different emotional states can be considered for the same organizational change, improving studies of the literature in which emotions are only divided into positive or negative, but not simultaneous (Elfenbein, 2007). For example, in the stage of bargaining the individual can feel positive emotions made the change whereas in the stage of depression can experience totally negative emotions on the same change. Thus, multiple emotions are produced on an organizational change.

Our model also opens the way to research aimed at exploring the influence of the individuals' social environment and their emotions on organizational changes. And we cannot ignore that emotions during organizational changes originate and evolve through a complex process that can vary for many reasons (*e.g.*, Smith and Lazarus, 1990).

Finally, this research expands the literature and addresses organizational change from another perspective. Conceptualization of organizational change as dynamic or nonlinear (Ashford and Tylor, 1990; Scheck and Kinicki, 2000) requires a model that allows such flexibility. Thus, this model allows framing the emotions of individuals during negatively-perceived organizational change through a dynamic and nonlinear model. Future research will expand and further improve this model. Further studies of these six emotional stages are forthcoming.

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