

# CHANGE READY, RESISTANT, OR BOTH? EXPLORING THE CONCEPTS OF INDIVIDUAL CHANGE READINESS AND RESISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper is a qualitative review of two concepts: change readiness and resistance to change. We review their use, clarify their conceptual underpinnings, and address the assumption of them being the opposite poles of the same continuum. We juxtapose the two concepts and analyze their dimensions which commonly represent a source of ambiguity about their meaning, review their evolution, and compare them to similar concepts. We argue that resistance to change addresses two important aspects: resistance as behavior and resistance as attitude. We argue that because resistance to change and change readiness share attitudinal roots, they should be looked at in conjunction – not on a bipolar continuum but as coexisting orthogonal dimensions – to grasp the full complexity of change-related attitudes. We discuss implications and offer guidance for future research.*

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Employee attitudes toward change are a key factor that determines the success of an organization's change efforts (Elias, 2009). Identified as critical for implementing planned change (e.g., Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994) the concept of change readiness strongly permeates the organizational change literature. Presumably presenting the same phenomenon from the opposite perspective (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993), resistance to change has been one of the most frequently cited reasons for why firms fail to implement change (Anuradha & Kelloway, 2004). According to Bouckennooghe (2010),

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more than 90% of the conceptual work on change attitudes has been done either on change readiness or resistance to change.

Indeed, the two concepts frequently appear in conjunction<sup>4</sup> in the literature, mostly represented as two opposite poles of a continuum (e.g., Salleh et al., 2011). However, calls for the clarifications of both concepts that have been raised many times (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999) suggest this might have been an unnecessary simplification. Moreover, as the interest in employee attitudes toward change has grown, so has the number of other concepts that appear along the change process, such as openness to change, change cynicism, and others. Depending on their positive or negative valence toward change, they have interfered or have been used as synonyms for either change readiness or resistance to change. This process resulted in the proliferation of concepts and confusion. Stevens (2013), for example, borrowed Block's (1995) expression of "jingle and jangle fallacies" to capture the pool of change readiness conceptualizations.

The goal of our review paper is twofold. First, we aim to clarify the concepts of resistance to change and change readiness along with interactions among them in order to facilitate further development of this interesting body of knowledge. Only a clear understanding of the concepts' meanings provides firm ground for sound theorizing and clarifies incommensurability issues. Second, our goal is to show that resistance to change and change readiness need to be inspected simultaneously to grasp the full complexity of change-related attitudes. We argue that employee attitudes toward organizational change are not as black-and-white as originally assumed.

We confront the concepts of resistance to change and change readiness, and simultaneously analyze their dimensions to clarify ambiguity about what these concepts are and what they are not. We first review the evolution of both concepts through time by (a) inspecting their cognitive, affective, intentional, and behavioral aspects, and (b) presenting the evolution of theoretical approaches regarding the origin of the concepts. Next, we clarify the focal concepts by (a) further exploring the dimensions of an attitude, (b) applying both focal concepts to stages of change, and (c) comparing them to other, similar concepts. We conclude with a discussion and directions for future research.

## 2 THE EVOLUTION OF THE USES OF BOTH CONCEPTS THROUGH TIME

The first observation regarding organizational change literature is that resistance to change began to appear much earlier than change readiness and also trumps change readiness in the number of total publications (123 vs. 462) (see Figure 1 in Appendix). This is not surprising because people naturally resist change as it concerns moving from the known to the unknown (Coghlan, 1993). The introduction of the term *resistance to change* is

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<sup>4</sup> Change readiness and resistance to change have largely been used interchangeably, depending on which valence was more convenient (resistance for negative and readiness for positive valence).

credited to Kurt Lewin (1947). The term appeared in the first stage of his three-stage change model: the “unfreezing” stage, referring to the application of an additional force to break employees’ social habits (Burnes & Bargal, 2017), current mental models, and behavior. However, Lewin “introduced the term as a systems concept, as a force affecting managers and employees equally” that could be found and rooted anywhere within the system of roles, norms, attitudes, and other factors—the psychology of the humans being just one element of it (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 25). Interestingly, the first reference to resistance to change was made by McMurry (1947), with “The problem of Resistance to Change in Industry,” and the second by Coch and French (1948) in a paper titled “Overcoming Resistance to Change,” followed by other works all offering prescriptions to fight against resistance (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). It seems that authors aimed to prevent or overcome resistance to change as soon as it was recognized to exist. Despite resistance to change being the longest-present and probably the best-known attitude toward change in the literature (Bouckenoghe, 2010), Dent and Goldberg (1999) observed in their comprehensive review it was not well-defined and frequently lacked definition.

The concept of *change readiness*, on the other hand, was introduced more recently. Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) define it and propose a model for creating change readiness at the individual level in 1993. In earlier literature, change readiness was not conceptually differentiated from resistance and can be traced in discussions with regard to reducing change resistance (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholder, 1993).

In search of ways to prevent resistance, calls for the retirement of resistance to change have been raised; however, resistance to change perseveres, together with the growing body of literature on change readiness from 1993 on. A review of publications published in the year 2017 reveals that 24 publications dealt with resistance to change compared to only eight dealing with change readiness.

Despite the popularity of both concepts and their interconnectedness, a search<sup>5</sup> for publications dealing with both concepts simultaneously resulted in a surprisingly low number of publications. Only three publications<sup>6</sup> address the two concepts at the same time: the Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder paper from 1993 aiming to differentiate

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5 We searched the Social Sciences Citation Index edition of the Web of Science Core Collection database. Publications of document types article, review, proceedings paper, and book chapter, written in English between 1900 and 2018 (June) were included. We searched the database for works with the words “change readiness” or “readiness for change” in their abstracts, titles, or keywords for the first concept of our interest, and “change resistance”, “resistance to change”, or “resistance toward\* change” for the second. The search was undertaken using the Web of Science categories, namely Management, Psychology Applied, Psychology Multidisciplinary, Psychology, Business, Social Sciences Interdisciplinary, Psychology Social, and Behavioral Sciences.

6 These three publications are: (1) Armenakis, A. A., Harris, S. G., & Mossholder, K. W. (1993). Creating readiness for organizational change. *Human relations*, 46(6), 681-703; (2) Michel, A., Todnem By, R., & Burnes, B. (2013). The limitations of dispositional resistance in relation to organizational change. *Management Decision*, 51(4), 761-780; (3) Salleh, H., Alshawi, M., Sabli, N. A. M., Zolkafli, U. K., & Judi, S. S. (2011). Measuring readiness for successful information technology/information system (IT/IS) project implementation: A conceptual model. *African Journal of Business Management*, 5(23), 9770-9778. 3).

change readiness from resistance, and two empirical papers which do not attempt to differentiate or consolidate the two concepts. This observation, in addition to the pivotal role the two concepts have in the broader change management literature, supports the need for our review.

## 2.1 A review of conceptualizations

As we dig into conceptualizations of resistance to change and change readiness, different paths in their evolutions can be detected. Below, we list (see Tables 1 and 2) and review their conceptualizations. We discuss their evolution addressing the four different dimensions of employee responses toward change: cognitive, affective, intentional, and behavioral.

With the *behavioral dimension* we denote actual behavior. For the *intentional dimension*, we follow Piderit's (2000, p. 787) understanding of "an intention" in his debate on attitudes toward an organizational change that denotes "a plan or resolution to take some action, rather than a plan to try to achieve some goal (Bagozzi, 1992)". This understanding is in line with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985) and the tripartite attitude model (Smith, 1947), on which our theorizing is based on. Moreover, our aim is not to observe what the goal of a dimension is. We draw on the assumption that humans as rational beings will always act rationally - with an intention.<sup>7</sup> The *cognitive dimension* refers to beliefs, thoughts, perceptual responses, and knowledge structures about change (Breckler, 1984). The *affective dimension* refers to feelings about change. Eagly and Chaiken (1998, p. 272) define this dimension as "feelings, moods, emotions, and sympathetic nervous-system activity that people have experienced in relation to an attitude object and subsequently associate with it."

Table 1: *An overview of resistance to change definitions*

| Source                           | Definition  | Dimension                 |
|----------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| Zander (1950, p. 9)              | "Behavior which is intended to protect an individual from the effects of real or imagined change."                  | Behavioral                |
| Argyris (1985, p. 5)             | "Thoughts and actions used to protect individuals', groups', and organizations' usual way of dealing with reality." | Cognitive, and behavioral |
| Brower & Abolafia (1995, p. 151) | A particular kind of "action or intentional inaction."  | Behavioral                |

<sup>7</sup> Acting "rationally" in the social sciences usually means "acting with instrumental rationality – doing what will get you whatever ends you wish to achieve, whether they are in your best interest or not (Korsgaard, n.d.)."

| Source                           | Definition  | Dimension  |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Ashforth & Mael (1998, p. 90)    | “Intentional acts of commission or omission that defy the wishes of others.”  | Behavioral   |
| Folger & Skarlicki (1999, p. 36) | “Employees’ behaviour that seeks to challenge, or disrupt the prevailing assumptions, discourses, and power relations.”                               | Behavioral   |
| Herscovitch (2003, p. 14)        | “Employee action or inaction that is intended to avoid a change and/or interfere with the successful implementation of a change in its current form.” | Behavioral   |
| del Val & Fuentes (2003)         | “Any set of intentions and actions that slows down or hinders the implementation of change.”  | Intentional, and behavioral                                      |
| Oreg (2006, p. 76)               | “Tri-dimensional (negative) attitude towards change, which includes affective, behavioural, and cognitive components.”                                | Affective, cognitive, and behavioral or intentional <sup>8</sup> |

The literature focusing on resistance to change departed from the behavioral dimension (see Table 1). Researchers describe resistance to change as behavior intended to protect recipients from change (e.g., Zander, 1950), and to avoid change (e.g., Herscovitch, 2003). Coch and French (1948), the authors who made one of the first references to resistance to change, as well use desirable (compliant) behavior as a criterion in their quasi-experiment on resistance to change (Piderit, 2000).

In later stages of evolution of resistance to change we spot the intentional dimension was added (see del Val and Fuentes, 2003) and finally we arrive to the contemporary definition that describes it as a multidimensional attitude (Oreg, 2006).

The cognitive dimension can as well be identified in early definitions (see Argyris, 1985). Also, when advising on how to overcome resistance, a “cognitive realignment of resisters’ espoused theories and their theories-in-use” is recommended (Diamond, 1986, as cited in Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 786). Also, among the causes of resistance Dent and Goldberg (1999) find misunderstanding to be a common cause, exposing its cognitive component. Zander (1950), for example, notes that resistance may surface “if the change is open to variety of interpretations” or “if the nature of the change is not made clear to the people who are going to be influenced by the change” (Dent & Goldberg, 1999, p. 34-35). Lawrence (1954) also emphasized management should use understandable terms so that the change makes sense to employees. Cognition as a part of the phenomenon can as well be found

<sup>8</sup> To Oreg (2006) the behavioral dimension denotes action or intention to act.

in the early work of Coch and French (1948) discussing participation that might have motivational and cognitive effects (Piderit, 2000).

The affective dimension can be found in early descriptions of resistance to change, but not in its definitions. Shimoni (2017) notices that Dent and Goldberg (1999) list terms such as *fear*, *frustration*, *emotionality*, and *innate aggression* when discussing resistance to change, all of which expose the emotional or affective nature of the concept. Notions of aggression can be traced back to the work of Coch and French (1948). In Diamond's (1986) view, the underlying nature of resistance to change is highly emotional (Piderit, 2000), even though not explicitly noted in its earlier definitions, as opposed to more recent definitions, where the affective component is included (e.g., Oreg, 2006). Oreg et al. (2018) describe resisters' responses to change with underlying core affects, such as stressed, angry, and upset.

Table 2: *An overview of change readiness definitions*

| Source  | Definition  | Dimension                             |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| Armenakis Harris, & Mossholder (1993, p. 681)   | "Organizational members' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding the extent to which changes are needed and the organization's capacity to successfully make those changes." | Cognitive, affective, and intentional |
| Cunningham et al. (2002, p. 377)                | It involves "a demonstrable need for change, a sense of one's ability to successfully accomplish change (self-efficacy) and an opportunity to participate in the change process." | Cognitive <sup>9</sup>                |
| Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris (2007, p. 235) | "The extent to which an individual or individuals are cognitively and emotionally inclined to accept, embrace, and adopt a particular plan to purposefully alter the status quo." | Cognitive, and affective              |
| Weiner (2009, p. 68)                            | "Organizational readiness for change refers to organizational members' change commitment and self-efficacy to implement organizational change."                                   | Cognitive <sup>9</sup>                |
| Holt & Vardaman (2013, p. 9)                    | "The degree to which the organization and those involved are individually and collectively primed, motivated and capable of executing change."                                    | Cognitive <sup>9</sup>                |

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps not explicitly stated, the definitions of Cunningham et al. (2002), Weiner (2009), and Holt & Vardaman (2013) describe the cognitive dimension. The concept of self-efficacy is even entailed in the operationalization of change readiness discussed in more detail in Section 3.

In contrast with the beginnings of resistance to change, Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) explicitly position the core of creating change readiness in changing individuals' cognitions, the latter representing a precursor to behaviors regarding change efforts. In their view, readiness is "reflected in organizational members' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions regarding the extent to which changes are needed and the organization's capacity to successfully make those changes" (p. 681). Thus, the change readiness concept puts cognitions in the focus of attention from its beginnings.

Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) do not explicitly mention affect in their conception of change readiness, but it can be traced in the notion of readiness being an attitude because an attitude is comprised of "qualitatively different types of information (e.g., affective and cognitive)" (Crites, Fabrigar, & Petty, 1994, p. 621). In more recent conceptualizations, we can find readiness explicitly defined as consisting of cognition, as well as affect. Nevertheless, affect still remains an understudied dimension in change readiness research (Rafferty et al., 2013). Some definitions also note intentions but not behaviors. Rafferty et al. (2013) conclude intentions should be excluded from the conceptualization, since they are indications of how hard one is willing to try and how much energy one is willing to invest in order to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991) concerning employees' *motivation*.

## 2.2 Theoretical approaches to studying resistance and readiness to change

Besides dimensions of the focal change concepts, the literature has also put a lot of emphasis on the sources of change readiness and change resistance. We draw on Shimoni's (2017) grouping of approaches to resistance to change and identify the following evolutionary lines of the sources of both concepts: (a) deriving from an individual's psychological disposition, (b) arising from the change context, (c) being a product of interplay between disposition and context, and (d) arising from habitus.

The first, and the earliest one — deriving from the individual's psychological disposition, has only been discussed in connection to the concept of resistance to change. This approach is also called the traditional approach to resistance to change. The other three approaches listed above are relevant for both concepts, thus we adopt them to discuss change readiness as well.

### 2.2.1 *An individual's psychological disposition as a source: The traditional approach*

Traditionally, scholars approached resistance to change as something rooted exclusively within individuals. What people actually resist is not change per se, but letting go of something that is familiar. They fear to lose status, pay, or comfort (Dent & Goldberg, 1999), or even their identity (Karp & Tveteraas Helgø, 2009), seeing change in organizations as shifting of identities. Neuroscience complements biologists' findings that the human brain is wired against loss (e.g., Cozolino, 2006) – loss aversion – and our brains tell us to

resist change and save energy if change is not necessary for our survival (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

In his review, Shimoni (2017) notes that organization development scholars and practitioners often see resistance to change as pathological — a defensive routine that change creators need to defeat. Being something that organizations need to overcome also implies the position of the concept in the four-phase reaction process to change that individuals go through, according to Scott and Jaffe (1988, as cited by Bovey & Hede, 2001, p. 534), being: “initial denial, resistance, gradual exploration, and eventual commitment”. The traditional view assumes employees' resistance can be turned into more supportive orientation if employees do the best they can (Illouz, 2007) and has been, in Krantz's (1999, p. 42) opinion, “transformed over the years into a not-so-disguised way of blaming the less powerful for unsatisfactory results of change efforts”.

Ford, Ford, and D'Amelio (2008, p. 362) emphasize that the “change agent-centric” view that sees change agents as unbiased observers (who do the right thing to overcome the objective reality of change recipients who are seen as obstacles resisting the change) should be discarded. We should realize that resistance is a result of interactions and relationships between change agents and recipients and does not reside completely “over there, in them (i.e., in change recipients)” (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008, p. 362).

### ***2.2.2 Change context as a source: The social context approach***

Recognizing there is more to it than just individuals, scholars began to see resistance as a product of the social context. Contextual factors are the circumstances under which change occurs and can inhibit or accelerate the effectiveness of change implementation (Self, Armenakis, & Schraeder, 2007). Lewin's field theory argues an individual's behavior needs to be understood within the context, taking into account all the forces of the life space that affect it (Lewin, 1947).

Ford, Ford, and D' Amelio (2008) advocate for the importance of change agents' role and their relationships with employees. Change agents need to be able to restore trust and establish fairness, call to action, and communicate effectively to avoid misinterpretation that could cause resistance. This factor belongs to the process factors of the change process, which include strategies and tactics, justifying organizational change, communicating a shared vision, and executive visibility (Self et al., 2007; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999). Supporters of this approach see inappropriate organizational cultures as obstacles to or enablers of reducing resistance by guiding their members on how to act, perceive, and feel (Shimoni, 2017). Often, the organizations' structures are sources of resistance (e.g., narrow job categories can force employees to choose between new perspectives and their self-interests; Burnes, 2015, Kotter, 1995). Holt and Vardaman (2013) add encouraging climate, and reward or incentive systems as relevant structural factors. Kotter (1995) finds



individual resistance to be rare and states employees usually understand the new vision and desire its realization but are restrained by the system.

The social context approach was used by Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) to build foundations of the concept of change readiness on. They acknowledge the contextual factors influencing the creation of change readiness, especially the role of change agents through influence strategies, such as persuasive communication, management of external information, and enabling active participation. Change managers should take the role of proactive players instead of trying just to “reactively monitor the workplace for signs of resistance” (p. 682), thereby taking the role of proactive change agents as coaches and champions of change. Second, they emphasize change readiness is a social phenomenon influenced by other peoples' readiness, another factor showing the context-dependency of change readiness.

### ***2.2.3 Interplay between an individual's psychological disposition and change context as a source: The social construction approach***

While the first two approaches view the personal and the social aspects as relatively separated (Shimoni, 2017), the social construction approach integrates both. This approach returns to Lewin's roots. This time, the whole content, not just the nomenclature, has been adopted because Lewin saw the behavior of individuals, groups, and organizations as a function of a totality of a life space entailing both — the individual and the environment (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). According to Burnes (2015), contextual factors moderate the level of dispositional resistance, and organizations being social systems, resistance should be seen as emerging from the mutual effects of individuals' and organizations' characteristics.

In the evolution of the concept of change readiness, the social construction approach was adopted as well, recognizing the importance of individual and contextual mutual effects. Holt and Vardaman (2013) named them *individual factors* (psychological) and *structural factors* (the circumstances under which change occurs).

### ***2.2.4 The habitus-oriented approach***

Shimoni (2017) acknowledges the advantage of the social construction approach and returns to the original Lewin's idea, but criticizes it for ignoring the dynamic nature of resistance. Thus, he proposes a habitus-oriented approach to resistance to change. He argues that “resistance is a social practice built into the system, produced by social agents' habitus, historically developed in constant interactions between human agents and social structures in a given social field” (Shimoni, 2017, p. 263). In line with the concept of habitus, social agents' behavior is not a direct reaction to external conditions (Swartz, 2002) but an improvisation of action strategies within structural constraints, also in terms of deeply rooted past experiences (Shimoni, 2017). For Shimoni, individuals or groups (social agents) are active producers of meaning. Bourdieu (1989) explains that by adopting

the social structure of organization through the process of socialization, the social structure becomes a part of individuals' habitus or social disposition, which influences their thoughts and behaviors, including resistance to change (Shimoni, 2017). The habitus approach emphasizes the mirroring of organizations' material and symbolic social structures in an individual's cognition. As Shimoni (2017, p. 264) notes, it is "something people learn, and once it is learned it 'naturally' affects the way they think and behave."

Holt and Vardaman (2013) propose an expanded conceptualization of change readiness by incorporating the factor of awareness. They draw on Gondo, Patterson, and Palacios's (2013) research on mindfulness, which points out the uselessness of willingness and capability of employees in the absence of awareness of the need for change and of their routinized or automatic behaviors. With this, we are rapidly approaching the habitus-oriented approach to resistance, as discussed by Shimoni (2017), incorporating the social disposition that influences our thoughts and behaviors, meaning that we are not (fully) aware of our routinized behavior.

### 3 CLARIFYING THE CONCEPTS

As the review of the evolution of the concepts has shown, the contemporary definitions describe change readiness as well as resistance to change as having an attitudinal core. However, this still leaves some ambiguity about the entailment of intentions and behavior in these two concepts. We discuss the dilemma of whether they should be included or excluded from the conception of an attitude and address some other aspects in the following subsections to improve the understanding of the focal concepts.

The tripartite attitude model (Smith, 1947) that led the development of attitude research constitutes of three attitude components: the cognitive, the affective, and the conative. While the cognitive component clearly denotes the beliefs (e.g., believing the change is beneficial), and the affective refers to feelings (e.g., being angry about change) about the attitude object (a specific change), the conative component is the most complex of all. In some cases also named intentional, in others behavioral, this dimension created substantial conceptual confusion. It denotes future intentions to act based on past behaviors or experiences with the attitude object. Some studies place more emphasis on past experiences and behaviors to reflect evaluations of an attitude object, while others criticize this, and focus on intentions, saying that one might not have past experiences when responding to a novel event (Piderit, 2000).

However, some researchers (e.g., Oreg, 2006), understand this component as entailing both, intentions to act as well as actions (e.g., verbally expressing intentions concerning change adoption, trying to convince others that the change is not beneficial). Thus, we identify the first source of conceptual confusion, especially concerning resistance to change, in different interpretations of the conative component. We need to understand that attitudes are a psychological phenomenon and higher-order classes of response to stimuli that

cannot be observed directly. Thus, Breckler (1984) sees overt actions as expressions of the behavioral dimension. Behavior in a sense of action or intentional inaction was often the only dimension in earlier stages of resistance to change definitions, as our review reveals.

However, intentions, and attitudes in general, do not necessarily end in behavior consistent with them (Fazio & Olson, 2007). This brings us to the second important issue in need of attention in order to understand our focal concepts better – the attitude-behavior gap. Drawing from critiques of attitude-behavior consistency of the tripartite model and consistent with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985), behavioral intention does not always lead to actual behavior because the individual's control over the behavior is incomplete.

The third issue is the absence of agreement on whether to omit the conative component (intentions) from conceptualizations of an attitude altogether. Because the findings of the existence of the conative dimension are mixed (some advocates of the multidimensional view find evidence of only affective and cognitive dimensions in an attitude structure and some find all three), Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 13) in their review of the literature on the tripartite model conclude that “evidence supports the empirical separability of three classes of evaluative responses under some but certainly not all circumstances.”

Based on our discussion, we propose behavior should be excluded from conceptualizations of change readiness and resistance to change that are defined in attitudinal terms, and should be seen as their possible outcome. Furthermore, we call for an agreement on the entailment of the conative component in attitudes that should be followed in both concepts consistently. The gap regarding the conative component is clearly visible in the operationalization of the concepts.

The constitutive definition of change readiness does not entail intentions or behavior. To comprise the concept of individual change readiness at lower levels of abstraction, Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993) proposed two factors that change agents need to cover through communication: (a) *discrepancy* between the desired state and the current state the employees need to realize (i.e., the need for change), and (b) *self-efficacy* (i.e., perceived ability of individuals and collective to change). Later, other factors were added, and today, the most popular and frequently used manner to operationalize change readiness at the individual level features the five dimensions by Holt and colleagues (2007). These include additional questions of (c) the *appropriateness* of the proposed change for addressing the discrepancy; (d) *principal support* being the degree to which organizational leaders support the change; and (e) *personal valence* (e.g., Is the change beneficial for the individual?). Finding positive answers to these questions will form an attitude of change readiness. This operationalization is referred to in the literature as “the message” and shows how salient cognition or individuals' beliefs are in the conceptualization of readiness.

On the other hand, the operationalization of individual resistance to change includes all three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and conative. Oreg (2006) followed Piderit's (1999) work and designed the Change Attitude Scale based on a conceptualization of resistance to change as a multidimensional, which previous studies did not consider (Oreg, 2006). The items measuring affect question (positive and negative) feelings one has toward a specific change. The cognitive dimension involves items about the employees' evaluations of the worthiness and potential benefit of the change. The last, conative dimension (also called *behavioral* and *intentional* in Oreg's [2006] in Piderit's [1999] nomenclature, respectively) addresses intentions to act and actions against the change (Oreg, 2006). At this point, we need to mention the Resistance to Change Scale (Oreg, 2003) that has been widely used and accepted the operationalization of change resistance. This instrument was designed to measure an individual's dispositional resistance to change. It includes items measuring emotional reactions to imposed change, routine seeking, and cognitive rigidity. As such, it can be understood as an antecedent to a change-resistant attitude (Oreg, 2006) and must not be confused with change resistance conceptualized as an attitude.

### 3.1 The coexistence of change readiness and resistance to change

An important underlying assumption of the tripartite model is the consistency of all dimensions of an attitude because they are part of the same underlying construct experienced by an individual. However, besides the attitude-behavior consistency, this is one of the significant critiques of the tripartite model because numerous studies show the existence of inconsistencies (Fazio & Olson, 2007). With new research advocating a reconceptualization of individual responses to change as multidimensional attitudes, it is becoming clear that attitude toward change is not all black-and-white. One can foster a positive attitude toward change, yet at the same time resist it. In other words, resistance to change and change readiness can coexist.

Individual's "simultaneously oppositional positive and negative orientations toward an object" including cognition ("I think about X") and/or affect ("I feel about X") is defined as ambivalent (Ashforth et al., 2014, p. 1455) and is perhaps the most prevalent type of response toward change that has been ignored for a long time (Piderit, 2000).

### 3.2 Using time to improve understanding of the concepts

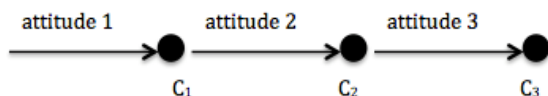
It is important to note that change readiness and resistance to change are, as attitudes, situational and time sensitive. If the situation or the context within which change occurs changes, attitudes can change as well.

Referring to change readiness, Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993, p. 700) noted that "the creation of readiness is not necessarily a pre-change concern only." They posited readiness should be maintained throughout the duration of the change process because

change is composed of smaller, ongoing changes and thus initial change readiness will not suffice.

We illustrate this in Figure 2 and add that the focal change stays the same, however, with each new piece of information from the external or individual's internal environment (the changing of the context) becoming available, the focal change subjectively changes for the individual, and thus the attitude toward it can change, too. The issue of time and context changes that it brings is especially significant to our discussion of change-related attitudes, since attitudes form before change takes action. For the formation of an attitude toward future events that we can never possess complete information on, every new piece of information we obtain can importantly change our attitude. Thus, we can see change readiness and resistance to change must be seen as fluid.

Figure 2: *The role of time and change of context in attitude change*



Note. C1 means change 1, C2 change 2, and C3 change 3. We are talking about the same change (e.g., a merger), however, as the context changes, the change is not the same for the individual anymore because with time new information that changes the context of the change is obtained.

Stevens (2013) offered clarification of change readiness by applying stages of change. Drawing on Lewin's three-stage model of unfreeze–change–refreeze, there is a consensus that change readiness applies to the phase of unfreezing and “equates to the preparation stage” (Holt & Vardaman, 2013). However, as Stevens (2013) noted when applying it to the phases of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983), it is not clear where to apply it. Thus, he proposed conceptualizing change readiness as a process referring to the transitions between the phases of precontemplation to contemplation and contemplation to preparation, reflecting the shifts in an individual's decisional balance rather than positioning it in a particular phase. We propose this approach could be applied to resistance to change as well.

### 3.3 Confusion with similar concepts

While the majority of definitions of change readiness draw on Armenakis, Harris, and Mossholder (1993), some definitions are closer to other concepts and some even contain them in the definitions of readiness, such as change commitment (e.g., Weiner, 2009). For this reason, we review some of the concepts most often used in conjunction with change readiness or as its synonym in Table 3.

Table 3: *Concepts similar to change readiness*

| Construct            | Source   | Definition   |
|----------------------|--|--|
| Openness to change   | Miller, Johnson, & Grau (1994, p. 66)              | “Willingness to support organizational change and positive affect toward change.”  |
| Commitment to change | Herscovitch & Meyer (2002, p. 475)                 | “A force (mind-set) that binds an individual to a course of action deemed necessary for the successful implementation of a change initiative.”   |
| Coping with change   | Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis (1986, p. 572) | “A person's cognitive and intentional/ behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize or tolerate) the internal or external demands of the person-environment transaction when it is appraised as taxing or exceeding a person's resources.” |

The confusion can be partly resolved by considering the stages of change. Readiness, in comparison to commitment, refers to the stages prior to the action stage, while commitment is in Armenakis, Harris, and Feild's (1999) view typical of Lewin's freezing stage. However, it may apply to any of the change stages, and thus in the earlier stages of the change process these two concepts can indeed be indistinguishable, since they are both described as precursors to change-supportive behaviors (Armenakis & Harris, 2009) and entail cognitive and affective dimensions (Herscovitch & Meyer [2002] suggest the force might also be classified as affective).

Some authors distinguish openness from readiness, saying it is a prior condition to it (Wanberg & Banas, 2000), while others (e.g., Herold, Fedor, & Caldwell, 2007) treat the two concepts as nearly synonyms. Since openness does not entail the intentional component, the similarity of the two depends upon whether we include intentions into conceptualization of readiness (Stevens, 2013). Thus in the early stages when it is not clear what type of behaviors will change require to form intentions readiness may indeed take the form of openness (Stevens, 2013).

Coping with change differs from change readiness by involving behavioral effort to manage change. Moreover, it implies change is already occurring, as opposed to readiness that happens before change occurs.

The problem of differentiating between similar concepts deriving from stages of change is not that salient with resistance to change. An issue that seemingly needs to be clarified is activation. Coetsee (1999) places resistance on a continuum of intensity ranging from apathy (i.e., indifference) to aggression (i.e., destructive opposition), positing that

resistance can be passive when forms of opposition are weak, expressed for example by voicing opposition, or active when blocking or impeding change. We agree with Coetsee (1999) that a more nuanced approach is needed. However, we share the views building on Lewin's (1947) and other behavior-oriented conceptualizations, as well as affect-focused conceptualizations describing change resistance with core affects high in activation (e.g., Oreg et al., 2018), implying resistance to be high in activation.

Change readiness or resistance happens when individuals foster psychological attachment to change. Change entails psychological involvement for them and triggers psychological arousal (Baek, 2010). The psychological arousal can be in a form of cognition or affect. Arousal of cognition and activation of an individual's cognitive resources show through answering questions, such as "Is the change needed? Am I capable of change? Is the change beneficial for me?" and others explained in Section 3. In other words, we speak of change resistance and change readiness when employees care for the change. In terms of affect, emotions high in activation are felt, such as excitement, fear, or anger (Oreg et al., 2018). Coghlan (1993) for example describes resistance as a dynamic energy and emphasizes it is not passive.

We posit other concepts are more appropriate for capturing low levels of psychological activation, such as disengagement (Oreg et al., 2018) or indifference, as mentioned by Coetsee (1999) himself. Jermier, Knights, and Nord (1994, p. 9) observe that seeing resistance as "a reactive process where agents embedded in power relations *actively* oppose initiatives by other agents" is the most prevalent view in the literature and this is also the view advocated in our paper as the most appropriate. We present the concepts of psychological disengagement and indifference, together with another concept similar to resistance to change – change cynicism in Table 4.

Table 4: *Concepts similar to resistance to change*

| Construct                            | Source                                    | Definition  |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Psychological (change) disengagement | Major et al. (1998, p. 35)                | "A defensive detachment of self-esteem from outcomes in a particular domain, such that feelings of self-worth are not dependent on successes or failures in that domain."                           |
| Indifference                         | Ben-Ze'ev (2000)                          | Perceiving something as unimportant, thus feeling no emotion in response.   |
| Change cynicism                      | Wanous, Reichers, & Austin (2000, p. 135) | "A construct that has two elements: a pessimistic outlook for successful change and blame placed on "those responsible" for lacking the motivation and/or the ability to effect successful change." |

Cynicism about change can be found on the negative side of attitudes toward change. Bommer, Rich, and Rubin (2005) see it as a complex attitude comprised of cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. However, as Reichers, Wanous, and Austin (1997) observe, cynicism does not necessarily result in change-resistant behaviors, which is compliant with our discussion on the behavioral component of attitude in Section 3. Cynicism is distinct from resistance in that it arises from a loss of faith in change leaders and the history of unsuccessful change attempts, whereas resistance as a negative attitude toward change is based on self-interest, misunderstanding, or inherently limited tolerance for change (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). Thus, being cynical about change will not aim to seek answers to questions such as “Is change needed and beneficial for me?” because a cynic fosters feelings of distrust or unfairness toward those responsible for change (Bommer, Rich, & Rubin, 2005).

#### 4 DISCUSSION

Armenakis et al. (1993) tried to differentiate the concept of change readiness from resistance to change, however, they were not as successful in resolving the confusion as in preventing further calls for clarifications after their publication (e.g., Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Their differentiation draws on the majority of past definitions of resistance to change defining the concept in behavioral terms. Armenakis et al. (1993, p. 681) differentiate readiness from resistance by defining change readiness as “a cognitive precursor to the behaviors”. They leave resistance to change conceptualized as behavior solely. In their view, the behavior could be of either support for change or resistance towards change, despite the term “resistance” being usually associated with a negative orientation toward change. Similarly, their view allows for assigning the possible negative valence to the change readiness attitude, meaning a sort of change readiness (i.e., negative change readiness) could be a precursor to the change resistance (the behavior). However, what seemed a clear differentiation between the two focal concepts opens new questions, one of them being “What was their basis for defining resistance as behavior?”, while the cognitive component is present in some definitions and literature preceding their paper (e.g., Argyris, 1985), as revealed in our review.

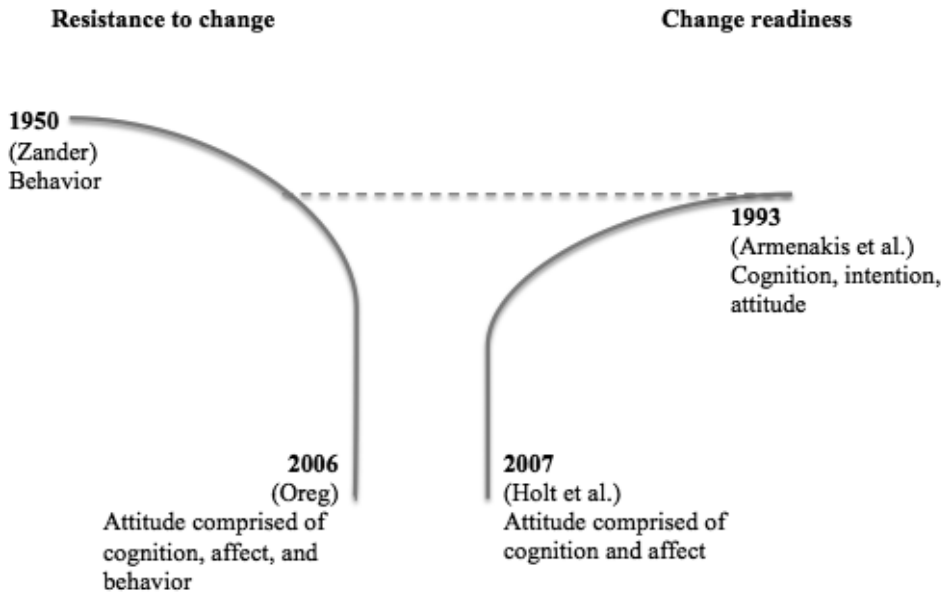
Based on our review and discussion in Section 3, we claim that the ambiguity and therefore calls for clarifications were justified. Resistance to change cannot simply be conceptualized as behavior, as Armenakis et al. (1993) proposed. The two concepts share attitudinal roots. When we speak of resistance to change as behavior (as the majority of early definitions do), we know today that we should be speaking of a different concept. We are witnessing a polysemy, meaning using the same phrase (resistance to change) to denote two different meanings and thus two concepts: (a) resistance to change: the attitude, and (b) resistance to change: the behavior. However, back in 1950, when Zander defined resistance to change, behaviors were assumed to be visual expressions of attitudes – the directly unobservable psychological phenomena.



Figure 3 illustrates our understanding of how the two concepts grew more together through their evolution. According to clarification, our proposal for resistance to change as a behavior should be seen as a separate concept from resistance to change as an attitude, we could assume the resistance to change “curve” presents two different concepts. But knowing the background and the development of attitude-behavior consistency literature, it becomes clear it depicts the evolution of one concept.

Nowadays, resistance to change and change readiness are conceptualized as attitudes. However, due to the different evolutions of our focal concepts, and the issues raised in Section 3, the conative or behavioral component is still present in the operationalization of resistance to change but not in the operationalization of change readiness.

Figure 3: *The evolution of resistance to change and change readiness conceptualization*



As for their use, resistance to change nowadays is still operationalized in research in different ways. While the majority of research acknowledges the multidimensionality of the concept and uses Oreg’s (2006) definition (e.g., Rafferty & Jimmieson, 2017; Moutousi & May, 2018), some authors still use it exclusively in behavioral terms (e.g., Furst & Cable, 2008), and do not recognize it as an attitude. Change readiness, on the other hand, is consistently used as an attitude. Its possible consequent behavior is discussed as change-supportive behavior.

We conclude that the concepts do represent the opposite poles of a continuum. They share the core property of being attitudes, readiness being the positive, and resistance the negative orientation toward change. However, both concepts should be operationalized along the same dimensions to enable complete alignment. Thus, we call for a unified approach to the operationalization of both concepts to facilitate commensurability. More specifically, we suggest that an agreement on the entailment of intentions in the conceptualization of an attitude should be reached and consistently implemented into both concepts. Furthermore, the behavior should be excluded from the resistance to change concept, and change-resistant or change-supportive behaviors seen as possible outcomes of resistance to change and change readiness, respectively.

To ensure commensurability, an important property of the concepts, as well as their similarity by involving activity and not passivity of change recipients, is deriving from psychological attachment to a specific change. With activity we refer to a form of psychological arousal, the activation of recipients' cognitive resources and/or emotions. In other words, employees will experience resistance or readiness when they care for the change, and the criterion of activation importantly separates them from other change-related attitudes.

Another criterion that we propose to help clarify the two concepts is the role of time and change context. Resistance to change and change readiness concern the pre-change phase, however, as attitudes they are situational and are as such ongoing processes. As the context changes constantly with time, the attitude can change as well and should not be treated as a pre-change concern only because every change is composed of many other smaller changes. In line with this finding, the two concepts should be seen as continuous and measured accordingly.

The situational property of change attitudes should not be lost or the terms confused with trait-like concepts. Resistance especially, is often seen as a psychological disposition of individuals and has been measured in many studies, using Oreg's (2003) Resistance to Change Scale. An individual's dispositional inclination to resist change is a possible source or antecedent of a change-resistant attitude. The same could be applied to readiness.

Despite the finding that change readiness and resistance to change can be put on a bipolar continuum, the question is, should they be. Change is one of the major triggers of ambivalence (Piderit, 1999), and an individual can simultaneously hold positive and negative orientations toward change. Moving beyond the seminal work of Thurstone (1928), who saw attitudes on a bipolar continuum ranging from positive to negative, with a neutral point in the middle, we draw on social psychologists' work (e.g., Kaplan, 1972; Breckler, 1994) to suggest that a more nuanced approach is needed by separating the positive and negative components of an attitude and placing them in a two-dimensional space. According to the traditional bipolar attitude approach, individuals who have mixed feelings, as well as the ones who are indifferent, would report the same neutral attitude

(Baek, 2010). We note that change readiness and resistance indeed can and should be looked at in conjunction, however, not in the sense of a bipolar continuum but rather as simultaneously present orthogonal concepts, as depicted in Figure 4. Within the spectrum of attitudes, which arises from the orthogonality of the two concepts, there are many nuances of attitudes that need to be further researched in the future.

Figure 4: *Resistance to change and change readiness: From bipolar to orthogonal concepts*



With our review, we contribute to the clarification of the change readiness and resistance to change concepts. Our findings bear insights for future research on the integration of the two concepts. Moreover, we see our results as building blocks to help align and integrate existing measures or develop new ones. Drawing from our clarification of the focal properties of the concepts, we propose a new measurement instrument should be developed in the future that would improve the validity of resistance to change and change readiness and better reflect the realities of change-related attitudes.

In Table 5, we summarize the proposed building blocks for a potential new measurement instrument.

Table 5: *Building blocks for a potential new measurement instrument*

| Building block                               | Description   |
|--|---|
| Catching ambivalence and attitudinal nuances | The new measurement instrument should be able to measure resistance to change and change readiness simultaneously (i.e., as orthogonal concepts) to be able to capture the realities of change-related attitudes that are often ambivalent.   |
| Aligning the attitude components             | An agreement on the entailment of the conative component in the conceptualization of an attitude should be achieved and followed in both focal concepts consistently. This would facilitate the commensurability of change readiness and resistance to change and establish the condition to treat the two concepts as orthogonal to one another. |

| Building block  | Description   |
|---|---|
| Separation of the behavioral dimension from conceptualization of resistance to change | Behavior should be excluded from the resistance to change concept and seen as a possible outcome (change-resistant behavior) of the attitude. This would also establish a condition for orthogonality of the concepts.  |
| Psychological activation  | We speak of resistance to change and change readiness when change triggers psychological (cognitive and/or emotional) arousal and an individual cares for the change. Activation in a sense of behavior is a possible outcome of the focal concepts.            |
| Continuance of measurement  | Despite concerning the pre-change phase, resistance to change and change readiness are situational, and should be understood and measured as an ongoing process, as the context changes constantly with time. One-time pre-change measurement will not suffice. |

Based on Holt and Vardaman's (2013) definition of change readiness, which entails the capability of executing change, and following the ordinary meaning of the term *readiness* (i.e., to be fully prepared for something; *New Oxford American Dictionary*), we find another interesting avenue for future research and conceptualization of change readiness. A question appears of whether the self-perceived capability (self-efficacy) captured in existing definitions of change readiness should be expanded to capability in more objective terms as well. Drawing on the plain readiness definition, Weiner (2009) noted that change readiness means being willing and able to change. The issue of actual ability should receive attention in future research, especially because change readiness is used as a tool by practitioners to predict the success of future change implementations. By expanding the definition in such a way, we would radically redefine change readiness, making it more than an attitude and moving it away from the concept of resistance to change. An alternative would be to define a new concept that entails both, readiness and ability.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In our paper, we juxtaposed the concepts of resistance to change and change readiness, and reviewed their evolution through time. This allowed us to explore the sources of ambiguity in their conceptualizations that is still present in the literature today. The originality of our approach stems from the simultaneous review of resistance to change and change readiness.

Examining the two concepts simultaneously is important for two reasons. First, change readiness has been in prior literature assumed as the opposite pole of resistance. To validate this assumption, we should first explore common grounds for comparing both concepts. A major finding of our study suggests that the two concepts can be compared because they share being an attitude. Moreover, they both include activation of an individual's cognitive

resources and/or emotions and are thus not passive attitudes. Drawing from this evidence, we confirm that the two concepts can be treated as opposite poles of each other.

However, the attitudes toward change should not be put on a bipolar continuum. Theorists and practitioners alike should realize change is one of the major triggers of ambivalence (Piderit, 1999), and the orientations of attitude dimensions will not always be aligned. We suggest that future researchers pay more attention to understand the spectrum of ambivalence toward change given that an individual's attitude toward change is rarely bipolar. We advocate that a more nuanced categorization of attitudes toward change is needed in the future and propose more precision and richness should be added by combining the orientation toward change (positive or negative) with the level of activation (activation of positivity and/or negativity that arises from the psychological attachment to change) and by acknowledging multiple dimensions of an attitude that will not always be aligned in terms of orientation toward change.

Last but not least, our study does not come without limitations. It is a qualitative review of the concepts of change readiness and resistance to change that was driven by a goal to clarify them to be able to understand them better and answer the question of whether or not they are representing opposite poles of the same continuum. A combination with a quantitative review of the concepts in terms of bibliometric analyses might reveal some interesting additional insights. We present only a brief quantitative review of the number of publications to show the popularity of the concepts through time.

Second, as a result of our review, we propose some building blocks for a potential new measurement instrument. We do discuss the existing operationalization of the concepts, however, with a more thorough review of the measures of both concepts we would be able to better examine the downsides of the existing measures and provide more practical suggestions to improve future measures of our focal concepts.

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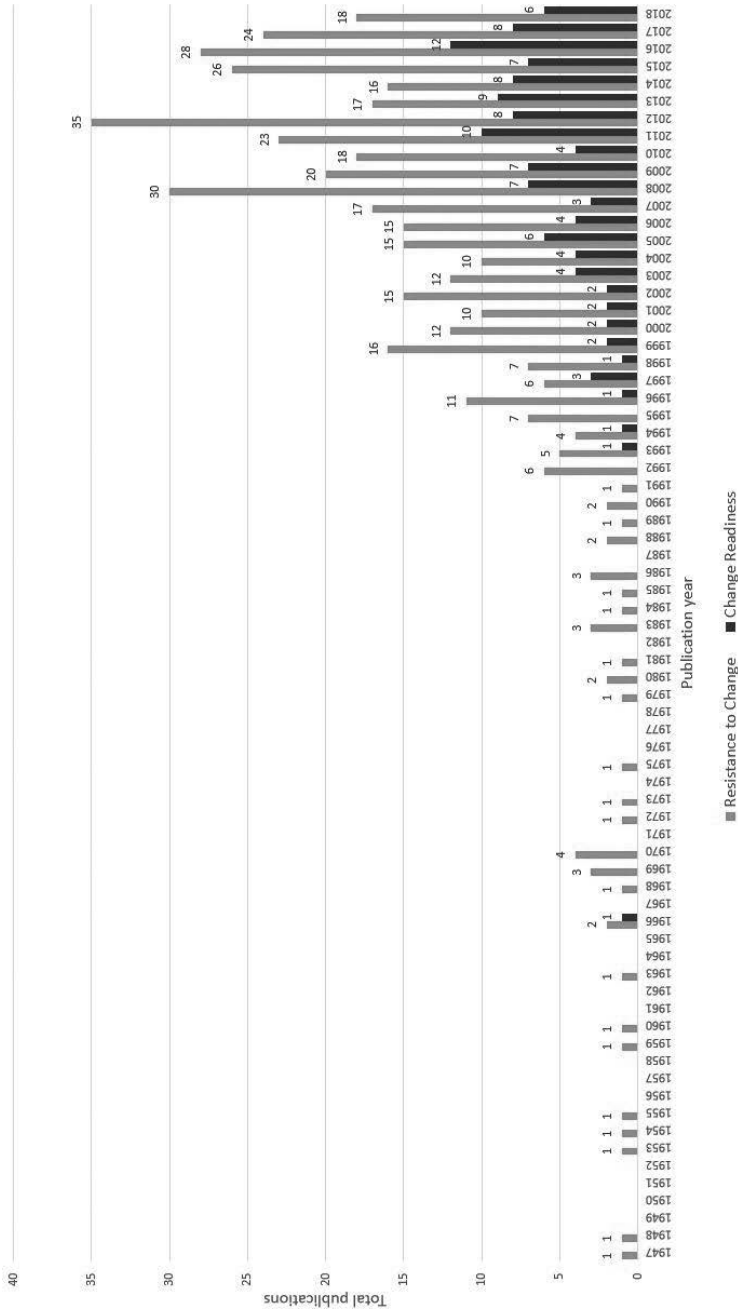
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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Total publications per year on resistance to change and change readiness



NOTE. The figure was produced based on the Social Sciences Citation Index edition of the Web of Science Core Collection database. Document types “article,” “review,” “proceedings paper,” and “book chapter,” in English and from 1900 to 2018 (June), were included. We have searched the database for works with the words “change readiness” or “readiness for change” in their abstracts, titles, or keywords for the first concept of our interest, and “change resistance” or “resistance to change” or “resistance toward\* change” for the second. The search was undertaken using the Web of Science categories “Management,” “Psychology Applied,” “Psychology Multidisciplinary,” “Psychology,” “Business,” “Social Sciences Interdisciplinary,” “Psychology Social,” and “Behavioral Sciences.”