My research examines how interpretive processes contribute to understanding change. Interpretive processes explain how individuals and collectives make meaning to help them, and influence how others, understand change. My research on interpretive processes during change makes three key contributions to organization theory. First, I develop and test the micro-foundations of change. I describe a mechanism by which change occurs through interpretations which enable and constrain corresponding actions. Second, I reveal different ways in which individuals exercise agency during change. Third, I rely on language use to explain several change processes. My research contributes to practice by showing how managing the meaning of change can improve change implementation.

I research interpretive processes and change in three domains: social change, organizational change and individual change.

**Research on Interpretation and Social Change**

This work focuses on how sensemaking and sensegiving (as forms of interpretive processes) affect individuals’ advocacy and responses to social change. In “Crafting Social Issues at Work” (forthcoming, *Academy of Management Journal*), I develop and test theory about how individuals use language to shape how others understand social issues. I find that individuals craft social issues by increasing their economic language and decreasing their normative language. This work illustrates how change initiatives often start from the actions of individuals who use language to convince others about the importance of an issue. In “The Role of Construction, Intuition and Justification in Responding to Ethical Issues at Work: The Sensemaking-Intuition Model” (forthcoming, *Academy of Management Review*), I develop a conceptual model for how individuals resolve social and ethical issues. I challenge “rationalist” decision-making models, and instead posit an interpretive model in which individuals intuitively react to issues and then use sensemaking to justify and explain their reactions. This work shows the importance of how individuals interpret issues prior to responding to them, and proposes that post-hoc explanations mask the underlying intuitive processes that affect how issues are actually resolved. I have also explored the interpretive foundations of normative models of social change (“Business Ethics and Internal Social Criticism”, 2005, *Business Ethics Quarterly*). I contrast traditional models of business ethics based on the application of moral principles with an interpretive model in which actors debate the meanings of shared traditions to locate latent ethical principles necessary for social change. Together with Gretchen Spreitzer, I have also explored social change through the lens of “positive deviance” (“Toward a Construct Definition of Positive Deviance”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004 and “Positive Deviance and Extraordinary Organizing,” 2003 in Cameron et al.’s *Positive Organizational Scholarship*). This research illustrates how positive deviants institute social change through departing from norms, and together with other work I have done (“Positive Organizational Scholarship,” in Werhane and Freeman’s *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Management*), helps integrate the disparate fields of business ethics and organizational behavior.

**Research on Interpretation and Organizational Change**

In my dissertation, I employ a multi-level (individual and unit), multi-method (surveys, archival analyses and interviews) approach to studying a real-time strategic change process at a Fortune 500 retailer. This research contributes to organization theory by illustrating micro-processes of strategic change implementation based on interpretations. It also proposes mechanisms that show how change gets produced endogenously and broadens understanding of the role of employees beyond
change resistance. My dissertation also connects interpretive processes to change implementation outcomes.

In study one, I demonstrate how strategic change gets constructed as a series of interdependent narratives told and enacted by managers and employees. Much of the research on strategic change examines macro-level changes in an organization’s strategy without explaining how internal actions generated these changes. In contrast, I develop theory about strategic change implementation as evolving from employees’ and managers’ narratives and their subsequent enactment. This calls attention to an interpretive mechanism as managers and employees make meaning and take corresponding actions to implement change. By unpacking this interpretive mechanism, I find, contra traditional accounts, that strategic change does not unfold as a rational and linear process but rather involves a serpentine path. Both managers’ and employees’ narratives reflect struggles to make meaning under conditions of uncertainty, uncertainty often created by each other’s narratives.

In study two, I examine the relationship between meaning-making and change implementation behaviors. Formal and informal communications influence how employees (cognitively and affectively) make meaning of change, and this meaning-making creates three psychological resources: commitment to change, perceived change efficacy and unit identification. These resources, in turn, fuel employees to implement change. I challenge uncertainty reduction approaches and develop theory about motivated behavior during change implementation. I test my theory using content analysis and survey data within a structural equation modeling framework.

In study three, I approach strategic change implementation at the unit-level and investigate how variation in convergent meaning explains unit-level change implementation performance. This study also helps adjudicate between theories such as sensemaking and symbolic management which offer competing perspectives on the role of shared meaning in explaining organizational processes and performance.

Research on Interpretation and Individual Change

My work on individual change focuses on how employees narrate their changing developmental paths at work as part of the self-adaptation process (with Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton and Grant; “A Socially Embedded Model of Thriving at Work,” 2005, Organization Science). My empirical work finds that individuals narrate their growth at work through a set of rationalist concepts (such as achievement and learning) and affective concepts (such as energy and relationships) (“Narrating Growth at Work: Rationalist and Socio-Emotional Logics of Development”, with Grant, Dutton, Spreitzer and Sutcliffe, revision requested by the Academy of Management Journal). This research illustrates how individuals use stories to gauge their work experiences and make sense of their development.

Future research

My next research projects will consider the relationship between social and organizational change. Organizations are increasingly being called upon to serve their shareholders and the public good. Attending to these sometimes conflicting needs requires constructing more complicated interpretations of change. Accordingly, I will examine when and how organizations develop interpretive capabilities to address a change that affects multiple stakeholder groups. Interpretive capabilities enable individuals and collectives to make sense of the conflicts inherent in certain types of change and construct plausible responses. This work will contribute to organization theory by showing how organizations respond to complex types of change that may help some but harm others, and will guide practice by demonstrating how the construction of interpretations about change is a competency that organizations can develop.