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OD or Not OD that is the Question! A Constructivist's Reflections

on the Changing Nature of Change

ABSTRACT

The landscape of Organization Development (OD) has changed significantly over the last several decades. This paper provides a broad commentary on these changes. In particular, it offers a critique of 'current OD' in terms of the marginalization of materiality in discourse-based OD techniques and the neglect of problem-centred, diagnostic approaches in favour of solution-driven, emergent approaches. The future of OD is also explored in relation to the scope for meaningful 'bottom-up OD' (i.e. employee-instigated change) and 'outside-in OD' (i.e. involving a range of non-organizational stakeholders).

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Introduction

The great thing about doing a 'reflections piece' for *JCM* is that it provides an opportunity to ponder over some aspect or aspects of the past and to consider future developments and directions. Moreover, it also provides an opportunity to be polemic and engage in a wide ranging, provocative and somewhat speculative mode of exposition and argument that is not generally possible in more traditional and conventional forms of journal article. To this end, this contribution presents some personal, albeit probably biased, thoughts on how the field of OD (organization development) has evolved and changed over the past two to three decades. These reflections represent a distillation of 25 years of direct experience of teaching OD, undertaking change-related consultancy projects, and a variety of research-based activities. In keeping with my constructivist credentials, the propositions and assertions offered here should be viewed as an interpretation of reality rather than a factual account of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 1999). And, as such, the intention is to provide a basis for further discussion and debate about OD rather than to lay claim to any authoritative or definitive insights into the field.

I will concentrate on several key issues in this piece. More specifically, I want to consider the changing landscape of OD with regard to: intervention foci, temporal orientation, power relations and forms of control, and organisational boundaries. These themes form the basis of the four subsequent main sections. Following this, the implications of these developments will be considered and some tentative comments regarding future directions will be made.

<u>Shifting Foci: From the Tangible to the Intangible</u>

Traditional forms of OD continue to dominate in the world of work and they also continue to dominate the academic curriculum (see for example: Brown, 2010; Cheung-Judge, and Holbeche, 2011; Jackson, 2006). However, over the past couple of decades social constructivist perspectives on organisational change have gained considerable traction and the extant literature on OD as a predominantly discursive process has grown (see for example: Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990; Barrett, Thomas and Hocevar, 1995; Ford, 1999; Ford and Ford, 1995; Grant, Michelson, Oswick and Wailes, 2005; Heracleous, 2006; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Marshak, 2009; Shaw, 2002; Woodman, 2008). This transition from more positivist and materialist accounts of change to interpretive and constructionist ones has typically been characterised by advocates as an evolutionary process involving a shift from 'old OD' to 'new OD' (see for example: Cox, 2005; Marshak, 2009; Marshak and Grant, 2008; Mirvis, 2006; Oswick, Grant, Marshak, and Wolfram-Cox, 2010; Oswick, Grant, Michelson and Wailes, 2005; Oswick and Marshak, 2012).

Somewhat inevitably, the advent of discursive approaches to OD has signalled a general movement from more concrete and tangible forms of change activity and towards more abstract and less tangible formulations (Oswick, 2009; Wolfram-Cox, 2009). This is apparent in Bushe and Marshak's (2009) exposition on the difference between traditional 'diagnostic OD' and emerging forms of 'dialogic OD'. They suggest that 'diagnostic OD' is a bounded and discrete process which embraces a positivist epistemology that, through gathering valid data, reveals clearly defined problems and provides logical solutions (or interventions). When viewed in this way change is a rational, linear, contained and 'knowable' process where reality is objective (i.e. the foci of change are relatively concrete and tangible). By contrast, 'dialogic OD' is a far more emergent and hazy process where

"reality is social constructed and negotiated" (Bushe and Marshak, 2009:357) and, as such, change is a far more ambiguous and intangible endeavour.

In effect, Bushe and Marshak (2009) offer a macro-conceptual take on the changing nature of OD by concentrating on what they describe as alternative premises and patterns of practice. If we drill down and look at specific forms of OD intervention there also appears to be a discernible shift from tangible to less tangible phenomena. In the 70's and early 80's 'structural interventions' (Lawrence and Lorsch, 1969) and 'job design' (Hackman and Oldham, 1980) were prevalent. These interventions encompassed an inherently materialist orientation insofar as they engaged with relatively concrete phenomena (i.e. formal reporting lines and the physical organization of work tasks). Through the 80's and 90's there was an emphasis upon teamworking (Chaudhry-Lawton, Lawton, Murphy and Terry, 1992; Kaye, 1994: Larson and LaFasto, 1989) and empowerment (see for example: Byham, 1988; Crosby, 1992; Scott and Jaffe, 1991; Vogt and Murrell, 1990). These popular areas of organizational change represented an extension of the earlier structural and task interventions by promoting increased levels of responsibility and discretion through the introduction of semi-autonomous work groups (Carnall, 1982). Effectively foregrounding changes in roles (e.g. team roles) and work activities (workgroup activities) perpetuated the enactment of organizational intervention through a focus on relatively 'hard' and concrete phenomena.

From the 90's onwards we have witnessed a transition to more constructivist and discursively-oriented modes of OD. This is apparent in approaches such as 'World cafe' (Brown and Isaacs, 1995) and 'participative design' (Purser, 1998) which privilege interaction and the co-construction of insight via structured and purposeful conversations with groups of organizational stakeholders. Beyond this, and by far the most significant OD approach to come to prominence in the 1990's was 'appreciative inquiry' (AI) (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). AI is inherently discursive in nature insofar as it is explicitly founded

upon interaction-based appreciative reflection around "what is" and envisioning and dialoguing "what might be" and "what should be" (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). The subsequent refinement and development of AI has continued to foreground constructivist principles (see for example: Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney and Yeager, 2001; Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2008) and it has stimulated the development of further AI-related, contructivist OD approaches, such as 'appreciative storytelling' (Ludema, 2002) and 'dialogical scripting' (Oswick, Anthony, Keenoy, Mangham and Grant, 2000).

The transition from tangible to intangible forms of OD arguably resonates with wider philosophical and cultural shifts in the arts and sciences from positivism and modernism to interpretivism and postmodernism (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). It also reflects the advent of the linguistic turn and a concomitant growing interest in the study of discourse (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Phillips and Oswick, 2012). Although the development of constructivist perspectives in OD may be a good thing, the contemporary dominance of these approaches is problematic in two ways. First, OD approaches that are 'harder' and more tangible have been marginalised. This is apparent in the paucity of task-based and structural interventions being undertaken. Clearly organisations continue to engage in processes of re-structuring - such as outsourcing and downsizing – but these types are initiative are driven primarily by the imperative of cutting cost rather than behavioural science considerations around effective ways of organizing. Similarly, job re-design activities are still undertaken, but are typically driven by the need to implement new forms technology to enhance efficiency rather than more traditional OD-based activities which started with a concern for the psychological and social needs of employees. Hence, many contemporary tangible ways of re-organizing work are concerned with changes in work practices which have an 'economic' rather than a 'behavioural science' focus and are therefore outside of what we might regard as constituting forms of OD intervention.

Second, the development of 'softer', less intangible forms of OD has, at least to a certain extent, been at the expense of the meaningful consideration of the material conditions and material outcomes that are inextricably linked to the newer forms of discursive intervention (e.g. dialogic OD, World cafe, AI and so on). The concern here is that the relatively tangible and concrete elements of discursively-oriented OD activities get downplayed. So, for instance, there is a danger that the physical layout of the concurrent and co-located meeting spaces in a 'World cafe OD initiative' might not be considered as fully as the actual processes of interaction and facilitation. In effect, the risk is that the 'material context' can be overpowered and overshadowed by the 'discursive content'. Moreover, the outcomes of discursive forms of OD can have significant material implications. For example, the process that follows the appreciation and amplification of good practice in AI (which is constituted through discursive activity) is a phase of implementation (i.e. embedding 'the good' and 'the best' in other parts of the organization). The process of implementation has direct and explicit material consequences insofar as it inevitably involves changes to procedures, structures, locations, roles and activities. Similar to the concern raised above regarding the subordination of 'material context', the risk here is that 'tangible, material outcomes' are overlooked or underplayed in favour of a preoccupation with, or predisposition towards, 'intangible, discursive content'.

Shifting Temporality: From Looking Back to Facing Forwards

Classical forms of OD follow a well established rubric inasmuch as the key stages are 'data gathering', 'diagnosis' and 'intervention' (Beckhard, 1969; Bennis, 1969; Brown, 2010). Typically, the process of data gathering involves uncovering problems and identifying underlying areas of causation. A focus on problems and causes is somewhat inevitably a retrospective endeavour. It involves looking backwards in a quasi-forensic way to consider what happened (or did not happen) that had a detrimental impact and/or lead to a negative (or

suboptimal) outcome. In this regard, traditional forms of OD are largely reflective (i.e. they privilege the consideration of the past from the perspective of the present).

By contrast, more recent forms of OD are more projective in nature (i.e. they privilege the consideration of the future from the perspective of the present). This is exemplified in the core tenets of AI: (i) appreciating and valuing the best of "what is"; (ii) envisioning "what might be"; (iii) dialoguing "what should be"; and, (iv) innovating "what will be" (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2001). Arguably, the first stage of "what is" is very much located in the present, while the subsequent three stages (i.e. "what might be", "what should be" and "what will be") are all concerned with the future. Similarly, other forms of large-scale intervention – such as 'future search' (Weisbord ,1987; Weisbord and Janoff, 1995) and 'simu-real' (Klein and Broom, 1995) - focus on addressing the future from the perspective of the present. Indeed, the very name 'future search' (Weisbord, 1987) reveals the underlying temporal orientation of this form of OD intervention.

The temporal bifurcation of traditional and more recent forms of OD can be connected to the tangible/intangible issue discussed earlier. A concern with problems, symptoms and causes (i.e. looking backwards) encourages a quasi-scientific stance which treats a specific problem in an objective way (i.e. as bounded, knowable and relatively concrete) in order to provide a basis for targeted remedial action. Conversely, the future is about possibilities and opportunities and, precisely because the future is in the future, it is inherently subjective (i.e. hazy, ambiguous, unknown and relatively abstract). The future orientation of contemporary OD approaches is inextricably linked to their engagement with discourse and dialogue because it is through the real-time processes of meaning-making in large-scale groups that possible future scenarios and outcomes can be co-constructed and realized. It is for this reason that 'Future Search' is premised upon the idea of "getting the whole system in the room" (Weisbord, 1987:19).

'Forward facing' interventions are undoubtedly a valuable addition to the OD repertoire of techniques. However, one of the unfortunate consequences of this temporal turn is the unanticipated and unintended marginalisation and stifling of 'backward facing' forms of OD. This has arisen because of the associated 'metaphorical entailments' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Oswick, Keenoy and Grant, 2002) adversely affect perceptions in two ways. First, 'the past' is not as sexy and interesting as 'the future' and 'looking backwards' is seen as nostalgic, safe and even slightly sad compared to 'looking forwards' which is synonymous with vision, dynamism and being proactive. Second, 'problems' (which are reflective) have a negative connotation while 'solutions' (which are projective) have a positive connotation. As a result of these figurative attributions, future-oriented OD approaches are generally far more seductively appealing than their past-oriented counterparts. This is deeply problematic because the highly contingent nature of organizations and organizational situations means that there are likely to be circumstances where a problem-centred OD approach is particularly pertinent, but may be overlooked in favour of an alluring projectively-oriented, alternative.

Shifting Power and Control: From Top-down to Bottom-up

In a recent editorial piece appearing in the *Journal of Change Management*, By, Burnes and Oswick (2011) posed the question: "Who manages change?" (p. 2). They went on to suggest that: "Traditionally, the management of change has been something which has been undertaken by managers and consultants with employees and subordinates positioned as the recipients of change" (2011:2). Clearly, there are obvious and explicit power asymmetries associated with the processes of change management. In a similar vein, the hierarchical underpinnings of OD are evident in Beckhard's oft-cited definition of OD: "organisation development is an effort: (1) planned, (2) organization-wide, (3) managed from the top, (4) to increase organization effectiveness and health, through (5) planned interventions in the organization's processes using behavioral science knowledge" (1969:9). The key wording is

"managed from the top". There is an overt, 'top-down' logic in play here and it begs the question: Why do OD interventions need to be managed from the top? Why can't they be bottom-up?

When viewed through this alternative perspective, OD is less about the downward processes of instigating and implementing planned change and more to do with facilitating and accommodating upward processes of changes. This is fundamentally different to processes of 'employee participation' or 'employee involvement' (Hyman and Mason, 1995; Thomas, 1983) where the power still ultimately resides with management. Effectively, what Moon (2008) has referred to as "bottom-up instigated organization change" (p. 1) is premised on the idea that control over the process of change is handed over to employees (Morgan and Spicer, 2009; Spicer and Levay, 2012; Taptiklis, 2012).

Although not generally acknowledged as a form of OD intervention, bottom-up approaches are starting to emerge. They represent a challenge to traditional modes of hierarchical power and a recognition of the need to meaningfully consider the notion of 'employee voice' (Klaas, Olson-Buchanan and Ward, 2012; Morrison, 2011). Recent examples of these employee-driven forms of engagement with processes of organizational change include: 'employee activism' (Phillips, 2012); 'positive dissent' (Kassing, 2002; Mouffe, 2007), and; 'constructive deviance' (Warren, 2003; Robbins and Galperin, 2010).

Thus far, bottom-up forms of OD have not taken hold in organizations and this is probably because they undermine the managerial prerogative when it comes to change. Moreover, managers like to be in control and handing over control is psychologically threatening inasmuch as there is a false assumption that not being in control means they have no control and they are left in a vulnerable position (i.e. the misconception that if one is not powerful

one is powerless). It is far better to think of bottom-up changes approaches as a form of power-sharing rather than as simply relinquishing power in a zero sum way.

The moral imperative for embracing bottom-up forms of organizational change is compelling. Society has changed significantly over the past three decades and so too has the world of work. There is a real need to meaningfully engage employees in processes of planned change especially in terms of identifying and addressing areas of collective interest and benefit within organisations (e.g. sustainability, social responsibility, and inclusiveness).

Shifting Boundaries: Bringing the Outside In

To a certain extent, OD as an established field of inquiry has been quite parochial and inward looking. It has been suggested that: "There is no obvious reason why the focal point of change management should be limited to organizations" (By, Burnes and Oswick, 2011:3). This equally applies to OD. In his seminal contribution to the study of organizational behaviour (OB), *The Social Psychology of Organizing,* Karl Weick (1969) cautioned that research should meaningfully engage with the study of 'organizing' (i.e. as a process) and not simply concentrate on 'organizations' (the tangible entity). Weick's work has questioned the core focus of OB and drawn attention to the fact that organizing takes place in a variety of situations and not just in organizational settings (i.e. organizing can occur in school playgrounds, social gatherings, crowds of commuters, and so on). Given that OD is an applied area of the behavioural sciences, we might reasonably apply a similar logic. Hence, we might extend our gaze beyond a concern with the 'development of organizations' and consider the 'development of organizing'. When viewed in this way, the challenge becomes the improvement and enhancement of organizing processes rather than the organization per se. Moreover, it encourages us to take seriously the development and enhancement of organising processes in 'non-organizational settings'. A particularly apposite and fruitful

illustration of how this less organisationally-constrained orientation of OD could be operationalized would be to study the nature and effectiveness of organizing processes within social movements.

Thus far, we have concerned ourselves with how OD might extend outside of organizations, but we have not explored how we might productively bring the outside into OD. Traditionally, bringing the outside into organizations during the OD process has been very limited and has generally been restricted to two forms of activity. First, there is a fairly broad and relatively superficial consideration of the competitive environment in which the organization is located. This typically involves considering the environment as impacting on the need for change in a broad sense through a range of techniques, such as 'environmental scanning' and 'SWOT' analysis. Second, 'the outside is brought in' through the use of an external consultant(s) during the OD process.

Arguably, there are other meaningful ways in which 'organizational-insularity' in OD might be overcome. In particular, we might re-think the rather narrow conceptualization of stakeholders associated with most OD interventions (By, Burnes and Oswick, 2012). Beyond 'the usual suspects' (e.g. senior management, client representatives, internal and external consultants, and employees), there is a case for considering the potential for a wider spectrum of stakeholders to play a role in organizational change and OD (i.e. customers, activists, and the general public).

The burgeoning growth of social media and social networking has significantly impacted upon the decision-making of organizations. In a highly connected world the actions of organizations are subjected to considerable public scrutiny – especially with regard to issues of social responsibility, sustainability, and ethical work practices. It is however possible to reframe this source of potential problems and threat to organizations and view it as an

opportunity to improve organizational effectiveness and an invitation to enhance the change process. For example, rather than positioning social movements as inhibiting or impeding organizational goals (i.e. the enemy) it is possible to see these organized collectives as a source of insight and providing an opportunity for constructive dialogue which could enhance outcomes (i.e. as allies). Indeed, King and Soule (2007) have suggested that we should consider "social movements as extra-institutional entrepreneurs' (p. 413) and Den Hond and Bakker (2007) have highlighted the constructive contribution of social activists in assisting value-driven change in organizations.

In addition to social activists, there are other creative ways in which other less obvious groups of stakeholders could be enlisted in new and innovative forms of OD. For instance, if one thinks of the claims made regarding the 'wisdom of crowds' (Suroweicki, 2004) and the recent emergence of, and proliferation of interest in, 'crowdsourcing' (Howe, 2008; Afuah and Tucci, 2012), it is possible to imagine instances where external heterogeneous groups of stakeholders (i.e. crowds) could add value as an integral component of planned processes of organizational change. Equally, if we superimpose the logic of 'open source innovation' (Chesbrough, 2003) on to OD, it is not difficult to imagine instances where an organization could collaborate with a rich mix of external stakeholders. This could even involve working collaboratively with competitor organizations on mutually beneficial OD initiatives. This form of cooperation with other organizations would also help to resurrect and reinvigorate the notion of 'interorganizational OD' which was developed by Schermerhorn (1979) more than thirty years ago, but which has had very limited take-up within the OD community.

Concluding Remarks

As indicated at the outset of this reflective piece, the discussion provided here has been somewhat wide-ranging. There are however two discernible strands of argument presented in

this contribution. On the one hand, some words of caution and concern are offered regarding some contemporary developments in OD and OD processes. On the other hand, some more projective assertions are made about possible future directions for OD research and OD practice.

The concerns regarding 'current OD' are twofold. First, it has been suggested that the increasing popularity of social constructivist modes of enquiry (i.e. a focus on discourse and intangible phenomena) has helped to counter the dominance of earlier 'harder approaches' (e.g. structural, technical and task-based interventions). However, it has been posited that an unintended consequence of the emergence of discursive forms of OD is the inappropriate marginalisation of materiality as an embedded and unavoidable aspect of OD activity. Second, the prevalence of solutions-oriented, forward-facing OD methods has been highlighted as problematic inasmuch as they draw attention away from problem-centred approaches that continue to be of valuable in certain instances. Arguably, the underlying problem here is that the old dominance of traditional forms of OD has simply given way to the new dominance of contemporary forms of OD. If we reframe this 'sequential-competing logic' we could substitute it for one based upon a 'concurrent-complimentary logic'.

The discussion of 'future OD' also had two different dimensions. It considered both the scope for genuine 'bottom-up OD approaches' (i.e. employee-instigated) and the scope for taking OD beyond the traditional limits of organisational boundaries (e.g. the involvement of a wider range of external stakeholders). For some, these more radical forms change intervention are so far removed from the core tenets of early forms of OD that they should not be considered to be OD at all. We could get into the semantics of whether or not these forms of change activity are OD or not. However, it is probably better to focus on the substance and potential for these types of initiative rather than devote attention to how we label them.

It could be argued that there is an inconsistency in this contribution between the positioning of traditional forms of OD which are narrowly prescribed and tightly defined and newer forms of OD which are more broadly framed and loosely defined. Although at face value this may seem paradoxical, the respective positioning of the two occurs for good reason. Articulating traditional forms of OD is a retrospective endeavour and is relatively fixed because it is constituted through a body of knowledge and discursive practices which are well understood and well rehearsed within the OD community. By contrast, the articulation of emerging forms of OD is a largely projective endeavour which is far more speculative and fluid in nature because there is lack of coherence and consensus around etymological boundaries and about possible directions.

There is perhaps a further, and far more significant, source of paradoxical logic in what is being proposed in this paper in that it simultaneously advocates that 'we embrace tradition' and that 'we break from tradition'. Embracing tradition is evident in the call to re-engage with the material and tangible aspects of OD and reinvigorate the use of problem centred and diagnostic interventions. By contrast, the call for more radical forms of change (i.e. 'bottom-up' and 'outside-in') represents a clear break with tradition. For me, however, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rather than treating contrasting modes of OD inquiry as epochs which go through an evolutionary process of displacement we might re-position them as concurrent and possibly even compatible forms of OD. The challenge for OD scholars and practitioners is to work with seemingly diverse and heterogeneous forms of change. And, possibly even integrate and blend contrasting OD commitments and orientations in order to develop new mechanisms and methods.

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