

Organising and managing across boundaries



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Guest Editors: Chris Blanter and Tom Boydell

This is an experimental edition, likely to evolve over the coming weeks

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Cover illustration:. Original quotation – 'Two monologues don't make a dialogue' – Jeff Daly, from an original photograph by Mark Cardwell, composed by Chris Blanter, December 2002.

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“Aren’t we all rats really?”

The role of the situation in configuring organisational action and learning

Chris Blanter



In this two-part article, I develop a view that our traditional ways of intervening in organisations (and by extension, in society at large) are anachronistic and limited. In particular - when it comes to addressing change where communities, stakeholders, participants, actors are so positioned that their distance and separation in meaning and action seem like concrete boundaries - we would be better off taking a critical view of our principal methods of intervention. In Part 1 the article acknowledges the traditional tensions between organisations as ‘structures’ and as ‘the aggregate of individual agency’, and their limitations. Part 2, which will be posted online shortly, introduces the ways in which a third position, or ‘stance’, can move beyond those constraints and generate new possibilities for productive, collaborative action. It also includes full references for Parts 1 and 2.

Introduction

The original aim of this Autumn 2014 edition of e-O&P and its associated Gathering was to enquire into and share intervention practices that help us to tackle some seemingly intractable challenges in our organisations and communities; so intractable that they seem to be ‘structural’ or deeply ‘habitual’. Our organising group referred to them as boundaries and we originally had in mind...

Dissolving the boundaries between Health and Social Care in the UK

The integration of Health and Social Care is seen by many, perhaps most, as a ‘good thing’. Clearly this promises considerable benefits for service users in presenting a more ‘seamless’ service experience and consequential economic benefits for institutions through the reduction of duplication. In theory, it also enables a more accurate and targeted assessment of needs. The rhetoric is overwhelmingly positive – from politicians, via public service professionals to communities and individual users. However, regardless of some local successes, a more generalised sense of satisfaction is elusive. Integration is difficult to put into effect.

Moving the boundaries between active citizenship and public service institutions.

Community voluntarism is growing and more and more people want to make a contribution and at the same time continue to be involved in purposeful activities. Increasingly there’s an acknowledgement that individual and community wellbeing are enhanced where more people are engaged in purposeful activities. It is increasingly irrelevant to talk about public service organisations and rather the notion of health and wellbeing communities that include the institutions and all

community stakeholders is gaining currency. How do we organise for this when many public service organisations see voluntarism as primarily a way of reducing employment costs?

Shifting the boundaries of organisational responses that continue to cast the articulation of localised negative or harmful public service practices as 'whistleblowing' ...

... rather than an opportunity for beneficial learning for the greater good?

Removing the boundaries of hostility between communities and peoples who are deeply invested in each other's demise and how to enhance 'peace-building and reconciliation'.

"Yes, Hamas want victory – but they also want to be right"

Jeremy Bowen – BBC Middle East Correspondent, Radio 5 Live, August 2014

In this article I want to suggest that relying on ways of looking at organisations as if they are 'structures' or viewing 'individuals-as-causal-agents' when it comes to the coordination of behaviour, are mostly unhelpful assumptions about organising.

Viewing organisations as structures (Stance 1)

Viewing organisations as structures assumes that people and their experience are merely servants of rules, procedures and the arrangement of resources. Meaning, cultural heritage and practices, history, moral sensibility and sense of being and worth are of secondary importance. It is assumed that people will easily adapt to the demands of 'structure'. Historically this view emanates from the philosophical tradition known as Positivism. (Later in the article I'll refer to this particular way of making sense of social activity, together with its required assumptions, as Stance 1).

On the other hand, *viewing organisations as arising only or primarily in the [reasoned] action of individuals* requires that there is little impediment to right action once the correct thinking [learning?] is arrived at. Organisations will change when enough people think differently, share their thinking language and make shared meaning together. The way to change organisations is through individual minds and their aggregation. This view of organisations (and society) constitutes, in the main, the language of the Learning and Development industry. Later, I will refer to this tradition, which is drawn from the philosophical positions of Phenomenology and Interpretivism, as '**Stance 2**'.

When it comes to organisational change the models of intervention used are largely based on one or other of the two stances and, quite often, blends, often unwitting, of both. But there is, in my view, something missing. The four domains listed above are proving notoriously resistant to courses of treatment offered by these two physicians (Stances) and boundaries which limit or prevent cooperation and collaboration remain concrete. In this article I want to say something of a Third Stance which offers promising possibilities for collaborative action, for privileging positive relationships over either both structures and individuals and which will not only help to make better sense of our social organising but has a great deal to offer a world where resources for supporting community-in-diversity are severely challenged.

Part 1: Towards a redundancy of 'structure' versus 'agency'

"In the traditional view, a person is free. He is autonomous in the sense that his [sic] behavior is uncaused. He can therefore be held responsible for what he does and justly punished if he offends. That view, together with its associated practices, must be re-examined when a scientific analysis reveals unsuspected controlling relations between behavior and environment."

(BF Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity, 1972)

B F Skinner's contribution to the psychology of human behaviour, in short, the ways in which environmental conditions operate to shape behaviour and his recognition of the central functioning of reward and punishment, was influential in the 1920s and 1930s. However his theories and methods receded considerably in popularity as the exposition of Phenomenology, mind and cognition, and the accompanying significance of 'free will' became increasingly attractive. It is particularly challenging, for example, to administer a system of formal justice without having individuals as causal agents.

This piece isn't about resurrecting Skinner's original brand of behaviourism but it does share something of the tensions acknowledged in Skinner's quote, above, taken from his reflections in later life. Skinner also believed in 'mind' but was adamant that we should not elide or dissolve the influence of environmental factors – perhaps something that Ludwig Wittgenstein would have found a way of sympathising with?

"What does behavior include here? Only the play of facial expression and the gestures? Or also the surrounding, so to speak, the occasion of this expression?..." "... the word 'behavior' as I am using it, is altogether misleading, for it includes in its meaning the external circumstances"

(Wittgenstein I, 1980, no. 314).

In sociology too, ontological assumptions and theories of causal behaviour have oscillated between 'structuralist', where social 'structure' is ascribed independent and reified characteristics, and 'interpretist', where social order is created and maintained exclusively through individuals in action, generating meaning (agency).

Margaret Thatcher most famously said in an interview given to Woman's Own magazine in 1987, when railing against a perceived, growing dependency on the state...

They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.

Perhaps Leo Tolstoy's narrator in War and Peace would have wanted to agree....

"You say: I am not free. But I have raised and lowered my arm. Everyone understands that this illogical answer is an irrefutable proof of freedom."

[Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace](#), 2nd Epilogue, p 1201.

There are those however, Critical Theorists amongst them, who want to say that individual freedom is an illusion and who see it as their project to exhume those ways in which 'Society [is] organized to make permanent inequity appear normal, a natural state of affairs.' (Brookfield)

"Experts in ancient Greek culture say that people back then didn't see their thoughts as belonging to them. When ancient Greeks had a thought, it occurred to them as a god or goddess giving an order. Apollo was telling them to be brave. Athena was telling them to fall in love.

Now people hear a commercial for sour cream potato chips and rush out to buy, but now they call this free will."

[Chuck Palahniuk, Lullaby](#)

I am suggesting here, then, that there is much to be gained by taking a more critical view of the 'structure' and 'agency' positions (Stances 1 & 2) when it comes to de-institutionalising our ways of organising¹.

In organisation studies there is much oscillation: organisational design, divisions (and boundaries), performance related pay, disciplinary measures, training (structured environment) or initiative, individual responsibility, human relations and learning (individual agency)?

However the scholarly discipline and professional world of Learning and Development focuses, almost exclusively, on individuals and sees individual agency as solely causal. Assisted by the ever 'deepening' vocabularies of cognitivism, phenomenology and constructivism we can dig further and further into the hidden recesses of the human mind and find internal processes that help people to 'grow' and/or become less dysfunctional. Change begins in the individual and resources (research, publishing, marketing, change practices and evaluation) are overwhelmingly dedicated to appeals to individual minds and their 'mental models' and thinking processes – albeit acting, where necessary, in concert. The ultimate goal of learning and development is individual 'autonomy' – even if we hang around to help organisations on the way.

"I am not sure that there is such a thing as a group that learns, or that a group can exercise autonomy. In terms of groups that are formed in a learning environment I think of them as a defined set of autonomous individuals. The other individuals in the group often act as foils that create learning, or are a catalyst to more direct learning. But each individual should act in ways that does not damage the ability of others to be responsible for the self, and to seek self-development and exercise self-care and to come to knowledge in their own way and time."

Linda Perriton, Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management at University of York (MamllNet discussion forum, LinkedIn, July 2014²)

A fairly brief thought-piece is, perhaps, not the place to develop or further explore the worlds of implications associated with privileging either a structural view or one that positions individual agency and free will as ultimately causal. It is nevertheless evident that this dualistic tension does play out when we try to agree ways of influencing for change in our societies, communities and organisations. Perhaps Thatcher was an exception but politicians, economists and governmental officials tend to see change in terms of structures whereas specialist scholars and practitioners in the worlds of human resources, learning and development and community development will find it easy to mouth "it's the individual stupid!"

¹ I have deliberately chosen to avoid the nominalisation of 'acts of organising' – as 'organisations' since the latter too easily contributes to the uncritical acceptance of 'organisations-as-things' (structures, entities or big animals).

² MAMLL – MA in Management Learning and Leadership, Lancaster University Department of management Learning and Leadership, LinkedIn discussion forum: 'A Group Approach to Working Out What's Going on in Groups' virtual hot seat.

These different vocabularies often play out as confusions about what we privilege as causal? Much of the literature in the organisational learning discipline implicitly talks of organisations as 'structures' whilst at the same time seeing organisational change as the aggregate of individual learning – where 'natural order' meets 'free will'.



Yet even those of us who have been acculturated with the iconic precepts of HR or L&D will recognise challenges like the failure of the 'transfer of learning', even 'on-the-job', or how individuals learn – but 'the system' overwhelms them, or the difference between 'theories espoused and theories in use.'

It's widely acknowledged that most change interventions in organisations have very little effect – especially in the medium to long term. Of course it's other people's interventions that tend not to work – so we keep on going – perhaps with the acquisition of more tools for promoting autonomy or with more targeted forms of structural redesign and reinforcement – like key performance indicators or best practice definitions – or, even, swearing an oath of allegiance³.

Some attempt, too easily, to avoid these tensions by collapsing the distinction between agency and structure and refer to organisations as if they are sentient beings – just like agentive individuals - when they say things like 'Does your organisation know how to do double loop learning?', or.....

'A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.'

(Pedler et al. 1991, p. 1)

³ Recently proposed for teachers by the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove

According to the popular press, too, it is not strange to cast organisations as sentient beings replete with autonomous agency....

Apple stumbles in delivering web services

Facebook tests mobile ad network

They can feel emotions...

Relief for Euro Disney over refinancing deal

..and think ahead...

Hibu warns its shares could be worthless

...and even make moral judgements...

Beijing blames car row on US elections

Extracts from the Financial Times – various dates, 2013 (Blanter, Boydell, Burgoyne, 2013)

In the Introduction I referred to examples of societal or organisational change that are proving to be particularly intransigent and we are concerned to ask whether the traditional ontological assumptions associated with both the 'structural' (Stance 1) and 'individual agency' (Stance 2) positions, expressed as they are in tension with one and other, are really sufficient for such conditions. Of course we include in this the prospect of developing vocabularies and practices which will help to bring about more widespread benefits to organisations, communities and societies – especially in a world which is increasingly interconnected and yet still, largely, struggles to achieve co-existence in diversity.

Advocating a Stance 3

So in my next piece, which I will post on the AMED website in due course, I'd like to talk about a 3rd Stance and say something of a style of thought and practice that we believe to be much more promising. I will begin by saying something about the assumptions we make commonly about 'structure' and 'individual agency' and in so doing re-engage with Burrhus Skinner's concerns that we need to find ways of not forgetting about environment, occasion and context – the situation – when we talk of agency and action in the world. As Bruno Latour encourages, (more later) if we want to make better sense of human, social action then we would be better off considering the live acts of other people and things in our moments of interaction – our behavioural performances rather than seeing structures or individuals as autonomous causal entities.

About the author

Chris Blantern is a leading consultant in organizational and management learning (individual and collective). He has pioneered work on the organizing power of communications and the innovative field of 'the role of context in shaping behaviour'. Chris has a long interest in collaboration and participative approaches to organising, decision-making, inquiry and learning. He has pioneered the development of 'Relational Action Learning' for working on 'shared' group/organisation problems and challenges, as distinct from individually centred.

Chris is also a semi professional musician mostly interested in 'Transatlantic' music (the fusion of Celtic and North American styles). chris.blantern@me.com

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Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

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