



## So, What's A Practitioner To Do?

by Matt Minahan, Ph.D.

So, I've got this nifty new Master's degree, all about OD or OB or change management. We read all the latest books and articles, and nowhere did I hear about morphogenesis or plurivocality; in our class, "container" is what held the cream cheese for our bagels. What's the big deal?

Or, I've been at this field for 30 years now, doing pretty well, not great, but pretty well. I've got a couple of long-term clients and do a few spot gigs to pay the rent. My clients seem happy enough with what I do, I take an NTL lab and I go to the OD Network conference every few years to stay fresh. I've read the Watkins and Mohr book on Appreciative Inquiry (2001). What's the big deal?

That's exactly the question, what's the big deal? Especially for practitioners? Or is this just another cat fight among the academics?

We'll know the real answer in about 10 years, I suspect; but for now, this does look like a big enough deal to get our attention, because the ideas represented in the articles here in Practising Social Change, and the conversations at NTL's The New OD Conference in March, 2010 contain both good news and bad news for the recent OD graduate as well as for the experienced practitioner.

The field of OD, academe, and the world at large seem to be pretty far into a shift from a positivist philosophy in which the world is real, concrete, and with absolute truth which can be objectively knowable via a succession of increasingly narrow hypotheses and research questions . . . to a socially-constructed view in which the world is abstract and conceptual, where there are multiple truths

which are not absolute and can only be discovered by understanding the subjective way in which people experience them. In other words, we create our world subjectively, by virtue of the way we experience it.

So, in a socially-constructed world, the "truth" about organizations cannot be discovered via tests or surveys or increasingly narrow hypotheses. For instance, in physics the sequential testing and re-testing of narrower and narrower hypotheses is how scientists discovered that molecules begat atoms, which begat neutrons and protons, which begat neutrinos, which begat . . . all assuming that the world is objectively knowable, if only we could do enough tests with fine enough instruments. And this is true not just in the hard sciences. Most of the



history of the field of psychology has been spent running tests on rats, pigeons, and sadly, human beings for a time, all with the hope of finding out what happens when the cheese is moved. And then repeating and re-repeating the tests in other laboratories and other subjects with the hopes that the first tests could be replicated by others and achieve the same results, which according to scientific protocol, would then tell us we have discovered the “truth.” That’s the story of Pavlov’s dogs. That’s how we learned much of what we know about positive reinforcement, through the work of B. F. Skinner’s trials at Harvard. Just in case you think that his reinforcement philosophy was mostly benign, Skinner called it “radical behaviorism,” which did not accept that thoughts or feelings or any phenomenon that was not externally observable could have a causal relationship to behavior (Skinner, 1974). Primate researcher Harry Harlow and, for a while, Abraham Maslow, worked with baby monkeys separated from their mothers in multiple-repeated trials to discover the importance of care-giving, companionship, and the unique role that mothers play in our social development (Blum, 2002). And while their findings warm our OD hearts, their methods were as positivistic and deterministic as any, as they strove for the kind of legitimacy in the scientific community that can only come from following the protocols of test-re-retest-re-re-test, etc. (For a fascinating and well written story about Harlowe’s work on macaque monkeys, read Debra Blum’s 2002 book *Love At Goon Park*.)

At the same time, another school of thought – the mentalists – held that observable behaviors, the coin of the Skinnerian realm, were less important than the thoughts and feelings that were actually going on inside the person, and that, if we truly wanted to know and understand a person’s actions, we needed a firm understanding of their thought process, feelings, and the way they processed data internally.

Although these distinctions reach back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Roberts, 1919), much of the actual research work didn’t occur in some deep, dark corner of our ancient past. This work was going on in the business and psychology schools in the 1960s and 1970s, well within the lifetime of many OD practitioners and all of the early thought-leaders and founders of our field.

But in the tension between the behaviorists (Skinner, 1974), the mentalists (Chomsky, 1959; Fodor, 1968) and the social psychologists (Lewin, 1943; Weick, 1995) it has been the latter who have had the deepest and most profound impact on our field and on our work as practitioners.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1939) was a committed researcher and student of the ways in which large groups influence the behaviors of individuals, and why it is that some groups influence their members a lot, and others do not, and why it is that some individual members in a group are influenced by the group and other individual members are not. He held that neither the individual nor the social setting alone could adequately explain group behavior (Minahan, 2006).

**What is “true?”:** The world of the social scientist is a world in which the “truth” can only set us free when we accept that each of us carries a different set of data about the organization and the world, and that we then construct a unique set of interpretations and reactions that are subjectively-based on who we are as individuals, our beliefs about ourselves and others, and our thoughts and feelings about the organization and the world; and that this is true even in the rare instances when we are all exposed to the same data, such as a town hall, or a speech, or an organization-wide memo or email. One of the few “truths” that we can confidently claim is that “there is no final word on rationality” (Gergen, Gergen, 2010).

**The Tools of Our Trade:** The good news is that the core technology of our field, Action Research, bequeathed to us by Lewin and refined further by the ethnologists and other behavioral scientists, is still alive and well, continuing to evolve, and can continue to serve as the spine and central nervous system of this new world of subjective realities.

In fact, when we use the Action Research methodology, the most common “facts” we seek are the “facts” about the variety of feelings, perceptions, likes, and dislikes – the subjectivities of the group. We are out to discover not just what people are doing, but also what they are feeling and thinking, and how much alignment there is and how much dispersion there is among them. We then feed that data back to them, and encourage them to reflect on the data, provide their own interpretations and explanation of the data, and then decide together what actions to take in response to the data. The very premise of Action Research assumes the plurivocality that Bob Marshak writes about here in *Practising Social Change*, and the very pluri-ness of the vocality is the phenomenon that interests us in Action Research.

Appreciative Inquiry methods are directly aligned with, and, in fact, were built upon socially constructed principles, creating change processes that rely on collaborative inquiry (Watkins, Mohr, 2001). If you ask Jane Watkins about the future of OD, she will gladly tell you that AI is not only the future of OD, but it is also our past, and that we’re just learning now how to apply Kurt Lewin’s principles in the 21st century.

**Our metaphors:** So, we stand well on the solid grounding provided by our founders. But that doesn’t mean that we’re home free as practitioners or that we don’t also need a dose of our own medicine about changing ourselves and our world views. The ideas and concepts raised at NTL’s The New OD Conference and written about here by the Gergens, Marshak, Bushe, Oswick and Grant challenge us to change our understanding of organizations and the metaphors that we use to do so. Not just a machine that pumps out widgets, requiring an expert to bring some specialized knowledge about how to tinker or overhaul the machine to make more or better widgets (Gergen, Gergen, 2010). Not just a plant standing in a fertile medium, seeking sunshine and water, interacting with its environment and needing to be pruned or moved toward the window or taken outside in the breeze.



The concepts of The New OD insist that we set aside these metaphors for our work and our organizations, and to shift our metaphors to an even higher level of abstraction. Not just a community of like minded people. Not just a complex, adaptive system.

**Structures:** The New OD requires us to look not just at the boxes or the people of the organization, but at the space between the boxes, and the space between the people, and how that space is filled, and by whom. As a field, we've already gotten the fact that organizations can't be seen as structures and hierarchy only, with formal roles, positions, descriptions, and boundaries. The structures in our world are social structures, with people working in groups and teams that have little to do with the formal structures. The New OD gives us the tools and perspectives to better understand the social structures within the system, and not just the formal structures as they appear on an organization chart.

**Processes:** We think of processes as linear outlines and patterns for the movement of information, money, or material through an organization. In The New OD world, we need to have a better handle on the informal patterns within the system, those propelled by conversation. Whatever hierarchical or divisional walls have historically limited the flow of information within an organization, today's communication tools and social structures make it impossible to plan, predict, manage, and change where information goes and how it gets there, which means that, as coaches and advisors to leaders, we need to advise them to remove the boundaries to the flow of conversation and meaning and, in fact, to "generate forms of organizational process that ensure open communication" (Gergen, Gergen, 2010).

**The Environment:** One of the strategic organizational variables has been the degree of interaction that a system has with its environment. Decisions about the porosity of the boundaries, and how much organizational effort is invested in managing the boundaries with the environment, how much of the organization is client facing, and what kinds of interactions to have with the environmental system have all been strategic choices for organizations. At some levels, the Darwinian "survive at all costs" philosophy has caused organizations to restrict the flow of knowledge and information with the outside world. In The New OD, the true vitality of an organization comes from the vibrant coursing of knowledge and information across social channels that are rich with interpretation and meaning.

**Evolving Language:** Language and discourse become two elements of the stories that practitioners need to learn about and understand today, because we know now that those stories and that discourse carry information about the system that is vital to understand it effectively, at all of the significant levels – the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, the micro, the meso, the macro, and the meta, as Grant and Oswick write in this edition (Grant, Oswick, 2010).

We have to understand this discourse because it is both the cause and effect of the power structure of the organization, without which our OD efforts remain limited at best, and irrelevant at worst, and "power issues have been neglected in favour of less confronting and more 'optimistic' or 'positive' approaches" in our work (Grant, Oswick, 2010). Being able to observe and understand the language and meanings of the organizational discourse is critical for us as OD practitioners, because the discourse is another performance feedback-loop on our projects and work.

**Our Skills:** With all the emphasis on subjectivity and language, a renewed emphasis is needed on the way we listen, and on our own abilities to listen for deep meaning and understand multiple levels of meaning when we are in conversation in our client systems. "If realities, rationalities, and values are constructed in conversation, then much depends on the kinds of conversations taking place. . . ." (Gergen, Gergen, 2010).

The New OD will challenge OD consultants even more to know themselves and to be present "in the moment." Gervase Bushe (2010) calls it being "the container," or the capacity to create conditions that allow people to be present, and honest, and speak their truth by being a non-anxious presence, able to contain and reduce our own insecurities and anxieties. That container uses metaphors, rituals, and a climate of trust and honesty to bring people to the true center of themselves and allow them to speak about the honest truths within them.

**The Power Is Still in the Process:** The problem with expert approaches to consulting is that they rely upon the "truth" as it is interpreted by a small handful of people, reflecting just the views of a few, without the rich palette of ideas and perspectives that are the plurivocal heart of The New OD. So, we need to set aside our urge to control the outcomes or to make ourselves look smart in the eyes of the client, and instead, let go of our need to control the outcomes, and trust that if we commit to a solid, inclusive, appreciative process, and then trust it, we will get better results than in our traditional, linear, positivist approach to OD.

**Reconnecting with Our Roots:** Neither is this a radical new approach for the field of OD. Some of the key elements of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) are based on the 1950s work of Noam Chomsky (1957) on "transformational grammar," which proposed a surface structure of meaning, and an underlying deep structure to verbal communication. The earliest studies of NLP published in 1975 (Bandler, Grinder) were all about the language that we use, and the meanings that underlie the language. Richard Bandler was listening to audio tapes of therapy sessions held by Gestalt therapist Fritz Perls and believed he recognized word and sentence structures and patterns of influence which he took to linguist John Grinder, and then a second therapist, Virginia Satyr (Spitzer, 1992) for confirmation.



So, the language of the study of language is shifting to 'discourse', but our basic practices of using language to understand how the world is seen by its inhabitants is still quite central to how we do our OD work today. "Language in its many manifestations is constructive and central to the establishment, maintenance, and change of what is and what should be." (Grant, Oswick, 2010)

In the end, none of these ideas represent seismic shifts in our field; nor do they call for seismic shifts in ourselves. Most OD consultants get and practice some part, and even most of what is implicit in The New OD. Many are using concepts like "the container" to conceive of and describe their work. Many are including the study of social networks into their projects. Most are already expert in the Action Research model. There is a lot of good work being done with metaphors.

So, peering into the time machine to see what the world of The New OD will look like, it appears that we have the tools within reach for the most part. But it's not about the pieces. The New OD is about the whole . . . the world view, the principles, philosophy, and what we believe about truth, ourselves and others. Integrating all of this into a dialogic whole is the value that The New OD brings to the field, and that challenges us to reach beyond our current thinking into a world of greater possibility.

#### BIOGRAPHY

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