Behind Conventional Wisdom in Organisational Psychology

F.H.M. Blacker and C.A. Brown*

ABSTRACT

Theory and practice within organisational psychology has been greatly influenced by humanistic psychology in general and theories of self actualisation in particular. Yet the concept of self actualisation is problematic, and may encourage a misguided view of people as exploiting each other and their environments in a hedonistic quest for satisfaction. Applied in an organisational context this interpretation of the human condition trivialises human interactions. Further, organisational psychologists have employed the humanistic paradigm in a search for effective ways of managing organisations to the exclusion of the study of the wider effects that organisations have upon people in society. Coupled with an inadequate model of man such limited horizons have led them to play an essentially conservative role in their work and to support institutional structures which are seriously debilitating psychologically. A major overhaul of implicit assumptions within the discipline is required. It is suggested that organisational psychologists standing as they do on the bridge linking explorations of individuals to explorations of society, should seek to develop models of people which emphasise the human capacity for self direction and should uncompromisingly explore the organisational and societal implications of such models.

A Japanese master receive a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

The master served tea. He poured his visitors cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. 'It is overful. No more will go in!'

'Like this cup' the master said, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen until you first empty your cup?'

This delightfully picturesque Japanese proverb concerns the futility of one man's attempt to study a form of wisdom he was in no state to appreciate. We argue in this paper that this point can be applied with equal force to the attempts of many psychologists to understand people's behaviour in organisations. Like the professor in this anecdote our suggestion is that organisation psychologists often evidence a prejudgement of essentials in their work which bars them from a deep understanding of people's behaviour in organisations. We shall develop this theme from two separate but intimately related perspectives. Firstly we argue that organisational psychologists, even those of the most humanistic persuasion, accept and employ incomplete and limiting notions of human nature and its potentiality. Secondly, that through lack of

attention to institutional structure and process, organisational psychologists may fail to appreciate that existing structural arrangements may impede, or at worst prevent, the development of mature responsible human beings. A vicious circle may thus emerge in which human potentials are never fully realised because of existing organisational structures, and truly humane structures are never developed because there is no clear conception of the nature or potentials of the people we are organising for.

Radical Humanism in Organisational Psychology

As an emerging field organisational psychology includes a number of theoretical approaches to the subject matter and several developing behavioural technologies. For example, one can point to applications of theories of individual differences as used in selection techniques, to learning theory in general and operant conditioning in particular (see reviews by Nord 1969 or Schneier 1974) to the development of expectancy theories (see for example Hieneman and Schwab, 1972, and House, 1971) to social psychological studies of group behaviour and the associated effects of factors such as technology (see for example the review by Bucklow 1966) and to the increasing popularity of systems approaches expressed through contingency models (see for example Lichtman and Hunt's 1971 review). Yet more pervasive than any of these have been approaches which lean heavily on 'humanistic' psychology, that is those which claim as their own the study of people's subjective experiences and essential selves. Nord (1974) indeed has been able to suggest that the ideas underlying theorists like McGregor, Herzberg, Argyris, Likert, Maslow and others come close to paradigmatic status in the subject, since they represent 'models of reality which provide the basis for coherent bodies of scientific enquiry.' It is clear that theories of self actualisation and of the psychological self have been and remain intoxicatingly influential in humanistically oriented organisational psychology. Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1962) have presented the theories which lie at the foundation of the movement and, well known as they are, it is not necessary to provide here a detailed review of their positions. Suffice it to say that Maslow presents a picture of 'normal' personal development passing through a series of stages as a person's behaviour becomes less concerned with basic needs and ultimately finds expression through his drive to self actualisation. Rogers' theory has similarities in focussing on the private world of experience and regarding the need to self actualise as the unifying drive of the total personality. Both approaches represent antidotes to the surfeit of theories in psychology that are built upon the notion that behaviour can be explained by reference to simple homeostatic models that explain actions solely in terms of behaviour designed to rectify states of deficiency.

French and Bell (1973) articulate the assumptions about people and groups common to leading organisational psychologists, and their summary serves to illustrate the dependancy on Maslovian and Rogerian type thinking. Assumptions include the following:

> *most people have drives towards personal growth and development . . . wish to become more of what they are capable of becoming . . . desire to make and are capable of making a higher level of contribution to the attainment of*

organisational goals than most organisational environments permit . . . one of the most psychologically relevant reference groups for most people is the work group . . . group members must assist each other with effective leadership and membership behaviour . . . suppressed feelings adversely affect problem solving, personal growth and job satisfaction . . . the level of interpersonal trust, support and cooperation is much lower in most groups and organisations than is either necessary or desirable.

Further, at the operational level the work of organisational psychologists is greatly influenced by the principles of humanistic psychology. In, for example, the fields of job enrichment, training either the effective leadership through power sharing strategies, or for effective group functioning through the study of group processes, the development of 'organic' organisation structures, or in the field of organisation development this influence is strongly felt, Beyond this the very definition of the legitimate scope of organisational psychology, perhaps typified as the search for a joint optimisation of personal and organisational needs, itself owes much to such approaches. Of course it would be misleading to suggest that humanistic psychology in organisational studies has had the field to itself or has passed uncriticised. Well known critiques from sociologists interested in organisation theory have been voiced by, for example, Silverman (1970) who criticises it from an ethnomethodological position, or by Perrow (1970) who argues that technological constraints are more demanding than psychological ones. Argyris (1972) has offered a retort to these views, and argues that assumptions about people hidden in such criticisms are often simplistic and depressingly 'theory X'. From within organisational psychology itself however the applause for humanistic approaches has not been unanimous. Hulin and Bloods' (1968) criticism of 'psychological universalism' inherent in relevant job motivation theory is well known, Bass's (1967) criticism of 'T' group theory, that it is incompatible with the requirements of organised behaviour articulates a frequently encountered mistrust of the underlying philosophy here, and Strauss' (1963) attack on the practicality and ethics of power-equalisation theory in organisations serves as a check to the unquestioning acceptance of such ideas.

Nonetheless, the popularity of humanistic approaches continues. Examination of the alternatives offers some reasons for this. Operant conditioning theory, expectancy theory, aspects of socio-technical systems theory, systems theory and contingency models are perhaps most parsimoniously understood as attempts to identify influence points that people can systematically manoeuvre to affect the behaviour of others. They are concerned with the world as it is now and how it can conveniently be managed. An alternative approach, eptitomised by humanistic psychology, seeks to explore what individuals, groups, organisations and societies could become, or in terms of some psychological criteria might be encouraged to become. Elsewhere the authors (Blackler and Brown 1975 and also Cooper 1976) contrast these orientations as being concerned either with 'regulation' or with 'revelation' in human affairs.

The psychology of personal growth in organisational studies initially appears to fall into the category of revelation as theorists working within this tradition believe, with some degree of justification, that they hold a concern for the dignity of people not found in alternative approaches. Through application of their theories there is the

promise of richer life experiences, (e.g. through worthwhile jobs or authentic personal relationships with work colleagues) of more humane organisational forms (as the excesses of bureaucracy are overcome) and so by implication to the promise of a more humane society. The power of the humanistic approach in psychology lies indeed in its capacity to generate exposé type criticisms of many aspects of social life, from the family (e.g. Rowan's 1973 presentation of Laing's views) to the education system (e.g. Rogers 1969) and from organisational life (e.g. Argyris 1957) to political behaviour (e.g. Hampden-Turner 1971) that remain unsurpassed in their breadth by alternative approaches familiar to organisational psychologists.

'Consumer Man' and the Human Condition

Laudable and attractive though such endeavours may be and influential though the relevant theory remains there are reasons for concern. In the writers' view it is not that errors of ethics are particularly marked here, but that there are very considerable errors of wisdom. Humanistic psychology as presently and popularly formulated in organisational psychology may be unwittingly, we suggest, a conservative venture labouring under certain misconceptions that are preventing it from developing into the radical force its proponents believe it already to be.

Central to much writing in this field is, as we have already indicated, the concept of self-actualisation. Charlotte Buhler (1959) observes in a different context that this concept 'has gone through many variations from Nietzsche and Jung to Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, Kurt Goldstein, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and others all of whom seem to be searching for an all-encompassing theory of lifes' ultimate goal. With again another connotation, it appears in the contect of existentialist thinking'. The mystical connotations often associated with the concept has been the concern of many writers. Skinner (1940) for example has voiced criticisms of Goldstein's usage of the term as metaphysical and untestable and Peters (1958), especially with regard to Maslovian theory is only able to make sense of the term as referring to a person's search for satisfaction. From within organisational psychology itself criticisms have been voiced by people close to the humanistic paradigm, thus Bennis (1959) observes that self actualisation 'is at best, an ill-defined concept . . . self actualised man seems to be more myth than reality'. Despite the frequency of expressions of concern about the concept the full implications of them do not appear to have been realised by many organisational psychologists. These depend less on the problems of definition - models of human behaviour need to account for 'growth' motivation as well as 'deficiency' motivation and of its nature the former is likely to lead to greater problems of analysis. Instead, the implications we touch on in the remainder of this paper follow from the ways in which organisational psychologists have pictured the parameters of the concept.

In presenting the core issues here we draw especially from the writings of Bateson (1963) and more specifically from Frankl (1973). develops a two pronged critique of the term. The first of these is that the concept of self-actualisation implies a view of the world as nothing more than a means to people's need fulfilling ends. An exploitative relationship between man and his environment is therefore entailed, and such a view has received considerable support in the psychological literature. Lewin's

field theory (1951) for example regards a person's environment as a set of barriers he seeks to surmount in the quest to realise his desires.

In a later section we briefly examine an alternative view on the nature of the relationship between man and his environment. However at this point we want to suggest that acceptance of the environment of objects and other persons solely as a resource for need gratification often also entails, implicity or otherwise, a pleasure seeking or hedonistic view of human nature. We must stress that self actualisation does not necessarily or logically entail hedonism since it is perfectly sensible to self actualise through self sacrifice. However the manner in which orgsnisational psychologists have employed humanistic insights has led them to implicitly conceive of self actualisation in hedonistic terms. Locke (1975) has demonstrated how expectancy theory may be criticised for its naive hedonistic assumptions. Indeed, in our view such a connection appears almost inevitable as long as in Maslow's words 'The environment is no more than a means to a person's self actualising ends'.

Crude hedonism has, of course, received considerable attention in the philosophical literature. The essence of much criticism concerns the idea that in suggesting that people simply seek pleasure from their actions one misses the central point that pleasure is more sensibly regarded as a by-product of ends achieved, and strangely evaporates when it is single-mindedly pursued for its own sake. For the experience of 'self actualisation', once directly sought after, soon becomes indistinguishable from a quest for pleasure. As Frankl puts it 'self actualisation is an effect and cannot be the object of intention'. People exist in a world of meanings that they ascribe to their environments; it is through successful action in such a context that fulfilment is experienced, not through a near mechanistic satiation of biologically programmed needs be these labelled 'higher' or 'lower' order needs.

This latter view, inherent in the term the 'need to self actualise' unnecessarily trivialises people's actions. Once it is accepted, as usage of the term in the work of organisational psychologists seems to imply, that people need to look inwards to a fulfilment of their own needs in order to find a definition of themselves, the real point is lost. To quote Frankl again:

> *Man . . . realizes and actualizes values. He finds himself only to the extent to which he loses himself in the first place, be it for the sake of something or somebody for the sake of a cause or a fellow man, or 'for God's sake'. Man's struggle for his self and his identity is doomed to failure unless it is enacted as dedication and devotion to something beyond his self, to something above his self.*

The second weakness in the concept that Frankl identifies refers to the notion of people as processes, of them 'wishing to become more of what they are capable of becoming'. Rogers (1951) has offered some qualifications to this outlook which exempts him to some extent from this criticism but he is unusual in this respect; in its simplest expression once again a near mechanistic process of 'becoming' is assumed. Yet, demonstrably, people do not spend their lives in a mindless search for the fulfilment of all aspects of their potentials, essentially they choose the paths they wish

to follow. Only through the concept of choice, denigrated in a need-fulfilment model, is it possible to make sense of the notion of an autonomous and responsible person. One must ask, man as becoming what? Frankl poignantly expresses it as follows:

> *Man must take his choice concerning the mass of present potentials: which will be condemned to non-being and which will be actualised and thus rescued for eternity. Decisions are final, for only the really transitory aspects of life are the potentialities. When a potentiality is actualised, it is actualised forever and can never be destroyed. Man, therefore, must face the responsibility for these 'Immortal footprints in the sands of time'. He must decide, for weal or for woe, what will be the monument of his existence.*

It appears, then, that the self actualising model may encourage an image of man as a pleasure seeking organism using and overcoming his environment in a quest for the fulfilment of his potentials. The title 'consuming man' well describes the implications of this model. It is a title we are sure will be resented by psychologists enamoured of the Maslovian tradition; at first sight the otherwise rich commentaries he (and others working with similar concepts) offer into people's lives seem belittled. Yet if the analysis offered here is opposite then the actual formulation of such insights in theory adopted by organisational psychologists entails such a description. It would appear that self-actualisation as a notion can be used to tag onto the end of a deficiency motivation model with its concepts of needs and drives, an additional set of motives that can be thought to operate in essentially similar ways. Further, that the notion it implies of 'spontaneous becoming' does not focus attention on the process of choosing what to become. Such a view contrasts sharply with the alternative, implicit in our criticisms, that a person generates meanings to account for his experiences, exercises choice in the development of his individuality and identity, and cannot, in Frankl's words, be 'relieved of the tension between what he has done or what he should have done or must yet do'.

Radical Humanism? The Case of the Emperor's New Clothes

We noted earlier that Nord characterises the work of humanistic psychologists in paradigmatic terms. In earlier sections we have attempted to sketch aspects of this paradigm and to explore its underlying nature. Kuhn (1970) has demonstrated the potency of scientific paradigms, in the provision of a definition of reality and in the supply of methods and values to guide the scientist in his work. There is however, a further feature of paradigmatic science which is crucial in the present context. This is that paradigms also define the range of problems to which appropriate methods are brought to bear. Paradigms therefore limit the scope of activities of scientists to particular types of problems.

As Kuhn points out this restriction is often necessary, for without it, scientific research may disintegrate into a number of unrelateable topic areas. Nonetheless, in the case of humanistic psychology we believe that the restrictions provided by its paradigm of the range of problems considered relevant is counter-productive in organisational studies. Because of the underlying concepts implicit within it, it is our

suggestion that organisational psychology has systematically ignored certain problems and systematically played down the importance of others. We are contending that while professing a claim to be concerned primarily with the quality of people's life experiences, in important respects humanistic psychology as used in organisational studies may actually have served to maintain organisational arrangements that are psychologically demeaning.

This is a serious charge. In this paper limitations of space mean we can only offer a few examples of its possible manifestations. To do this we consider two questions that students of organisation are concerned with, how can we humanely organise? and what are we organising for?

In approaching the first of these question it is evident that organisational psychologists have developed some useful prescriptions designed to improve the quality of working life. Argyris's, Herzberg's, Maslow's and McGregor's models offer an analysis of how many common organisational practices are psychologically debilitating. What is surprising, indeed, is the popularity that their ideas, so critical of organisations, have achieved with managers.

The analysis developed earlier explains this apparent paradox however. The model of 'Consuming man' that may be extrapolated from such approaches is tailor - made for our consumer oriented industrial society. The primary concern of such applications, to match organisational needs and personal ones, seems now a feasible enterprise. A trade off between organisational requirements and personal needs seems both possible and healthy as environments are designed to enable people to satiate their needs. 'Higher order needs' become substituted for the 'lower order' ones that managers are more accustomed to exploit. Note the philosophy here: 'we will use people by letting them use us'.

Yet the dangers of such a perspective are glaring. At the simplest level such an outlook trivialises people's relationships with each other and their worlds. But further, a system of organisation built on a vision of people as pleasure-seeking organisms exploiting their surroundings, almost unnoticed reduces people to the status of 'objects'. Organisational psychologists are prone to talk of ways of using better an organisation's human 'resources'. People defined in this way are labelled as objects to be exploited: so, managers talk of human 'problems' and in developing their efforts to coordinate the activities of others, they may seek to isolate themselves psychologically from their staff who are now seen to be suitable cases for treatment and not individuals to be held in unconditional regard. Their staff may sense this and naturally will respond in kind, thus feeding back data to the managers which serves to confirm their original inclination to conceive of the 'problems' of human 'resources'. We suggest therefore that the humanistic psychology paradigm as expressed in organisation studies contrary to popular belief may lead to alienative interpersonal relationships. Whether or not such a vicious circle is a likely feature of all organisational forms is an open question. What seems true though is that organisational psychologists shackled by their conventional wisdom of hedonistic people have not studied it in a detached way. Indeed, one can argue that all they have achieved here are strategies designed to develop models of compliance in organisational life which simply prevent its overt manifestation.

Job enrichment is a stark example of such a strategy. Here the internalisation of management goals by employees is considered healthy, desirable and beneficial to all, a process which obviates the need for conventional methods of supervision or overt 'carrot and stick' methods of securing output (see Blackler and Brown, op. cit. for an extended discussion of some problems of job redesign theory). As people are encouraged to internalise their organisation's objectives a naive pluralism is assumed and a kind of 1984 world begins to emerge where it is considered healthy (and adaptive indeed) for us to love our jobs and employing organisations and to be enthusiastic about our positions in society as they are defined by our work roles. Of course one would not wish to argue that dehumanisisng work is a necessary or a defensive state of affairs but we do suggest that the current horizons of organisational psychologists are far too limited. The 'consuming man' model leads psychologists to question bureaucratic organisational forms that do not encourage a satiation of people's 'higher order' needs and to advocate a replacement by structures that do. Yet such bureaucracies may actually serve important psychological functions for employees, enabling them legitimately to reserve the extent of their committment to their employing organisations. The incredulity psychologists working at job design express, when faced with objections to job enrichment projects from union representatives, illustrates how hard this point is for their paradigm to accomodate.

Leadership models in organisational psychology which advocate power sharing approaches (see for example Likert 1967) provide a further example of the strategies of organisational psychologists which can be interpreted as attempts to prevent alienative interpersonal relations developing. Leavitt (1972) summarises the strategies that a manager using a power sharing approach might adopt in his desire to promote behaviour changes in his subordinate:

First - wait for the subordinate to perceive the problem for himself, either by pointing it out to him or by letting him experience the difficulties for himself.

Second - let him take the responsibility for considering alternative ways of behaving, using the managers as a resource to help explore possible additional alternatives.

Third - both parties should mutually communicate the implications for each other of one new method of behaviour versus others.

Fourth - the subordinate selects an alternative his manager can accept.

Fifth - he then tries to change with the support of his manager.

Sixth - he then finds the new method successful and integrates it as part of his behaviour, or he finds it unsuccessful and abandons it.

Clearly the essential features of this model are that the subordinate finds a kind of fulfilment in his changed behaviour which is the outcome of the conditions under which he changed. Using French and Ravens (1968) classification of power bases that managers can call upon, the manager in this situation uses primarily the power he has with his subordinate by virtue of his expert skills and his skills in interpersonal relationships (although steps one and four above are possible exceptions to this rule of course).

More conventional power bases such as the ability to administer rewards or punishments, or the influence a person might exercise by virtue of his superior role in a social system are largely eschewed in this strategy of interpersonal influence, implying as they do a more coercive or authoritarian model.

Like job enrichment ideas this approach to management seems both attractive and realistic. We do not wish to be understood as dismissing either out of hand. Yet here again the structure of the humanistic paradigm has not focussed attention on some potentially key problems.

An alternative model of interpersonal influence does exist which, in common with the power equalisation model relies primarily on expert and referent power bases and avoids the more overt use of reward, punishment and legitimate power bases. This one, however, does not carry the pleasant overtones of the collaborative model as it is thoroughly manipulative. In this case the tactics are:

First - the manager should not make his motives fully known to his subordinate

Second - the manager uses his personal relationship with his subordinate as a tool for influence, taking perhaps a deep personal interest in him.

Third - he will develop feelings of dependency in his subordinate upon him, encouraging him to feel very strong attachments to himself.

Fourth - he provides satisfactions hard to come by, especially approval, support, recognition, attention; yet the threat of the possible withdrawal of regard may be present in the background.

Fifth - the manipulative manager moves slowly, only gradually moving his subordinate to where he wants him

Sixth - he may also exploit not only his personal relationship with his subordinate, but also the subordinate's relationship with other people by bringing group pressure to bear if necessary.

It seems eminently possible to the writers that in hierarchically based organisations (which in large degree are structured upon reward, punishment or legitimate power bases) the collaborative model in practice may have degenerated to a manipulative one. Thus, one would recognise it when managers withhold the scope of their intentions as to what changes are thought desirable in their subordinates, encourage subordinates to like them and feel dependent or indebted while giving an impression of openness, reinforce subordinates when they begin to see the problem as the manager conceives of it or implicitly threaten to withdraw patronage if it becomes necessary, and cautiously foster the emergence of group norms supportive of such a perspective. We do not know whether or not such a mutant form of power sharing leadership theory has developed widely, yet the possibility seems real. Should it have materialised in fact then the situation is serious indeed, for now organisational psychology would be lending legitimacy to management practices masquerading as progressive yet in reality being both retrogressive and unpleasant. Once again, almost unnoticed people would have been reduced to the status of objects.

to be continued next month

** This is an alphabetical listing as there is no senior author for this paper. (see next month).*

Anne Dickson

Breaking Out

AUTOMOD is Sargent's brainchild. After a gestation period of twenty years, the concept of automodification was developed and integrated until it emerged at last as Automod Inc. early this year. Since it was launched as part of the human potential movement in the U.S., the Automod network has rapidly expanded and the enthusiasm is spreading.

Tom Sargent answered some questions about Automod's concept, its relevance to human growth and its effective application.

What does Automodification mean? What does the method consist of?

Automodification is behaviour modification with a built-in contradiction. Behaviour modification is a method of changing human behaviour by reinforcement from the outside. Automodification of behaviour is from the individual who modifies his own behaviour. Take a simple behaviour modification model: a child learns that for each correct answer, he will receive a candy from his teacher. The candy is his reward. However, he might also learn that if he continually gives perversely wrong answers, he elicits a much more entertaining response - the teacher is perplexed, annoyed, exasperated. So when satiated with the candy, the child can operate his new reward