Behind Conventional Wisdom in Organisational Psychology

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

ABSTRACT

Continued from last month

The analysis we are offering can also be applied to a broader range of problems we subsume under the question, what are we organising for? This is an area which proves to be a difficult one to approach and is one indeed where organisational psychologists have been somewhat inactive. Their paradigm appears to have encouraged them to study the effective management of organisations but not to question deeply what such organisations seek to do and the wider effects they have within society. But the effects of organisations on people's lives and psyches are manifest and the study of them cannot sensibly be abdicated by psychologists.

The role of institution within society, indeed, raises questions intimately related to the study of personal development and maturity. Fromm (1955) has provided a starting point for our analysis:

> *In recent decades increasing attention has been paid to the psychology of the worker; but this very formulation is indicative of the underlying attitude; there is a human being spending most of his lifetime at work, and what should be discussed is the industrial problem of human beings rather than the human problem of industry.*

Clearly to tackle this problem organisational psychologists must bring into consideration the industrial structure of present day society. It remains a strong possibility that the prevailing perspectives of hedonism and consumerism, which appear to pervade our theories of human nature, can only be validated within organisational structures which support and nurture such perspectives. Thus any concern to develop alternative models of man which excludes consideration of structure may be self defeating. As W.H. Whyte (1954) has demonstrated, within the present structure of American industry, it is necessary for managers to encourage both the development and acceptance of a conformist personality type. Higgin (1973) goes further and suggests that our present industrial society is structured to engage in a spurious battle with scarcity, a battle which requires people to subordinate essential aspects of their personality to the acquisition of wealth. Nord (op. cit.) notes the misconception under which behavioural scientists labour, for although they conceive of their work as radical, they act as consultants or change agents within the existing socio-economic system.

It is perhaps too easy to conclude that what is required are widespread changes in societal and organisational structures as well as changes in the values of both organisational members and society as a whole. While such a view may have some validity in response to a listing of what must be very considerable obstacles to any such restructuring it is not surprising that rather than a programme of radical change emerging, disjointed incrementalism (see Lindblom 1965) results, in this approach only small marginal changes are made to existing organisations or processes.

To the extent that organisational psychologists are active in social change 'disjointed incrementalism' is the approach they have adopted. We prefer therefore to adopt a more pragmatic approach, by indicating those aspects of structure which organisational psychologists could most profitably examine, since they have major implications for the development of alternative organisational structures.

We begin by noting that many humanistic psychologists, especially those working in the area of organisation development, are concerned with the problems of the effective management of change. The existence of 'turbulent environments', with which the organisation must learn to cope, through a process 'planned organisational change' towards more 'flexible structures', indicates the flavour of this approach. The necessity for change is universally accepted, as Kostelanetz (1968) observes 'change is the metaphysic of our age'.

Yet strategies are often evolved to cope with this phenomenon without any clear analysis of either the purpose or desirability of change. The manner in which this concept has become part of the core philosophy of organisational psychology mirrors closely the unquestioning acceptance by many economists of the need for 'growth'. Over the past decade criticism of the necessity for growth has begun to emerge within the field of economics itself (see for example Mishan 1967 or Schumacher 1973). These critics have clearly demonstrated that if growth is not regarded as sacrosanct then a range of radically different structures and processes become practicable possibilities. If, in similar fashion, the blind faith in progress through change, was also to be subjected to critical examination, then we might expect that more truly humanistic considerations would guide our conceptions of ideal organisational forms.

By the adoption of a more critical attitude to change the crucial question of what we are organising for would be thrown into sharper focus and would complement the attempts of a group of writers who have already begun to attack this issue from a different perspective (we refer particularly to the work of Ellul 1964, Illich 1973, Higgin op. cit., Vickers 1970, Roszak 1970, and others some of whom are reviewed by Bottomore 1967). Surprisingly the work of such writers seems to have had little impact upon organisational psychologists. To take just one example of this work, Illich introduces the concept of conviviality which he defines in terms of an autonomous and creative intercourse between and among individuals and their environments. He contrasts convivial relationships with the conditioned responses of people to the demands made upon them by their self created environments, which seem so characteristic of present day society. In fact the notion of conviviality does entail an alternative model of man to those currently utilised by organisational psychologists. For example Illich argues that members of affluent societies are degraded to the status

of consumers under the present institutional structures. However, the notion of conviviality remains problematic, for the implicit model of man upon which it rests is not clearly developed. It could be argued that the failure of humanistic psychology to provide social theorists or structural sociologists with an adequate model of man has proved a severe limitation for such writers.

Yet in spite of this limitation Illich demonstrates that present institutional arrangements serve to directly obstruct the development of convivial activities.

He writes:

> *. . . society must be reconstructed to enlarge the contribution of autonomous individuals . . . to the total effectiveness of a new system of production designed to satisfy the human needs which it also determines. In fact the opposite. As the power of the machines increases, the role of persons more and more decreases to that of mere consumers.*

As a part explanation of how present industrial institutions contribute to such social consequences, he offers:

> *Present institutional purposes, which hallow industrial productivity at the expense of convivial effectiveness, are a major factor in the amorphousness and meaninglessness that plague contemporary society.*

We wish to stress here that this viewpoint differs significantly from that of several other writers who have criticised social scientists often from a more or less rigid Marxian position for their unquestioning acceptance of the present socio-economic or institution arrangements (see for example Shaw 1972, Sedgewick 1974 or Ingleby 1974). Such criticisms are based upon the view that by the refusal to question existing structures, social scientists are implicated as accepting the present status quo, and are unwittingly or not adopting a reactionary and exploitative standpoint. Whilst we accept the validity of this criticism in principle, we believe it misses the most crucial point, a point which is implicit rather than explicit in the writings of Illich and others. We articulate this point as the suggestion that present institutional arrangements have a strong tendency to prevent the development of mature, morally responsible people. They achieve this by encouraging individuals to abdicate their moral responsibilities to anonymous mechanistic processes. These mechanistic processes, of which production and efficiency, the inevitability of change (progress) the price mechanism and conventional economic theory, or the logic of boss/subordinate relationships are clear examples, are stitched into the very fabric of our society. So much so that we seldom even question their supposed inevitability and unthinkingly accept their dominance over notions of morality or ethics, be these personal or social. Indeed we are often punished severely by our institutions should we refuse to abdicate our responsibilities in this fashion. It is also apparent how crucial hedonistic models of man are in the continuation of this state of affairs.

The failure of organisational psychologists to contribute substantially to this area is mirrored by a related failure to appreciate the role played by organisations in shaping

their environments. The language of organisation develpment, to which we have referred before, with its stress upon turbulent environments, is so universally accepted that it is often uncritically assumed that whilst societal and economic conditions are major determinants of organisational structures and activities, the influence of organisations in shaping their environments is minimal. We wish most strongly to question this last assumption and to stress that organisations exert considerable power in the shaping of their environments.

As Perrow (1972) writes:

> *Society is adaptive to organisations, to the large powerful organisations controlled by a few often overlapping leaders. To see these arrangements as adaptive to a 'turbulent' dynamic ever - changing environment is to indulge in a fantasy. The environment of most powerful organisations is well controlled by them, quite stable, and made up of other organisations with similar interests or ones they control. Standard Oil and Shell may compete at the intersection of two highways, but they do not compete in the numerous areas where their interests are critical, such as foreign policy, tax laws, import quotas, government funding of research and development, highways expansion, internal combustion engines, pollution restrictions and so on. Nor do they have a particularly turbulent relationship to other powerful organisations such as auto companies, the highway construction firms, the Department of Defence etc.*
>
> *. . . . it is precisely because the dominant organisations . . . have been able . . . to create the environments they desire, shape the existing ones, and to define which sections of it they will deal with, that the failure to link organisations such as these with society is so alarming'.*

One approach which may help to increase our understanding of the nature and scope of this influence has been offered by Urry and Wakeford (1973). They refer to the concept of power, indicate that this concept has proved particularly difficult to quantify in empirical study, but suggest that three main types of power can be identified: economic, political and cultural power. Since we consider that the main contribution that organisational psychologists might make here is to increase our understanding of the nature of cultural power we do not intend to provide an extended analysis of either the economic or political aspects. We may note in passing however that recent predictions indicate that by 1985 some two to three hundred companies will control 75% of the capital assets of the Western world. In combination with the ability of multinational companies to transgress national governmental policies, this entails that they may be expected to exert increasing economic power over their environments. Further we note that exercise of political power by organisations, the control of the sources of force, is intimately related to their economic power. An indication of the nature and extent of this type of power can be gained from an examination of some recent U.K. government policy decisions. The scrapping of plans to nationalise ICI, the formulation of government policy for the exploitation of North Sea Oil, or the recent bailing out of Chrysler UK, are recent and obvious examples.

Urry and Wakeford (op. cit.) define cultural power as the control of resources which transform and interpret the values and norms of society. It is in this area that we believe organisational psychologists have a major role to play in examining the pervasive nature of this influence. Descriptive research would provide perhaps the most useful insights relevant to the crucial question 'what are we organising for', for any discussion of the cultural power of organisations is presented severely limited by the lack of systematic research. In consequence we can do little more at this stage than to suggest the ways in which organisations wield such power, with reference to some commonsense examples.

It can reasonably be argued that organisations are a most powerful influence upon societal norms and values. By the mandate we allow them they define for us what is to be regarded as normal, practical or desirable. The values of industrial society which are based upon notions of ambition, achievement, acquiescence and conformity are created and sustained by our dominant institutions. Reimer (1971) and Illich (1971) have both illustrated in a most powerful fashion how our educational institutions contribute to this process. The instrumental orientation of the Luton car workers (see Goldthorpe 1969) is surely created and encouraged by the experience of such individuals in a variety of work organisations. This view is lent further support by the study of apprentices in the British shipbuilding industry (see Brown 1973) which demonstrated the power of the industrial socialisation process in the shaping of orientations to work. Further the values of loyalty and conservatism are crucial for the continued preservation of existing institutional arrangements. As Hall (1972) has observed:

> *Organisations operate conservatively regardless of whether they are viewed as radical or as reactionary by the general population.*

But perhaps the most pervasive and insidious aspect of the cultural power of organisations is that they limit our horizons both of what is available and what may be possible. In this very real sense they hamper our attempts to see beyond the present social organisation of society. By their lack of attention to this and other issues, organisational psychologists are implicated as agents in the restriction of alternatives. In failing to make any systematic contribution to the question - 'what are we organising for?' the aspects of theories in organisational psychology which appear to be concerned with revelation in human affairs may more correctly be viewed as directly serving the cause of regulation.

Can These Bones Live?

The main points developed up to now may be summarised as follows. We have argued that a paradigm, based upon humanistic psychology, has greatly influenced the work of organisational psychologists. Job enrichment, the study of group and leadership processes, of organisational structures and organisation development, owe a lot to its core ideas. Yet we suggest, that Maslow's theory of a hierarchy of needs crowned by self actualisation, or perhaps even aspects of Carl Rogers' Theory of the phenomenological self which seeks to sustain and develop itself in the expression of

such a need, may unexpectedly and unnecessarily be used to trivialise people. They may be interpreted as portraying a hedonistic image of people, and may be failing in their theories of human action to place sufficient emphasis upon the processes of devising meanings and making choices. Further we have argued throughout that the picture of 'consuming' man, that can be extrapolated from the concepts of need-fulfilment and self-actualisation, is an ideal one for our consumer orientated society, with its philosophy of creating wealth and providing services to facilitate a present gratification of real or imagined wants. This may seem unexpected, for theories of 'growth' motivation have offered some far-reaching criticisms of common socialisation and organisational practices. Yet our analysis, if correct, shows how the humanistic paradigm in organisational studies has lead to dubious insights and suspect practices. It was argued that the 'consumer' man model, advocating a process by which people should use both other and their environments as a means to their hedonistic ends, has provided a rationale for a managerial perspective that conceives of people as objects to be used in certain ways as 'human' resources but 'resources' none the less, that present particular and unique 'problems' of utilisation. We suggest that this approach once accepted may lead to a cycle of alienation between people. Further that the ideas underlying such modern practices as job enrichment, participative management and organisational development have led psychologists to ignore and even support elements of the social world equally as debilitating psychologically as trivial work, oppressive supervision or bureaucratic organisational structures. In this respect we emphasised the facility of people to accept personal responsibility for their actions. We also considered the problems of a utopia as implied in an unqualified job enrichment philosophy, of a 1984 world where people love their jobs and their roles in society, of a mutant form of participation theory perhaps appearing when people working in their hierarchically arranged organisations attempt to assimilate power sharing leadership strategies, and a mindless quest for accommodating to change for change's sake. Next through our consideration of the wider structural arrangements of society, we were able to argue that psychologists have dangerously accepted as legitimate important aspects of the status quo, overlooking the dynamic interchange of structure and process.

In presenting this thesis we are aware that there is a danger that it will be misinterpreted. In passing we observe that despite the fact that Maslow regarded his theory as only a guide to further enquiry a measure of the power of the paradigm generated by his model is that criticism of the precise formulations he offered is regarded as near heresy by many psychologists. Yet it has certainly not been our intention to suggest that the current state of humanistic psychology condemns it permanently to irrelevance or conservatism. On the contrary in fact we remain optimistic that the discipline has potentially a major contribution to make to the resolution of individual organisational and societal problems. We applaud for example the current expose flavour of some of the work in the field, demonstrating as it does a concern for revelation in human affairs, in contrast to the concern for regulation typical of more conventional approaches. Yet while, as we started earlier, we have no criticism of the aims of the humanistic endeavour (we believe revelation is the rightful perspective for a science of man) our analysis has led us to question its current formulations. We conclude that humanistic psychology has led students of organisations to the great crime of doing the right things for the wrong reasons, for

these same wrong reasons appear to lead to serious errors of ommission and commission.

But to return to our optimism for the potential contribution of social science. This stems from the view that social theory stands in a dialectic relationship to its subject matter. Such a view emerges from the work of Berger and Luckman (1966) and has been neatly summarised by Albrow (1974) as follows:-

> *Social phenomena are no longer the products of impersonal forces. As we act and give accounts of action, we are creating society and ourselves.*

Adoption of this anti-positivistic perspective implies that the way in which we conceive of organisations of people is our choice, and in turn that by our choices, we either create new forms or sustain existing ones. It further implies that social scientists can fulfil a crucial role in the development of more humane organisational structures if they so wish.

Acceptance of this position, that we create our own realities is the one around which we have structured this paper. Humanistic organisational psychologists have, we have trid to illustrate, played a major part in both encouraging inherently conservative assumptions about human nature and in sustaining institutional arrangements that reinforce this conservatism.

To combat this trend an urgent overhaul of current concepts and theories is required. Organisational psychology has the potentially vital role to play in exploring the potentials of humanity. The ideas as to what one believes as possible in society and organisations, depend upon the ideas one has of the possibilities in people: it is our contention that organisational psychologists, uniquely placed as they are on the bridge linking explorations of people to explorations of society, should vigorously pursue such a study. Their lasting contribution will, we suggest, be the extent to which they can be judged to have played a pioneering role in the development of 'scenarios of the possible'. Expressing the key task of organisational psychology in this way is deliberately intended to invite comparison with the aims of politicians who describe their work as the 'art of the possible'. While, as Pym (1974) has demonstrated organisational psychologists do, as of now, play political roles, the exploration of scenarios of what is possible invites consideration not primarily of how best to manoeuvre current systems but consideration first of what models of human nature and potentials should guide the design of future systems.

An approach to this task would begin from the position that people discover meanings to account for their experiences, and exercise choice in the development of their actions and identities. This starting point highlights the centrality of the study of how people appreciate their life situations, the frameworks they use and the approaches they develop. It also implies that a rich appreciation of one's situation is desirable, for as people cope with the resulting implications for actions, the range of their possibilities becomes wider. Rousseau said man is born free and then everywhere put in chains. We prefer, though, Szasz's (1973) observation that:

This high-flown phrase obscures the nature of freedom. For if freedom is the ability to make uncoerced choices, then man is born in chains. And the challenge of life is liberation.

Work exploring people's interpretations of life has been attempted by some psychologists (notably for example by Kelly), whilst others (for example Kohlberg) have examined the justifications given for actions. As yet however organisational psychologists have not widely adopted this approach though there are some exceptions: for example Vickers work on appreciation is mentioned by Clark and Krone (1972), Rowan (1974) has attempted to apply Kohlberg's analysis to organisations, and Cooper (op. cit.) has mapped some broad theoretical implications for behavioural science of an approach which focuses upon the core process of meaning. Outside the field of education however, the implications for organisational or societal forms of a paradigm which places the processes of meaning and choice at the core of human existence remain largely unexplored. Consequently we find work in job design, participation or workers control depressingly inadequate. As Cooper suggests, perhaps the issue we should explore is:

Self-management generalised to all our activities - working, learning etc. - not just as a way of socialising a la Marx the institutions through which society keeps moving but as a way of making space for the definition of our real selves. The challenge is to manage ourselves all ways, in and out and right across, not to be steered however benignly by that which is external and above. Democracy is not enough.

Inevitably any rift with past approaches leads to ambiguity, and we are not clear where the considered mapping of utopias that we suggest should be the central task of organisational psychology will lead the discipline. Nor, we strongly emphasise, are we here clearly articulating a model of man to serve as an alternative to the models we have criticised in this paper. Our primary purpose has been to encourage students of organisation to explore a number of crucial issues that have hitherto largely been overlooked by them. While we would ourselves favour an approach which focuses fundamentally on the processes of discovering meaning, exercising choice and taking responsibility our primary intention here has been to direct attention to problems rather than solutions, for it is only through such enquiry that an impetus for new approaches is likely to emerge. When one does it seems likely, though, that it will suggest that organisational forms that faciliatate rather than inhibit 'personal development' may look very different in a convivial society. They may also be engaged on very different tasks. Writers on alternative technology may provide one source of inspiration in this enquiry, as might writing in anthropology, sociology, education, philosophy, religion, politics, science fiction, literature or future studies. We do however consider it appropriate that organisational psychologists rather than technologists or political dogmatists should place themselves in the fore-front of social change.

We began this paper with an anecdote to illustrate the problems that the current paradigm in organisational psychology may have led us towards. We end with another, this one to underline the importance of the points we have developed. Should our

analysis of organisational psychology, as operating with the trappings and not the substance of humanism, be correct, then it is likely only to be a matter of time before we are rejected by those who in good faith turn to us in the expectation of guidelines to a better future.

'There was an old woman in China who had supported a monk for over twenty years. She has built a little hut for him and fed him while he was meditating. Finally she wondered just what progress he had made in all this time.

To find out, she obtained the help of a girl rich in desire. 'Go and embrace him', she told her, 'and then ask him suddenly: what now?'

The girl called upon the monk and without much ado caressed him, asking him what he was going to do about it.

'An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter', replied the monk somewhat poetically. 'Nowhere is there any warmth'.

The girl returned and related what he had said.

'To think I fed that fellow for twenty years!' exclaimed the old woman in anger. 'He showed no consideration for your need, no disposition to explain your condition. He need not have responded to passion, but at least he should have evidenced some compassion'.

She at once went to the hut of the monk and burned it down'.

1 This anecdote, and the one at the start of the paper is taken from Reps P (1971) *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

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