



OD Morphogenesis: The Emerging Dialogic Platform of Premises

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**The following is an abbreviated version of a keynote presentation given at the NTL Conference on The New OD, Silver Spring, MD, USA on March 19, 2010.*

The purpose of this article is to highlight some recent trends in organization development (OD) theory and practice. The term morphogenesis is borrowed from zoology and is used in this context to imply the differentiation in premises and practices occurring during the development of OD, especially related to postmodern and new sciences influences, and potentially leading to different forms of OD.

WHAT'S NEW IN OD?

In recent years there has been a range of conversations at academic and practitioner conferences, and in leading OD-related publications, questioning one or more aspect of OD theory and practice. Usually the concern is about amending some dimension of OD that is considered too limiting while seeking a different formulation to allow a broader range of focus and action. These include at one time or another calls for OD to expand its primary focus on a single organization to include broader systems, such as organizational sectors, communities, or global networks. It also often includes calls to expand issues of concern beyond economic viability and quality of work life to include also issues of social justice, sustainability, global health, climate change, and so forth. The changing contexts that impact how OD is carried out, and some of the issues OD is asked to address, are also noted with calls to expand OD capabilities and responses. These include being better able to address the impacts of globalization, information technology, multi-cultural dynamics, the 24/7 and virtual work worlds, and the general move to leaner and faster moving processes with

people needing to embrace “continuous change.” Some have also wondered whether the underlying humanistic and democratic value system of OD needs to be modified to encourage more pragmatic or business-oriented thinking and action, or that social action values need to be more explicitly added. And, of course, there are all the new OD interventions, or modifications to long standing interventions, that are often the most visible and tangible aspects of any conversation about what is going on in OD; or what is OD; or what is new in OD.

NEW PREMISES, PERMUTATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

What is less discussed, but is the central concern of this article, is how the underlying premises that historically formed the field of OD have been expanding to allow a broader range of new communities of OD practice to emerge. These newer practices, and the ones still on the drawing board, are built not so much on the original platform of foundational OD premises, but on more recent ideas and developments in the social and physical sciences. As such, I believe they rest on an amended, or even a new platform that is linked to the foundational



one, but also has significant differences. I also believe that the official literature of OD (textbooks, academic and practitioner journal articles, and so on) has been slow to recognize and fully articulate the characteristics of the newer platform(s), implicitly fitting everything into the same old shoe of the original ways of thinking. Aspects of this may be merited, but the newer or more recent premises and practices are then described in terms of the preceding ideas, and not allowed to be experienced and developed in their own right, thereby limiting their full potential. Instead of this confluence, greater explicit differentiation and recognition of what I am calling here OD platforms (of premises) would encourage more innovation and fuller realization of the potential these newer premises offer. More explicit recognition of similarities, differences, and linkages among the various premises making up today's world of OD might also encourage greater breadth, depth, and innovation in practices.

ONE EXAMPLE: CHANGING THEORIES OF CHANGE

To help illustrate my point, let us take a quick look at how the premises underlying OD change theory have emerged over time. Table 1 suggests four main influences on how change is conceptualized in organizations. One is based on the mechanical sciences and implies organizations are closed, determinate systems with productivity and efficiency as primary criteria and where changes are needed to "fix" or "re-engineer" some process or function, especially when "broken." Another is based on the biological sciences and views organizations as contingent, open systems. Alignment, congruence and successful strategic positioning of the organization become key criteria and change is needed when the organization must adapt or re-position itself given changes in its environment. These two ways of thinking about organizations dominated organization and management theory in the first 60 to 70 years of the last century. They, especially open systems theory, were the dominant theories when OD was first formulated and both helped shape OD thinking about the whats, whys and hows of organizational change in the foundational years of the late 1950s to the late 1970s.

These ways of thinking about organizations and change have continued to shape OD theory and practice into the new century, but have been augmented by two newer ways of thinking since about the 1980s. A range of ideas linked to social construction, meaning-making, organization culture, and the role of language, conversation, and discourse, among others, are loosely bundled here as part of what I am calling the interpretive sciences. Instead of assuming an objective reality to be discovered or discerned, the interpretive sciences view organizations as generative, meaning making systems where participants are actively involved in the social construction and re-construction of their reality. The current popular interest in changing the conversation as a primary way to achieve organizational change is a reflection of this way of thinking. "If all transformation is linguistic, then we create a new future by having new conversations" (Block, 2008: p. 36). Change is a function of asking different questions or reframing and/or re-naming organizational phenomena. Another stream of thinking originating in physics, but gaining prominence in the social sciences in the 1990s, directly addresses change and change theory. Drawing on chaos and complexity theory, organizations are conceived of as complex adaptive systems. Instead of planned, episodic change these newer ideas suggest that change can be both continuous and self-organizing. Consequently, start-stop ways of thinking about change are replaced with ideas about facilitating minimally bounded processes of re-creation and transformation; staying with the flux and flow of things while fostering the emergence of new possibilities at the edge of chaos.

While all four ways of thinking about organizations and change are now employed in OD practice the original versions of OD were invented before some of the later theories came into clear focus and application. Partly as a result, in the early days of OD change was generally conceived of as something that was planned, developmental, linear, and episodic. In contrast, in today's world, change can be all those things and also: self-organizing, transformational, cyclical, and/or continuous. Despite these differences in premises - that are also leading to differences in practices - start-stop models

Source:	Mechanical Sciences (1900s to Present)	Biological Sciences (1960s to Present)	Interpretive Sciences (1980s to Present)	Complexity Sciences (1990s to Present)
Organizations are:	Determinate, closed systems	Contingent, open systems	Generative, meaning making systems	Complex adaptive systems
Focus on:	Efficiency, plans, structure, IT, productivity	Alignment, congruence, strategic plans	Discourse, meaning making, culture, consciousness	Chaos, self-organization, emergent design
Change by:	Fix & Re-engineer	Adapt & Re-position	Reframe & Rename	Flux & Emergence

Table 1: Influences on Change Theories



of planned change (for example, unfreeze-movement-refreeze) still seem to dominate the thinking of most managers and consultants.

FOUNDATIONAL PREMISES OF OD

At some risk of over-simplification, or ignoring other important contributions, Figure 1 suggests seven foundational premises that together helped create the original “platform” upon which the early practices of OD were developed. Most of these are still described in leading textbooks and articles about the practice of OD, and newer developments are often presented in ways to imply they also fit with or are built upon this founding platform of premises. The following are some brief comments on each of the components of Figure 1:



Figure 1: Foundational Premises of OD

- 1. Positivism and Univocality.** Although not explicitly described in OD textbooks, the physical, biological, and social sciences of the mid-twentieth century were predominantly based in scientific positivism and notions of a single transcendent truth. In brief, there is a single, underlying, objective reality impacting people, organizations and events that can be discovered, analyzed and changed using scientific methods.
- 2. Social Psychology and the Primacy of Small Groups.** Much of foundational OD and planned change approaches draw on social-psychological theories originally advanced by Lewin, in particular the primacy of small groups in setting and reinforcing norms and attitudes (Cartwright & Zander, 1968; Lewin, 1943; 1947).

3. Open Systems Theory. Beginning in the 1960s, leading organizational theorists advanced the proposition that organizations should be conceived of as open systems needing to adapt to their environments, and not as closed, mechanistic systems primarily pursuing efficiency criteria. By the early 1970s this became the dominant view of organizations in virtually all OD textbooks and practices (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969; Von Bertalanffy, 1968).

4. Humanistic Psychology. The 1950s witnessed an outpouring of alternative views to the then prevailing psychoanalytic and behavioral theories of Freud and Skinner. This Third Wave of psychology advanced a more positive view of human potential at work and in general. The contributions of such people as Maslow, Rogers, and McGregor about a positive view of people and their potential to develop under the right conditions helped establish the humanistic values and practices that became a cornerstone of OD theory and practice (Maslow, 1954; McGregor, 1960; Rogers, 1961).

5. Action Research and Process Consultation. Two of the most influential sets of related theories about how OD consultants should work with client systems are action research (Lewin, 1947) and process consultation (Schein, 1969). These approaches and associated methods help provide the foundational OD premise that involving participants in data-collection, diagnosis, reflection, and action taking can create change.

6. Planned Change. Linked to Lewin's original ideas about systems existing in quasi-stationary fields of forces, later theorists proposed that change can be planned by intentionally altering the field of forces. Furthermore, following the Lewin formulation of “unfreeze-movement-refreeze,” change is implicitly episodic and intended to move purposefully from a problematic current state to a more desirable future state (Lippitt, Watson & Westley, 1958).

7. Humanistic and Democratic Values. Finally, all of these foundational premises and associated practices are configured and given coherence by a set of loosely defined and still evolving humanistic and democratic values: involvement, participation, dignity, respect, power equalization, social responsibility, and so forth (Tannenbaum & Davis, 1969).

Over the past 50 years these foundational premises have been the platform upon which OD textbooks have been written, graduate and certificate programs designed, and practices developed and described. Other theories and premises could also be included, but these should suffice to make the point that while OD is notoriously difficult to define, there is still a rough platform of foundational theories, ideas, values and methods that make something OD, or not OD.



MORE RECENT PREMISES

Perhaps starting in the 1980s and accelerating in recent years, different theories and ideas have been advanced in the physical, biological and social sciences and have been incorporated into the thinking and practices of both scholars and practitioners of OD. The question that arises for me is have we now reached a point where there has been enough of an accumulation of ideas sufficiently different from the foundational premises to suggest that different forms of OD now exist, but have not, perhaps, been fully recognized or described in the texts and educational programs that “officially” define the field. Consider the following. What if virtually every single one of the previously described premises was more or less “replaced” by a different premise? Considered one by one, that might simply mean a new theory, intervention or practice had emerged. What if, however, they were all, or virtually all, changed and that the new premises were coherent enough with each other to suggest their own platform of premises and associated practices? While the new platform of premises might still be considered OD, it might also be usefully considered as a different form of OD needing to be recognized and developed in its own right.

Let us now see if this speculation suggests a plausible morphogenesis of OD as experienced and practiced today. Figure 2 shows changes to six of the original seven premises that helped form OD theory and practice. The seventh premise about humanistic and democratic values is certainly being questioned in some ways today, but enough remains unquestioned to suggest that its value system is what holds OD together as a more or less recognizable field of practice. To be clear: the following discussion is not to suggest that these ideas have replaced the founding premises, but that they now compose a coherent enough platform of different enough premises to suggest they are an alternative form of OD.



Figure 2: More Recent Premises in OD

Let us now take a quick look at each of these more recent developments that in some ways are directly challenging the original premises and, in others, augmenting or altering them in substantive ways:

1. **Social Construction and Plurivocality** instead of positivism and univocality. Many more recent forms of OD are explicitly based in theories of social construction and notions of multiple, immanent truths. There may or may not be objective facts in the world, but it is how we socially define and describe those facts that create meaning in social systems. Furthermore, there is no single objective reality, per se; nor a single authoritative voice or version of reality. Instead, a multiplicity of diverse voices and actors need to be recognized (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996).
2. **Large Group/System Events** instead of small group interventions. Large group events are used to bring together broader system stakeholders to agree on common agendas (get the whole system in the room). While small group premises may be used within the context of any given large group event, these approaches imply not only a difference in size (large versus small), but also a difference in orchestration and implicit change premises (Bunker & Alban, 2005).
3. **Meaning-Making Systems** instead of open systems. Consistent with constructionist thinking, people and organizations are considered to be dialogic, meaning-making systems where reality/truth is continuously created through social agreement on one from many possible interpretations. What happens in organizations is influenced more by how people make meaning than how presumably objective external factors and forces impact the system (Boje, 1991; Boje & Khadija, 2005; Weick, 1995).
4. **Participative Action Inquiry** instead of action research (and process consultation, to a lesser degree). Ideas of participatory action inquiry have been expanding the original ideas about action research. In the original formulation, behavioral scientists involved client system members at various times in studying themselves and making action choices. Today, the methods and degrees of involvement reflect a much broader conception of participation; and inquiry versus a more diagnostic stance has been advocated by many as an alternative way to engage and change a system. The resulting processes of participative inquiry, engagement, and reflection are then presumed to lead to new social agreements and possibilities (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).
5. **Discursive Studies**. The new field of organizational discourse emerged in the mid-1990s along with the linguistic turn in the social sciences. The relevant main presumption is that language, narratives, stories, conversations and so forth are constructive of social



reality and not simply representational. Consequently, language and discourse are a central aspect of change and meaning-making processes in human systems. This is one of the principle theoretical justifications for “changing the conversation” as an intervention in and of itself (Grant et. al, 1998; Grant et. al, 2005; Marshak, 2002; Marshak & Grant, 2008).

6. **Complexity, Self-Organizing, and Continuous Change** instead of planned, episodic change.

In contrast to start-stop thinking about change processes, more recent theories and experience with organizational change suggest a different set of premises. Change needs to be thought about as an ongoing process rather than an episodic, planned event. Organizations are self-organizing, complex, adaptive systems, not closed or open systems. Change is continuous and can be more dialectical rather than teleological. (Marshak, 1993; Shaw, 2002; Stacy, 2001; Van de Venn & Poole, 1995).

7. **Humanistic and Democratic Values** continue to be advocated or assumed, even with some challenges to alter them in some way. Despite all the differences in premises, all are still configured and given coherence by the same, or a similar set, of loosely defined and evolving humanistic and democratic values as advocated in the original formulation of OD: involvement, participation, dignity, respect, power equalization, social responsibility, and so forth. This is why this platform should be considered a different form of OD rather than a different form of social change altogether (Bushe & Marshak, 2009; Marshak & Bushe, 2009).

Interestingly, for some newer practitioners this set of premises, or a substantial subset, are what they have learned *is* OD. They may or may not be familiar with the foundational platform that helped create the field. Older or more experienced practitioners, on the other hand, may be more familiar with the foundational principles and practices, and in some cases consider these more recent ideas not as contributing to a separate form(s) of OD, but as variations or options to be built on the foundational platform of ideas. The result is increasing difficulty in discussing OD as a coherent field of practice, as well as where the field, as a whole, may be headed. Instead, communities of practice associated with one or another of the main premises are tending to talk more among themselves about what they are doing, and where *their* domain of practice is headed.

PLATFORMS OF POSSIBILITIES

There are three aspects of what has been covered that I wish to underscore at this point. One is that I am suggesting that recent theoretical and applied developments offer different possibilities and practices than found in foundational OD. Second, I am also suggesting that many of the more recent developments are converging in ways to begin the outline of a different

platform upon which to shape OD practices. As far as I know, this has not been recognized in the literature or teaching about the field as a whole. Instead these developments are often positioned such that they are explicitly or implicitly considered to be additions to the foundational platform or perhaps novelties or slight deviations from more orthodox approaches. One consequence of this is to limit, to some degree, the ability of theorists and practitioners of these more recent approaches from fully expressing their own ideas in their own ways, as opposed to through the framing of the foundational premises. This may reduce anxiety in the field as a whole about the effects of such differentiation, but it also hampers innovation and broad understanding of the range of possibilities now widely present and being practiced around the world. Partly as a way to help legitimate discussions about the possibility of multiple forms of OD, my colleague, Gervase Bushe, and I recently labelled more or less what is presented here as the foundational platform, *Diagnostic OD*, and the more recent platform, *Dialogic OD* (Bushe and Marshak, 2009; Marshak and Bushe, 2009). Others may choose to debate if these two forms exist or which one is superior; I simply wish to assert that I think both currently exist and that OD, as a field, would benefit from a clearer differentiation of them in official texts, research accounts, conference conversations, and OD degree and certificate programs.

The third aspect I would like to underscore is that people are more and more drawing on and combining the newer premises such that some practices now include a combination of several or even all of them. Perhaps, when some of these ideas were first introduced, OD practices emerged that were built primarily on the original foundational platform, but with perhaps one new twist or variation. Today however, various combinations of the premises - for example, facilitating constructivist discourse and meaning-making in large group settings - are being routinely applied in practice. Some may even be said to be working now from the complete dialogic platform almost exclusively:

It is this increasing convergence of ideas of complexity, diversity, plurality and interdependence in a socially-constructed world of human action that is leading many organizational practitioners to attend to, and work with, the self-organizing, self-referential, sense-making interactions with people as the key processes of organizational stability and change. (Shaw, 2002: p. 141)

Whatever your current thinking or preferences as to OD and social change theory and practice the good news is that there is a growing diversity of possibilities now being developed and practiced around the world. This, however, has not been well described or understood in the official literatures of the field making sharing and choices more difficult. I hope, therefore, that this brief article will help shape future discussions and understandings within the field of OD specifically, and social change more generally.



BIOGRAPHY

Robert J. Marshak, Ph.D. has been an internal and external organizational consultant for more than 35 years and is currently Senior Scholar in Residence for the AU/

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