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The Postmodern Turn in OD

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Recent years have witnessed an emerging set of OD practices based on premises that are different from key assumptions of the founders. In this article we want to identify this new form of OD and bring the underlying assumptions into the mainstream of theory and practice.

Different Forms of OD

Many of the premises underlying the original or *classical* formulation of OD are based in modernist science. Classical OD assumes that a team or organization can be studied using empirical methods before intervening. Starting with Lewin the commitment to scientific inquiry may well be why OD is one of the few fields of consulting practice to also be recognized as a scholarly discipline. In many writings, and virtually all OD textbooks, the purpose of data gathering is described as “diagnosis” – the organization exists as an entity that needs examination prior to prescribing remedies. That formulation links with another element of classical OD, the emphasis on the organization as an open or living system. Classical OD assumes that like real living systems, if we can understand the interdependence between all parts of the organization and its environment, we can identify how it all ought to work together to produce the best outcomes.

Postmodern forms of OD think about organizations differently. Without denying the utility of open systems theory, a dialogical narrative has supplanted the organic one. Intervening into the meaning

making process is the objective. In any large group there are multiple realities so any data collected is used not to identify the problem, or *the truth*, but to raise collective awareness of the multitude of perspectives at play in the system and/or the meaning-making process itself. *Table 1* summarizes some of the contrasts between what we are calling classical OD and newer forms, or postmodern OD.

Another difference to note is classical OD’s focus on changing behavior. Postmodern OD practices focus on changing what people think, instead of focusing on changing behavior, with the assumption that once people change how they make sense of things they will change their own behavior. *Table 2* provides a suggestive list of some current OD practices that might be considered, in whole or in part, to include postmodern forms of OD.

Continuing OD Values

While postmodern forms of OD have different assumptions about what can be changed and how, they continue to embrace classical OD’s humanistic and democratic values. These values and ideals are reflected in the empowering and collaborative nature of postmodern OD practices, the facilitative and enabling role of the consultant, and the underlying goal of developing and enhancing organizations and broader social systems.

OD consultants operating from postmodern premises use methods consistent with traditional OD ideals like

Table 1: Contrasting Forms of OD

	Classical OD:	Postmodern OD:
Differences	Influenced by classical science and modernist thought and philosophy	Influenced by the new sciences and postmodern thought and philosophy.
	Organization as living system	Organization as meaning making system
	Reality is an objective fact	Reality is socially constructed
	There is a single reality	There are multiple realities
	Truth is transcendent and discoverable	Truth is immanent and emerges from the situation
	Reality can be discovered using rational and analytic processes	Reality is socially negotiated
	Collecting and applying valid data using objective problem-solving methods leads to change	Raising collective awareness and generating new possibilities and social agreements leads to change
	Emphasis on changing behavior and what people do	Emphasis on changing mindsets and what people think
Similarities	Strong humanistic and democratic values	
	Consultants stay out of content and focus on process	
	A concern for capacity building and development of the system	

free and informed choice, authenticity and congruence, participative democracy, trust and collaboration. Postmodern OD processes often attempt to circumvent the power of entrenched groups to equalize the variety of interests represented in the system, giving everyone as much equal footing in the co-construction of new realities as possible. The role of the consultant in postmodern OD is also consistent with facilitating and enabling

others as opposed to providing expert advice. Like the classical OD consultant, the postmodern OD consultant's expertise is in understanding human social dynamics and in offering change and decision-making processes that support organizational goals and OD values. The OD consultant, classical or postmodern, is concerned with developing the capacity of the client system and not developing client dependence on the consultant. The consultant therefore stays out of the content and focuses, instead, on processes while members of the system deal with the content.

Table 2: Examples of Postmodern OD Practices

- » Practices based on social constructionism such as appreciative inquiry
- » Practices used in large group interventions to seek and achieve common ground
- » Practices intended to change the consciousness of leaders and organizations
- » Practices used to recognize, work with and address multi-cultural realities
- » Discursive practices such as dialog, narrative, sense-making, changing conversations, etc.

Table 3: Basic, Shared Characteristics of Postmodern OD Practices

1. The change process emphasizes changing the conversations that normally take place in the system through changing who is in the conversation, how the conversation is run and/or what the conversation is about.
2. The change process creates containers for greater total system awareness and self-organization.
3. The purpose of inquiry is to surface, legitimate, and/or learn from the variety of perspectives, cultures and/or narratives in the system.
4. The change process results in new images, stories, and socially constructed realities that impact how people think and act.
5. The change process is consistent with traditional OD values of collaboration, free and informed choice, and capacity building in the client system.

This emphasis on the consultant's role in capacity building links to the final characteristic all forms of OD share, an interest in *development*. There are, at a minimum, three common themes. First, a person, group, organization or network is more developed the greater awareness it has of itself – it can talk to itself about itself. Secondly, in a more developed system, emotional, reactive behavior decreases and rational, goal directed behavior increases. Third, the more developed the system, the better able it is to actualize its potential. These ideas about development are implicit in all forms of OD, although specific practices may differ.

Toward a Definition of Postmodern OD

To help define this burgeoning field of practice we offer in *Table 3* a set of five characteristics for categorizing postmodern OD.

In brief, rather than collecting data to diagnose a system prior to intervening, postmodern OD creates events that facilitate collective inquiry into the multiple "realities" in order to generate new collective understandings and cognitive maps that will lead to a team's or organization's further self development.

Conclusion

We are witnessing the emergence of new forms of organizing that are co-evolving with the information revolution and it is not surprising that these require new

forms of OD. Postmodern forms of OD will not attempt to diagnose systems in the traditional sense so much as attempt to create events where organizational members increase their awareness of the system and how social reality is being constructed by them. This can then lead to the central contribution of postmodern forms of OD: *generativity*, the creation of new possibilities based on new meanings, new ideas and new energy to do something with them.

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