



Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies

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Culture: The Missing
Concept in
Organization Studies

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Inattention to social systems in organizations has led researchers to underestimate the importance of culture—shared norms, values, and assumptions—in how organizations function. Concepts for understanding culture in organizations have value only when they derive from observation of real behavior in organizations, when they make sense of organizational data, and when they are definable enough to generate further study. The attempt to explain what happened to “brainwashed” American prisoners of war in the Korean conflict points up the need to take both individual traits and culture into account to understand organizational phenomena. For example, the failure of organizational learning can be understood more readily by examining the typical responses to change by members of several broad occupational cultures in an organization. The implication is that culture needs to be observed, more than measured, if organization studies is to advance.

The purpose of this brief essay is to note that organizational psychology is slowly evolving from an individualistic point of view toward a more integrated view based on social psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In this evolution we have absorbed some of the more important concepts from these fields such as role, norm, and network, but we have not yet sufficiently understood the impact of culture. Even though I have worked on culture as a variable for over 10 years, I keep being surprised by how little I understand its profound influence in situation after situation. I believe our failure to take culture seriously enough stems from our methods of inquiry, which put a greater premium on abstractions that can be measured than on careful ethnographic or clinical observation of organizational phenomena. I will begin historically and then give a couple of examples of where culture comes into play in the explanation of phenomena that have not been sufficiently understood. This will put more focus on occupational cultures that are global and raise the possibility that organizations are not the right unit of study for certain purposes. In the end, I also hope that we as researchers will come to recognize how much our own methods and concepts are a product of our own culture.

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY**

The concept of organizational psychology was introduced in the early 1960s by Hal Leavitt and Bernie Bass in an article for the *Annual Review of Psychology* (Leavitt and Bass, 1964) and by Bernie Bass and me in textbooks with that title (Bass, 1965; Schein, 1965). The important issue at that time was to separate out from a fairly well-developed industrial psychology those elements of social psychology and sociology that dealt specifically with group and organizational phenomena. A number of new concepts were introduced into the field but, as I look back on it, most of them dealt with properties of the individual and were clearly derivative from psychology. Though we paid lip service to and reviewed the work of organizational sociologists in our

books, I have a feeling we did not then and maybe do not even now take them very seriously.

Most of the business schools that adopted this field hired industrial or social psychologists and called it "organization behavior," a label with which I was never comfortable because it struck me as a kind of conceptual oxymoron. Either we were anthropomorphizing the legal entity called the corporation, or we were loosely adopting a kind of behaviorist model that derived much more from individualistic psychology than organizational reality. At the MIT Sloan School I remember insisting that we call our newly formed group "Organization Studies" to allow us to bring in whatever disciplines were relevant to the understanding of organizational phenomena. At that time we did not really know very much about what went on in organizations. We dealt in abstractions, not real phenomena, and we did not really know how to incorporate some of the significant findings of Roethlisberger and Dickson in the Hawthorne studies, the industrial field studies of Trist, Rice, and Jaques in the Tavistock Institute, Sherif's boys' camp studies that illustrated intergroup phenomena so clearly, and, of course, Kurt Lewin's groundbreaking work on group norms and leadership styles.

For their part, the organizational sociologists paid equally little attention to what the psychologists had learned about individual differences, testing and selection methods, training and development, incentives, motivation, and rewards. This was illustrated for me personally in the field of career studies, where the sociologists of occupations such as Hughes, Becker, and Osipow made no references at all to the groundbreaking work of Strong, Super, Holland, and other vocational psychologists, and vice versa. The sociologists knew all about occupations but not how people got into them, and the psychologists knew all about how people chose occupations and how they could be helped in this process, but nothing about what it was like once one was in one.

In the 1970s, organization studies maintained its bias toward the individual in that we continued to ignore the huge amount that the sociologists of occupations knew about the realities of what went on in organizational life, even though those studies were often focused on occupations rather than organizations as such. Melville Dalton's (1959) *Men Who Manage* was a kind of exposé of what organizational life was really all about, and Katz and Kahn's (1966) *Social Psychology of Organizations* made a valiant effort to get us to think systemically and in terms of networks and roles, but my impression is that the individualistic psychological bias continued to rule.

In part this was due to the discovery that organizations were mean to people. Argyris's (1957) classic *Personality and Organization* made it very clear that organizations infantilized their employees, and McGregor in *Human Side of Enterprise* (1960) argued persuasively that most managerial control systems created a negative view of human nature that people eventually adopted, not because they are that way but because the organization trained them to be that way.

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Following Lewin's studies of the positive longer-range benefits of the democratic leadership style, Likert and many others saw the need to retrain managers, to teach them "human relations," and to show them that human nature was not intrinsically bad. Organization behavior became an advocate for more humane treatment of employees by showing that people were in the long run more productive and creative if they were treated as adults. The fact that short-run productivity in the autocratically run groups was just as high has seemingly been forgotten. We focused on productivity defined in terms of the individual's ability to be productive and creative but did not consider the systemic forces that operated in organizations to make managers, especially at the top of organizations, behave in the autocratic way they tended to do. We focused on charismatic leadership and became prescriptive, rather than studying the realities of what executives in organizations dealt with on a day-to-day basis. We viewed the organization from the bottom up and took the employee's point of view rather than seeing it as a complex system consisting of many conflicting points of view. We acknowledged the existence of group norms but failed to note that norms across wider social units such as entire organizations or occupations had a decisive influence on how those systems operated. And if we thought those norms were inimical to "organizational health," we glibly called for leaders to change them. We did not grasp that norms held tacitly across large social units were much more likely to change leaders than to be changed by them. We failed to note that "culture," viewed as such taken-for-granted, shared, tacit ways of perceiving, thinking, and reacting, was one of the most powerful and stable forces operating in organizations.

The individualistic bias and the underestimating of the power of culture can be understood historically if we think about how we get concepts in the first place, what our methods of inquiry are that lead to our abstractions. Here, too, the psychologists have not paid enough attention to the sociologists and anthropologists whose traditions have been to go out into the field and observe a phenomenon at length before trying to understand it. And, for their part, the sociologists have not paid enough attention to the impact of individual differences on the social phenomena that they observed.

CONCEPTS AND METHODS OF INQUIRY

I start with an emphasis on concepts and methods of inquiry because knowledge in the human sciences arises initially through combining the clinical and ethnographic insights of the trained observer with ever-better theory. The field can progress only when we have a set of concepts (1) that are anchored in and derive from concrete observations of real behavior in real organizations, (2) that hang together and make sense of the data that we observe as we study organizations, (3) that are amenable to some kind of formal and operational definition so that they can be studied further, and (4) that provide some link to the concerns of practitioners who are solving real organizational problems here and now.

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As I look back, what is missing most in our methods of research is the anchoring of our concepts in observed reality (Schein, 1987). We have gone too quickly to formal elegant abstractions that seemingly could be operationally defined and measured, i.e., centralization-decentralization, differentiation-integration, power, etc., and failed to link these to observed reality. I say "seemingly" because in the effort to define such concepts, we often relied on further abstractions, i.e., questionnaire responses, and began to treat the abstractions as the reality. Not only does this create fuzzy theory and research that is made significant only by massaging the data statistically, but the results are often useless to the practitioner.

The role of the practitioner is quite visible when one reviews these fields historically. The important theoretical and empirical advances came in response to social needs. We needed to explain the bizarre behaviors that occurred under Nazism (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950), we needed to prove that democratic forms of government had validity (Lewin, Lippitt, and White, 1939), we needed to know how to design economical communication systems for civil defense shelters and sensible methods for rationing in World War II (e.g., Lewin, 1943; Bavelas, 1948, 1950), we needed to understand and ameliorate the racial intergroup conflicts that plagued us in the 1940s (e.g., Sherif et al., 1961), we needed to develop tests to recruit for the military both in World War I and II (Stouffer et al., 1949), we needed to develop concepts of organizations that were both very productive and had high morale (McGregor, 1960; Likert, 1967), and so on. My point is that breakthrough research was driven in part by the need to contribute to the solution of highly visible real problems that were plaguing us at that time. We had real data around which to build our abstractions. Throughout this time, the concept of group norms was in good repute, but for some reason it was rarely applied to groups larger than teams or problem-solving units. For me, the larger culture issues surfaced first in relation to my serendipitous research on repatriates from the Korean conflict.

COERCIVE PERSUASION: INDIVIDUAL OR ORGANIZATIONAL PHENOMENON?

The connection between social needs and empirical research became very clear when the opportunity presented itself to study the behavior of prisoners of war (POWs) in the Korean conflict. The early exchange of sick and wounded prisoners had revealed that many POWs had seemingly collaborated with the enemy and had exhibited behaviors that were incomprehensible, such as making false confessions of dropping germ bombs. The three branches of the military combined to do a thorough screening of all the repatriates and to learn "what had gone wrong" or what did "brainwashing" actually consist of. Edward Hunter's books by that title implied Pavlovian conditioning, hypnosis, drugs, and other esoteric methods seemingly learned from the Russians during the heyday of Communism (Hunter, 1951, 1956).

Though none of us who were sent to Korea to debrief the repatriates had experimental, survey, or even tightly

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controlled interview data, the need to understand what had happened when POWs allegedly collaborated with the enemy and changed their attitudes toward Communism was so great that most of us who were fortunate enough to have talked to the repatriates found ourselves having to invent and develop new concepts to explain the observed and reported events (e.g., Schein, 1956, 1961a; Lifton, 1961; Biderman, 1963). The concepts available in psychology at the time were simply not capable of explaining the observed behavior.

To understand what had happened to the individual prisoner in POW camps and to the Western civilian prisoners in the political prisons on the Chinese mainland, it was necessary to understand the entire milieu that the captor was able to create through (1) the manipulation of information such as withholding supportive mail, telling one prisoner that another had already confessed, showing forged documents to that effect, or constant lecturing and indoctrination on the Chinese Communist point of view toward the Korean War; (2) the manipulation of incentives, such as indeterminate prison sentences until the prisoner was willing to make a "sincere" confession, punishment for false confessions or other forms of "resistance," or rewards for any small steps in the right direction toward confession; (3) the manipulation of group support by removing leaders from groups, by breaking up relationships if they stimulated resistance, by tying the fate of a group cell to the progress of its most resistant member; and (4) the captor's complete sincerity and conviction in his efforts to convert the prisoner to a new point of view.

What we viewed as a cynical kind of social psychological torture, the captor viewed as a normal process of teaching Westerners the realities of Chinese Communism, a process that was widely practiced throughout China in the process of the Communists' political takeover. The Chinese Communist movement had been forged out of a common experience and had resulted in a shared view of the world that can quite legitimately be called a culture. One of the main forces operating within that culture was what many observers called a "passion for unanimity," which reflected itself in the zeal that all of the interrogators, prison guards, and ordinary citizens displayed in their dealing with Western prisoners. And it was this zeal that often proved decisive in opening up the mind of the prisoner, not the discomfort of prison life.

My point in rehashing some of the phenomena of coercive persuasion, as I came to call this process, is that we sided with the prisoner and did a good job of trying to understand what happened that would account for changes in attitudes and the kind of "cognitive redefinition" that caused prisoners to make sincere confessions. We did not, however, pay enough attention to the organizational implications, to the concept of milieu control, to the creation of an environment by the manipulation and control of multiple variables to create certain organizational outcomes, and to the role of a shared belief system in integrating the various components of the social system. Leaders and executives think in terms of such systems of incentives and controls and are concerned about shared values and beliefs because they are

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dealing with thousands rather than a few immediate subordinates, and it is their ability to organize thousands that creates some of the most effective organizations we have seen. Instead of focusing on the negative effects of such shared belief systems and the milieu control they generate, should we not think more about the forces that create such cultures in the first place and thereby influence in executives the tendencies to manage in the way they do?

On the level of social process, I saw many parallels between what the Chinese Communists were doing and what we do every day in families, in schools, in prisons, and in private and public organizations under the concepts of training, development, and socialization (Schein, 1961b). The goals are different, but the methods are remarkably similar. When we disapprove, we call it a cult and deplore it; when we approve, we call it an effective indoctrination program, such as a boot camp or academy. We need to understand better what the forces are that cause organizations of all kinds to create similar cultural milieux, incentive and control systems that operate in the same way, even though the goals of the organizations are quite different.

My own understanding of this phenomenon came about from seeing more clearly that cultures arise in whole occupational communities and that, therefore, parts of organizations are as much a reflection of the occupational backgrounds and experiences of some of their members as they are of their own unique organizational histories (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Because I did not observe organizational phenomena carefully enough, I assumed that the unique history of an organization would eventually override the prior cultural assumptions of all of their employees, but, as I will try to point out below, this may not be the case either for certain classes of professionals in organizations or for chief executives. My own insight into this phenomenon crystallized as a result of an effort to understand why so many of the programs of organization development and organizational learning that we launched with so much enthusiasm seemed not to survive or diffuse across hierarchical or functional boundaries within organizations or across organizations within broader industrial sectors. I look first at why organizational learning has assumed such importance and then analyze the obstacles to such learning.

OCCUPATIONAL CULTURES AND THE FAILURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Scholars of organizations have talked about organizational adaptation, coping, learning, adjusting to their environment, and so on for as long as the field has existed. The field of planned change and organization development is all about learning and was already well articulated by Lippitt, Watson, and Westley in 1958 in the *Dynamics of Planned Change*. The postwar efforts of the Tavistock Institute under Rice, Trist, Bridger, Jaques, and many others were entirely devoted to how to help organizations to learn. The entire last chapter of my 1965 first edition and the subsequent editions of *Organizational Psychology* argued that one of the central

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conditions of organizational health was the ability to cope and adapt and specified several mechanisms and conditions for such coping. Learning is, however, a basically individualistic concept drawn directly from psychology, where it is highly developed, and we have not yet settled on a good definition of what it might mean for an organization to learn. Argyris and Schon (1996) finesse this issue by arguing that when individuals are in organizational roles acting on behalf of the organization, we can think of the organization as learning. By contrast, Cook and Yanow (1993) argue persuasively that organizations do have to perform as total organizational units, and their ability to do so under changing environmental conditions must be legitimately thought of as organizational learning without attributing any consciousness to the organization *per se*.

The intensive attention to this concept in the 1990s has to do with the fact that organizations both in the public and private sector have discovered that they are not efficient enough, given the levels of global competition and shrinking resources. The crisis of today is not war but how to remain competitive in a rapidly changing global context in which the U.S. is no longer an overwhelmingly dominant player. From the perspective of the market-based economy operating in Western capitalist societies the fact that thousands of laid-off employees may be suffering economic deprivation as a result of worldwide "downsizing" is only a small problem when the very survival of total organizations and industries is viewed to be at issue.

What is different today is that organizations are more in trouble and that the environment is changing faster. Leaders both in the private and public sector are wrestling with difficult economic problems, and the public at large has become cynical about the money spent by organizations, particularly public organizations, on social services. Technological advances have made some of these services, such as health care, so sophisticated and expensive that we are having to assess what social values are being served and what role government should play in the delivery of those services. Other technological advances, particularly those in information technology, have made it possible to conceive of new kinds of organizing principles that do not depend on co-location in time or space. All of this requires tremendous learning—how to collaborate, how to become more trusting and open in communications, how to deal with dependency in the new kinds of fluid hierarchical relationships, how to wield personal vs. positional power without losing the commitment of subordinates, how to design organizations with fluid boundaries, and so on.

One phenomenon that is frequently observed in this context is that new methods of learning or solving problems do not diffuse or even become embedded in the organizations that first used them. Organizations display what can be thought of as "learning disabilities," or what Argyris might call "defensive routines" that get in the way of the kind of second-order learning that may be needed in today's turbulent world (Argyris and Schon, 1996). Individual projects

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learn new methods of operating, but these methods do not diffuse to other groups or organizations.

If we go back into the field and observe carefully what goes on when organizations attempt to improve their operations in response to new data from the economic, political, and technological environment, we discover the critical role that culture and subcultures play in this process. I am defining culture as the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about, and reacts to its various environments (Schein, 1992). Norms become a fairly visible manifestation of these assumptions, but it is important to remember that behind the norms lies this deeper taken-for-granted set of assumptions that most members of a culture never question or examine. The members of a culture are not even aware of their own culture until they encounter a different one.

As I observe efforts to improve efficiency and effectiveness in many different kinds of organizations I have noticed that there are operating silently within each of them three different cultures. Two of these cultures are based on larger occupational communities and thus are more stable in the assumptions they hold (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984).

Three Cultures of Management

The "operators." The group we typically work with I will call the "operators," the line managers and workers who make and deliver the products and services that fulfill the organization's basic mission. In most organizations these operations acquire the name "the line," as contrasted with "staff" or "executive management." We have pretty good concepts from group dynamics, from motivation theory, and from learning theory on how to make "operations" more efficient, effective, and innovative. It is the operator group that typically becomes the target of change programs and organizational learning efforts. And it is this group that discovers the systemic interdependencies among the functions and learns to deal with them. It is this group that is typically the target of management in the sense that "developing managers" is typically conceived of as training people how to better handle the operators in the organization. Yet in organization after organization we have found that the innovations and more effective operations do not diffuse upward in the organization or last. To explain this, we need to discover how two other cultures interact with what I am calling the "operator culture."

The "engineers." In every organization there is a core technology that underlies what the organization does, and that technology is designed and monitored by various kinds of "engineers" who share a common occupational culture. I have labeled this community "engineers," but it includes the technocrats and core designers in any functional group. For example, the designers of information technology systems might be software programmers, but I would include them in this concept of the engineering culture. The designers of financial reward systems or market research programs similarly belong in this broad occupational group.

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If one examines the tacit shared assumptions of this broad community, one discovers that their preferred solutions are solutions without people. They prefer systems, machines, routines, and rules that are automatic and totally reliable. The need to do "real engineering" or basic design drives them toward simplicity, elegance, and routinized solutions that often ignore the social realities of the workplace (Kunda, 1992; Thomas, 1994). I have often overheard conversations like the one I heard most recently from a couple of MIT engineers, on their way to Boeing, while our plane was landing in Seattle: From their point of view, the cockpit crew is not necessary because the plane can be flown by computer from the ground. The social interaction that is necessary under unanticipated crisis conditions or the need to reassure passengers is viewed as irrelevant and expensive. If given the choice, the engineers would replace people with machines and routines. Engineers tend to view the need for complex human teams, the need to build relationships and trust, and the need to elicit the commitment of employees as unfortunate and undesirable derivatives of "human nature" to be circumvented, if possible, because they are so hard to manage and control.

Operators, with their new systemic insights and new-found desires to work in effective teams, are often thwarted by the lack of support and enthusiasm of the engineers who keep proposing technical solutions that make operators very skeptical and feel threatened because they might lose their job as a result of the technical solution. The resolution of the tension between operators and engineers often results in proposals for new machines or new training programs that have to be pushed "up" in the organization for approval (Thomas, 1994). That process reveals the presence of a third critical occupational culture.

The "executives." If one looks at organizations worldwide, one can identify a global community of chief executive officers (CEOs) who share a common set of assumptions based on the daily realities of their status and role. I am referring here to CEOs who have worked their way up the ladder and have been promoted into these positions. Entrepreneurs, founders of companies, and members of owning families are more diverse and would typically not display the kind of assumptions I see in the promoted CEO.

The essence of this role is financial accountability to the owner shareholders, often embodied in the principle to keep the stock price and dividends as high as possible (Donaldson and Lorsch, 1983). The essence of their status is that they are the place where the buck stops, where ultimate accountability lies. Though lip service is paid to long-range strategy, to human resources, to balancing the needs of different stakeholders, the reality is driven by the capital markets and the need to remain financially viable. Though lip service is paid to the "office of the president" and "executive teams," the reality is that CEOs the world over learn that they alone must make the tough financial decisions based on imperfect information, because they become isolated and find it harder and harder to trust what their subordinates tell them.

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CEOs learn that to manage large numbers of people, departments, and divisions, one must rely increasingly on rules, procedures, and systems, most notably reward and control systems. Though they may have grown up with the knowledge and insights of the "operators," they increasingly have to abandon those insights and replace them with perceptions that in a tough competitive world, compromises have to be made, chances have to be taken, and financial criteria always have to be treated as paramount. When one is accountable for thousands of employees, one cannot worry about individual subordinate relationships. As one CEO put it, "I love to play ball with the troops after hours, but I keep my immediate subordinates at a distance." People become "human resources" and cost factors rather than capital investments.

One consequence is that when the operator culture attempts to improve effectiveness by building learning capacity, which requires time and resources, the executives disallow the proposed activities on the grounds that the financial returns cannot be demonstrated or that too many exceptions are involved that would undermine the control system. Executives thus unconsciously collude with the engineers in wanting to minimize the human factor. In effect, all of the research findings about the importance of teamwork, collaboration, commitment, and involvement fall on deaf executive ears, because in the executive culture, those are not the important variables to consider.

Even if a given CEO "sees the light" and creates a company that is more productive because it is more in tune with human needs, his or her replacement is likely to hold the more standard cost-driven assumptions and will dismantle many of the improvements that the previous "enlightened" CEO created. As a growing body of research has shown, some organizations have been able to overcome the negative impacts of short-run financial thinking by evolving cultures that integrate the executive, the engineering, and the operator point of view, but those organizations are still the exception rather than the rule, and we still do not fully understand how they did it (e.g., Donaldson and Lorsch, 1983; Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Collins and Porras, 1994).

What this line of thinking leads to is the possibility that the organization as a unit may not ever be able to be a reliable learning system unless it reconciles the built-in conflict between these three cultures, two of which have their roots in larger worldwide occupational communities. These communities have learned their assumptions from the environments in which they exist, the financial structure of capitalism and the technological structure of engineering, and until those structures and the educational systems that support them change, organizations will not be able to make some of the fundamental changes that the learning ideologues, myself included, have been advocating. If we believe in learning, we must redefine our question and ask how *occupational communities* learn. How do executives learn, given the realities of their roles, and how do we help them to become effective learners? How do engineers learn outside the narrow confines of their technologies, and how do we help them learn? These are questions that have only

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begun to be addressed because they cut across disciplinary lines. To address them will require the collaboration of occupational sociologists, organizational theorists, and psychologists knowledgeable about the learning process itself. Most of all, it will require, at the outset, the recognition that we are dealing with other cultures and are imposing our own cultural biases on them.

The humanistic bias that is inherent in the field of organization studies makes it hard for us to be truly sympathetic either to the technocratic emphasis of the engineer or the financial emphasis of the executive. So we spend our time advocating that "they" should become more aware of the human factor, which is tantamount to saying give up your culture and become a member of ours. Organization studies will not mature as a field until we spend much more time in observing and absorbing these other cultures, learning to see them from the insider's perspective, discovering in that process even other occupational cultures that affect how organizations work.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

I have always been struck by the analogy between the artist learning to see his or her subject before it can be rendered and the social scientist learning to see the psychodynamics and sociodynamics of individuals, relationships, groups, and larger organizational units. My own insights have only come after I have spent hours and hours immersed in a given phenomenon, after I have identified and dealt with all my own prior expectations and stereotypes, and have gradually come to see what is really out there. I think it is a difficult process, and our theories are weak because we have not practiced it enough. Particularly in relation to culture, when I see my colleagues inventing questionnaires to "measure" culture, I feel that they are simply not seeing what is there, and this is particularly dangerous when one is dealing with a social force that is invisible yet very powerful. We are in grave danger of not seeing our own culture, our assumptions about methods, about theory, about what is important to study or not study, and, in that process, pay too much attention only to what suits our needs.

Artists get very interested in each other's work and learn a great deal from how other artists have solved problems. Here, too, we could learn by spending more time with colleagues from related but different disciplines. It is comforting for the social psychologist trained in questionnaire or laboratory methods to spend time with colleagues who have the same training, but it might be more productive for that psychologist to go into the field with an ethnographer or become a participant observer in a real organization. We can only see that to which we expose ourselves and, I fear, we have limited our exposure too much to the artificial. We will not learn about the power of culture unless we cross real cultural boundaries. This is an uncomfortable process, as every traveler in a foreign country knows, but I believe it is essential if we are to develop organization studies as a viable and practical field.

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