Comment on the Two Preceding Articles

OD for Whom?

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Practitioners and researchers in the OD field bear a peculiar burden of ethical responsibility which stems from two aspects of their work. First, among diverse groups of educated people—psychology graduate students, American historians, and liberal executives, to illustrate—the OD field has taken on a patina of humane enlightenment. The apparent task of moving corporate and other bureaucracies from punitive hierarchies toward nurturant commonwealths is one which evokes broad sympathy among intellectuals and others. So scrutiny of this work is sensitive but timely.

The second aspect of OD practitioners' work which creates a special burden of ethical responsibility is that it goes on within those institutions which are the primary instruments of power and purpose in the society. In a social order dominated by corporate bureaucracy, people who tinker with such structures are at play in the fields of our secular lords.

Despite their relative clarity on a number of value issues, these two articles remain representative of the silence in the OD field on several other critical problems. Commentary on these two papers can, perhaps, contribute to the professional self-scrutiny which is now emerging in the social sciences. It should be emphasized, however, that the implications of such scrutiny are much broader and more serious than those pertaining only to professional responsibility. We are no long-

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er in a situation in which "petite Eichmannism"—the ac-
quiescence in and evasion of responsibility for mundane
wrongdoing (Michael, 1970)—is the crux of ethical matters
for the behavioral scientist. The American aggression in Viet-
nam, the persistence of racial oppression, and indeed, the po-
tential for what Paul Ehrlich calls "eco-catastrophe"—these
matters of fact mean that the stakes are in earnest.

It is only fair for a critic who is about to flay others with
the whip of righteousness to declare his own commitments. I
hold, then, to a radical egalitarianism. I find "equality of op-
portunity" to be an empty evasion of the problem of privilege,
so it is toward social equality of culturally diverse conditions
that I strive. A radical democrat, I do *not* share with some a
revulsion at all authority, but do believe that all hierarchies
and leadership should be democratically accountable for their
behavior. More might be said, but these other views are sum-
marized in my own case this way: I am a socialist.

What then are some of the unspoken value assumptions of
these two articles? My first observation is this: the OD pro-
fessional is either unconcerned with, or supportive of (in val-
ue terms), what the client organization actually does. Evident-
ly, process is seen as more important than purpose.
Burke states as OD goals, "increasing effectiveness," "reduc-
ing waste," and so forth (Figure 1), while Hornstein et al.
write of OD goals as change which makes organizational
structures, norms, and processes more consonant with "Theory
Y" perspectives on motivation (i.e., humans as creative work-
ers). Neither article mentions the purposes to which such
newly effective organizations are put; thus, we are forced to
conclude that the authors assume that such purposes are, at
worst, neutrally valenced, or at best, benign. This is an un-
tenable value assumption in the face of the stark realities of
the contemporary scene. Just as no aspect of organiza-
tional or procedural humaneness could justify the product of
Auschwitz, so today it is a matter of moral irrelevance wheth-
er the producers of napalm, magnesium bombs, or anti-per-
sonnel weapons are managed despotically or benignly. The
behavior of these organizations is such that to make their
products neutral or benign would entail making these organ-

izations *less* effective, *increasing* waste, and *encouraging* discontent and disruption within them.

One may object that though war, and the Vietnam war in particular, puts these issues in polar relief, they are atypical cases, not to be taken as representative or normal. But from the perspective of this commentary such extreme cases are the outgrowth of the world role of both the American government and its corporate supporters. A discussion of imperialism is not conceivable in the compass of this commentary. But if the proposition is accepted that the political and economic influence of American corporations is exerted to repress revolutionary movements and to expropriate resources and profits to the home country, then the assumption of typically benign purpose is invalid.

The skeptical reader may protest that, even acknowledging the ethical difficulty of aiding corporations whose international interests result in destructive behavior, most OD work is, after all, applied to domestic operations. In this respect, however, the shopping list of accumulated grievances in American society becomes very much to the point. Environmental despoliation, exploitation of the consumer, discriminatory practices, concentration of tremendous social power among the highly privileged—these are costs of making the management of corporate America more effective.

The Burke, and Hornstein, Bunker, and Hornstein papers do evidence a certain "humanism," however; they tempt us to begin a litany of aphorisms such as "one has to start somewhere," or "that's the dilemma of moral men in an immoral society," or "it's necessary to work within the system for these changes." And isn't "Theory Y" more humane than "Theory X" (which assumes a lazy, monetarily-oriented worker)? Burke, for example, puts among OD values the "right of persons and organizations to seek a full realization of their potential," and the "humane and nonexploitative treatment of people in organizations." Such values are indeed commendable. Yet lying beneath them is a series of assumptions and empirical realities which, when recognized, tarnish the glow of righteousness which they impart.

One initial reality is the imperative of profit—privately

appropriated return on investment. Though the term does not appear in either paper, one can be sure it occupies a position of highest importance among the clients of OD work. The Hornstein, Bunker, and Hornstein paper talks of creating a "culture to facilitate diagnosis and change." Yet the dominant aspect of corporate culture is its pursuit of profit or economic power, usually without serious regard for other values. When we set, as Burke has, a goal of facilitating "the organization's reaching its objectives while meeting the needs of its members," we should understand that we are talking about making some people happier at the job of making others richer. That this may be accomplished gently does not necessarily imply that it is not done exploitatively. It is just that insight, we may infer, which led a UAW magazine to comment on the Hawthorne studies:

What did make them [women workers at Western Electric] produce and produce and produce with ever-increasing speed was the expression of interest in their personal problems. . . .

Now obviously this is the greatest discovery since J. P. Morgan learned that you can increase profits by organizing a monopoly, suppressing competition, raising prices, and reducing production (Baritz, 1960, p. 114).

Much has changed since this kind of manipulation went unquestioned. (*See* Leavitt, 1965.) Nevertheless, the distribution of power and privilege remains essentially unchanged by OD workers if we go beyond the level of managers and include working class people as among those whose "potential" or "humanity" might be at stake. Tacitly, the OD specialist accepts the existence of class privilege and inequality, even while preferring these to be maintained with less brutality than earlier in our industrial history.

To be sure, Burke states "sharing power" as a goal which has a "value connotation," but he is relatively explicit in rejecting democracy as a guiding precept. He says "OD does not necessarily advocate the restructuring of all organizations according to the democratic process." Instead, consonant with the notion of increasing effectiveness, he states that the goal of power sharing is "decentralizing decision making to the lowest point of relevant information in the organization." In

practice, what this means is that middle- and sometimes
lower-level supervisors get to join the team. Is this not the
liberal, managerial version of a slogan now current in less rep-
utable circles: "This is a republic, not a democracy"?

The Burke paper provides room (at least rhetorically) for
some of these concerns when it talks about tolerating con-
flicts and placing a value on making values explicit. The un-
spoken, and perhaps unnoticed, fact is that the most persis-
tent and irresolvable conflicts in organizations are class con-
flicts. These stem from the contradictions of the workers' sale
of labor and managers' and owners' disposal of it; or in a
more speculative version, from conflict between superordi-
nates and their subordinates (Dahrendorf, 1959). Perhaps we
have here another version of "repressive tolerance" (i.e., you
can disagree all you want, so long as you do not act to alter the
social order).

It would appear that these papers are caught in the same
intellectual *cul-de-sac* that they are criticizing. Both, but es-
pecially Hornstein, Bunker, and Hornstein, argue the weak-
ness of change attempts which are not systemically oriented.
Yet both appear to analyze the changes and values for which
they work as if tinkering with the norms and structures of
managerial life would somehow abolish capitalism's basic
properties: unequal economic competition (and the conse-
quent accumulation of unequal power, privilege, and wealth)
and economic gain as the metric of social life (which pro-
duces everything from war to pollution). Paradoxically, then,
while claiming to transcend assumptions about change which
are rooted in individuals, they find themselves involved in
work which assumes that groups of enlightened individuals
can operate outside their society's most enduring character-
istics.

The pity of it all is that it appears that some powerful tech-
nologies for the management of change do now exist. The
challenge of creating an industrial democracy is realistically
on the agenda in the affluent West. The primitive tactics of
early capital accumulation are not needed in the present ob-
jective situation. In a different political-economic environ-
ment the OD people could be a boon to the commonwealth.

Even now, unions or social movement organizations, student or parent groups could make use of the skills and insights of Burke and Hornstein et al. Yet the technological preoccupation evidenced in these articles results generally in a more privileged clientèle. Without strong value or political criteria or perspectives, OD specialists become social scientists for hire. The ability to hire them, distributed as it is, too frequently puts them to work for those who need and deserve their aid the least.

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