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# A sociological perspective to organization development Habitus Oriented Consulting

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As a general rule, critics are concerned with individuals. But when you do sociology, you learn that men and women are indeed responsible, but what they can or cannot do is largely determined by the structure in which they are placed and by the position they occupy within that structure (Pierre Bourdieu).

In 2008, David, a member of “Kimono’s” (pseudonym) board of directors, invited me to improve the firm’s poor performance. Kimono is an Israeli firm that develops marine products for an export to West Europe and Japan. At the time the consulting process took place, two business groups owned Kimono, Adventure (51%) and Genesis (49%). The roots of the company’s poor performance, according to David (pseudonym), were in John and Bill’s “stubborn personality” and ineffective communication. John was the head of Kimono’s agriculture farm that produces the marine products and Bill was the head of marketing. My consulting role was to help John and Bill develop better interpersonal communication in order to improve Kimono’s poor performance.

As common among Organization Development (OD) practitioners, I conducted interviews with John and Bill and with all Kimono’s participants (six board members and five marine biologists). OD is a conceptual and practical field that focuses on organizational change. The interviews indicated that John and Bill’s interpersonal communication was indeed ineffective. However, from the interviews I also learned that the roots of Kimono’s poor performance were mainly the constant power struggles between Adventure and Genesis, the two business groups that own Kimono. These struggles, I found, started years ago with fights over issues such as Kimono’s ownership and shares, strategic direction, necessary capital investment and main operational processes. The interviews also showed that the board members, fully comprised of Adventure and Genesis’ owners, are deeply

involved in Kimono’s everyday management and were using John and Bill as a way to achieve each owner group’s specific benefits. At this point, my impression was that the struggles within the board, and not John and Bill’s interpersonal communication, as David believed, were in large measure responsible for Kimono’s poor performance.

This impression encouraged me to write a paper on organizational consulting from a sociological perspective, yet one question remained open. Can we separate the personal from the social? Is “resistance to change”, a common behavior in organizational change processes, for example, a personal or a social phenomenon? Is it a psychological or a sociological occurrence? Those who see resistance to change as a psychological phenomenon believe that it is a defense mechanism or that it represents other personal properties such as frustration, anxiety, fear and aggression. Those who see resistance to change as a sociological phenomenon, on the other hand, view it as an expression of social properties such as unequal division of labor, exclusion processes, asymmetric power relations and poor management. However, both miss the opportunity to understand their perspective’s reciprocal influences. Understanding resistance to change, or any other behavior in an organization, I claim, entails adopting both perspectives, the personal and the social, and searching for the interaction between the two.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which links the personal and the social, helps me to ground my argument in theory and to define the paper’s goal. The goal of the paper is to offer a sociologic conceptual framework, Habitus Oriented Consulting (HOC), which understands organizational problems as a product of mutual relations between individuals’ behavior and social structures.

In the following section, I present the paper’s theoretical argument, that an understanding of organizational problems entails a search for the sociological roots of managers’ (and

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other participants') thought and behavior. In the third part, I briefly discuss Bourdieu's concept of habitus, capital and field, which constitute "Habitus Oriented Consulting" (HOC). I conclude by highlighting the paper's theoretical and potential practical contributions.

## THE PAPER'S ARGUMENT

### The Individual as Psychological Subject in the Modern Social Structure

Understanding organizational problems as psychological phenomena and placing the responsibility for these problems on the individual's shoulders is not unique to David. By defining Kimono's poor performance as a psychological phenomenon, a problem of John and Bill's interpersonal communication, David represents the individualistic orientation rooted in modern western social structure. In this social structure, the individual is perceived as a psychological subject who is the main source of meaning, values and behavioral norms and therefore his personal growth (autonomy, self-expression and self-actualization) is highly significant, as suggested by Bogdan Costea and his colleagues. In this view, the notion of personal responsibility is central. That is, if the individual is the main source of meaning, values and behavioral norms, the individual, as claim organizational consultant Kenneth Gergen and his colleagues, is (or should be trained to be) fully responsible for her or his thought and behavior.

We find this view expressed in modern societies in fields like education, law and labor. The labor field, which is the social context of this paper, uses psychological discourse and practices in order to define itself as the site in which the individual self is expressed and realizes its potential. When questions like "What is wrong with me?" are answered with "Just focus and everything will go well; it is only a question of how much effort you are willing to invest" the individual is expected to be fully responsible for his thought and behavior. These phrases do not consider social structures to be responsible for the production of meaning, values and behavioral norms and within them for individuals' thinking and behavior. In other words, like David (Kimono's board member), people often say "The firm's poor performance is the result of workers' poor involvement, low devotion or non-effective interpersonal communication." As offers Eva Illouz, they usually do not say "The firm's poor performance is the result of bad working conditions, a strong competitive market or management's behavior".

### The Individual as Psychological Subject in OD Field

Organizational Development (OD) is a conceptual and practical framework interested mainly in human behavior. Critics say that by largely using psychological discourse and practices, mainstream OD scholars and practitioners try to change organizations by changing individuals. Examples of this claim in the history of OD are many. Scholars and practitioners of system approaches to organizations argue that a common misconception about organizational change, both practical and theoretical, is the neglect of systemic

elements. Personal change, they say, which is what OD consultants are mainly preoccupied with, is not similar to systemic organizational change. Other critics say that OD is losing its power and relevance because its tendency to consider the individual before the organization; that is, to focus on the development of personal skills such as leadership style and team development and not on the development of the organization as a whole. In general, recent critics assert that although OD has always advocated working with organizations as a whole, in practice many OD projects are engaged solely in specific programs that focus on individuals and sub-organizational systems. The reason for this focus is probably OD's psychological orientation.

It seems important to say that some writers often use the term "psychological" in a careless way. One should remember that not all psychological discourse fall into the reduction trap. "Organizational psychology", for examples, offers rich conceptual frameworks and metaphors for organizational-wide planning and strategy. Another example is the search of organizational psychology for the effects of unconscious behavior of organizations. Organizational psychologists who deal with planning and strategy or unconscious parts of the organization then do not reduce the organization into the individual level; rather, they use psychological metaphors to represent and analyze the organization as a whole. The criticism should be therefore, and is in this paper, not toward the use of psychological terms, but toward the use of therapeutic psychological discourse, one that to my opinion attempts to change organizations through the changing of individuals. Moreover, in this paper I do not pretend to pose sociology against psychology. Rather, I try to enrich the OD field with sociological concepts that aware to the organizations' social context and to the place of individuals in this context.

Mainstream OD scholars then perceive individuals as *psychological subjects* whose personal development and growth are the main target of organizational change processes. Seeing individuals as psychological subjects is totally in contrary with OD's primary notions, especially with Kurt Lewin's, OD's founding father, field theory, which views individuals' (and groups') behavior as the product of interaction between individuals and forces in the social field (e. g., systems of benefits, norms and values, management style and equipment and maintenance).

One example is the frequent use of medical discourse. Edgar Schein, one of the leading figures in the OD field, provides a good example when he regularly talks about the anxiety of learning and of abandonment and "defense mechanisms" as a means to diagnose and "remedy" the organization. Although Edgar Shein takes the group level and the organizational culture into account, I argue that when he offers to *cure* the organization pathologies, he conceptualize organizational problems in a way that relates more to individuals' body (anxiety, pain) and less to the broader social contexts in which those same individuals operate. The medicalization of the organization actually frames organizational problems as individuals' problems. This framing often leaves the discussion of problems at the organization level, such as strategy, rewards and vision, out of the consulting interventionists' sight.

In an interview with David Bradford, Jerry Porras, another central figure in the OD field, says that OD consultants have

always worked on directly changing people's thinking and behavior while neglecting the social context in which these people work. Jerry Porras attributes OD scholars and practitioners' individual-orientation to the intensive integration of psychologists into the OD field in the 1950s and 1960s. Organizational psychologists, he claims, were trained to see internal motives and personal growth as the main reason for individuals' behavior and therefore were busy developing ways to change people. As a result, says Jerry Porras, these consultants did not have "a conceptual framework to guide their work, to help them see the big picture from which they could decide what action to take".

I should say that in years of consulting I have also based my work solely on psychological discourse and practices. Influenced by OD, I used, and taught managers and students to use, concepts and practices such as self-awareness, personal communication and active listening to improve their performance as a way to deal with organizational problems. However, today, after 25 years of consulting, research and teaching using concepts from the sociology of organization and the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, I find the self-oriented psychological mode of thinking and practice problematic. I realized that regarding the self as the main target of the consulting process created an understanding that the self will not be at its full potential if we do not constantly improve its capabilities and performance. Such understanding distracted the managers' and students' attention, as well as mine, from the social level of the organization, especially from structures such as power relations, organizing metaphors and shared practical knowledge and from the managers' position in these structures.

The goal of this paper is therefore to offer a conceptual framework (HOC), which searches for the roots of organizational problems not only in the individual but also in the social level of the organization and in the interaction between these two levels.

## HABITUS, CAPITAL AND FIELD: HABITUS ORIENTED CONSULTING (HOC)

### Habitus

Habitus according to Pierre Bourdieu consists of a set of social dispositions both internal and external that generate individuals' thought and behavior. Individuals adopt these social dispositions (worldview, schema of thinking, practical knowledge) from the social structure of the gender group, ethnic group, working organization and family through a process of socialization. As the family (or groups') dispositions are acquired, the habitus predisposes individuals' thought and behavior accordingly. Children who grow up in a family of business entrepreneurs are far more likely to develop entrepreneur abilities and to acquire the worldview, schema of thinking and practical knowledge to appreciate entrepreneur performance than if they were born to families of professional musicians. Social structure is therefore mainly a cognitive structure, a habitus that consists dispositions acquired from the social environment.

As such, the habitus links the social and the personal. People internalize their social structure into their habitus and accordingly develop ways of thinking and behavior. As

the interviews for this paper show, John and Bill's communication was not necessarily a result of personal properties, of their "stubborn personality" as David said. Rather, their ineffective communication was generated primarily by what I define a contested habitus that consists of properties like a competitive worldview and a zero-sum-game way of thinking, produced through constant struggle between Adventure and Genesis. Habitus, again, is something people learn, and once it is learned, it 'naturally' predisposes the way they think and behave.

Yet, because the social structure becomes part of their body, their habitus, people control the way they apply the social structure. I guess that sports players (like business entrepreneurs, teachers, drivers and university professors) do not only apply the social dispositions (such game style or playing by the rules), the habitus, they acquire in their primary sport socialization. They probably base their game on this habitus but enrich it by performing innovative and creative practices that over time produce and reproduce the game's social structure (game style, rules). As the interviews with John and Bill showed, the two were not powerless agents that adopted the contested habitus for or against their will. Instead, they reproduced the contested habitus, refined it and 'improved' its combat properties, by ignoring the other, by hiding information and in general by eroding each other's professional legitimacy. Habitus, again, represents not only the influence of the social structure on individuals, but also the influence of individuals on the social structure.

### Capital

Habitus is always connected to power relations determined by the capital people have, as claims Pierre Bourdieu, 1989. Among the central types of capital are "human capital" (knowledge, skills and expertise), "symbolic capital" (prestige and reputation), "social capital" (the ability to use individuals' and groups' capital to promote once-won interests), and "cultural capital" (arbitrary attributions like accepted language). Gallery owners and art critics have cultural capital in their language and techniques for art evaluation. They often have social capital for belonging to a narrow group that has the needed competencies to evaluate art, and symbolic capital (prestige and reputation) derived from their cultural and social capital. Possessing these three types of capital gives the art critics' habitus a dominant position in the world of art. The same thing happens in organizations. Managers, or other dominant agents in organizations, have cultural capital derived from their competencies (language, significant knowledge and techniques) to run organizations. They also possess symbolic capital, prestige, for being the leaders of the organization. They have social capital derived from the use of other participants' capital to advance their particular interests. These managers then can reproduce their habitus and their status as the controlling group of the organization and exercise a certain degree of control over social relations in accordance to their specific needs and interests.

This is exactly what I found in Kimono. I found two interest groups (Adventure and Genesis) each struggling to fulfill its specific needs and interests and to impose its worldview on the other group by achieving capital and material resources

and by improving its position and control over Kimono. They frequently struggled over the legitimate authority to fill Kimono's positions (the principal marine biologists, the farm manager), to determine its strategic goals (Japanese market first) and to define its vision (increase agricultural sales or to sell Kimono's technology).

From this perspective, we see once again that the roots of most struggles in Kimono, including the struggles between John and Bill, were not of the personal kind in which feelings, perceptions and communication style are involved. Instead, these struggles were mainly social ones in which alliances, common interests and power struggles between the two owner groups took significant roles. These struggles (at the owner groups' level), I realized, were responsible not only for the capital each owner group acquired but also for the production and diffusion of the contested habitus that generated the participants' (including John and Bill's) ineffective interactions that caused Kimono's poor performance.

## Field

Field according to Pierre Bourdieu is a social space in which people play a game according to rules that are different from the rules played in the nearer space. Once adopted, these rules largely direct what people can or cannot do; they become an inner structure, natural and durable dispositions, or habitus that predisposes people's thinking and behavior.

Although fields represent a group with common rules, that has a shared interest and habitus, group members are always in a state of struggle over similar sets of material resources (budget, technology) and over different types of capital (social, cultural). These struggles over the field's resources and types of capital, in turn, produce and reproduce the individual's way of thinking and behavior. It is not enough to understand the individual's inner psychological world, the view accepted by mainstream OD scholars and practitioners. Instead, to understand the individual is to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed, as claims Pierre Bourdieu. Indeed, the more I examined Kimono's social field, the more I refused to see John and Bill's communication as just a psychological phenomenon in which two people, isolated from the social context, simply did not find the needed psychological skills to approach each other. Instead, I started to realize that John and Bill's ineffective communication had been formed with and against Kimono's social structure as expressed by the contested habitus. I think that in order to survive and keep their job alive, John and Bill adopted Kimono's contested habitus and behaved accordingly.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

When he invited me to Kimono, David (the board member) defined Kimono's problem as a psychological phenomenon. For him, and probably for the rest of the board members, Kimono's poor performance is the product of John and Bill's personal inability to communicate effectively.

As accepted in today's modern individualistic social structure and in mainstream OD then David viewed John and Bill as *psychological subjects* who are the producers of meaning, values and behavioral norms (like Kimono's poor perfor-

mance) and therefore they should be the target of the organizational change process. For him, all the consultant (me) had to do in order to stop the poor performance was to fix its source, that is, to help John and Bill grow personally and improve their communication skills.

The HOC, on the other hand, views managers mainly as *sociological subjects*. The managers then are not only the producers of meaning, values and behavioral norms, but also the products of meaning, values and behavioral norms defined by the organization's social structure. From this perspective, one that views John and Bill as sociological subjects, we can understand Kimono's poor performance not solely as a product of John and Bill's ineffective communication but of the interaction between that communication and Kimono's social structure diffused by the contested habitus. John and Bill adopted the contested habitus and, in fact, in their daily reciprocal communication refined and improved it.

The HOC then does not expel the individual's inner world from the consulting process. The individual's inner world remains highly important. However, the HOC is interested not only in the individual's inner psychological world (frustrations, anxiety, aggression) but also in the sociological, or in the habitus, in order to develop her or his reflectivity to the social roots of meaning, values and behavioral norms (including organizational problems). In short, developed the Habitus Oriented Consulting in order to enable consultants to adopt a subjective perspective that is not only individualistic but also collectivistic. Such a perspective views the individual level as an expression not only of psychological dispositions but also sociological ones.

Developing sociological reflectivity is not easy in light of the almost total conquest of the labor field, organizations and management, by psychological discourse and practice. As we have seen, Kimono's participants had never considered the possibility that Kimono's poor performance was not necessarily the result of John and Bill's behavior but of a greater game in which the power system (the owners) forced the two to struggle over resources and control. I would guess that David, like the rest of Kimono's board members and perhaps like many OD scholars and practitioners, assumed that if John and Bill properly 'worked' on themselves, their external world would also change; that is, the problem of the poor performance would be solved.

This paper then offers a conceptual framework that considers the sociological roots of meaning, values and behavioral norms that guide participants' thought and behavior. This conceptual framework follows Kurt Lewin's field theory that views individuals' (and groups') behavior as the product of interaction between individuals and forces in the social field (e.g., systems of benefits, norms and values, management style and equipment and maintenance). The conceptual framework also responds to calls in most recent literature to rescue OD from its technical place, one that focuses largely on personal growth in favor of a kind of consulting that focuses on the organization as a whole. The HOC's conceptual framework responds directly to Jerry Porras's call to replace OD's heavy emphasis on personal growth with an emphasis on developing a conceptual framework that sees the big picture from which consultants and managers could decide what action to take.

Because of the theoretical line of this paper, I do not aim my criticism exclusively at a specific scholar or consultant. OD's heavy psychological orientation is part of the humanist tradition of the 60s that grew in response to the dominance of structural ideas of Taylorism in the field of organizational research and theory. The Taylorist engineers, as Edgar Schein explains, forgot the individual person or treated him or her as part of the structure. Therefore, in light of the neglect of the individual person in the research and practice of those years, OD scholars devoted their research and consulting careers to the development of a consulting practice that includes the individual person in the consulting process.

However, if we follow the theoretical line of this paper and see the habitus as not only reflecting but also producing social structures, we should argue that OD's strong psychological orientation is not something uncontrollable. OD's significant figures such as Edgar Schein, are not powerless agents that adopted the humanist traditional worldview against their will. These people are acknowledged agents that have been using their influential positions (based on their symbolic and cultural capital acquired by a vast number of publications) in order not only to employ the humanistic tradition, but also to reproduce and diffuse it. Through impressive and extensive academic and professional publications, as well as teaching, they defined the way consulting to organizations should look, be formulated and occur.

This paper starts a theoretic task that requires future practical development. The theoretical perspective of the Habitus Oriented Consulting can be a point of departure for the development of several consulting practices. These might include, for example, group workshops that develop the managers' reflective gaze on the impact of structural

elements of the organization on subjects like interpersonal communication, problem solving and leadership. These workshops will view the managers' interpersonal communication, problem solving techniques and leadership as subject not only to aspects of personality such as aggression, learning and anxiety, as accepted in the OD field, but also to common practical knowledge and power relations, and within it the managers' capital and position in the organization.

Another direction will use this sociological perspective to enrich consultants and managers' understanding of important organizational change junctures, such as problem definition, intervention strategies and plans for change. Relying on the sociological perspective, consultants can help managers to use not only the accepted discourses and practices that understand such junctures in terms of inner individual motivation and personal skills. Instead, the sociological perspective can help both consultants and managers understand such junctures as the product of ongoing dialectical relations between individuals' diverse behaviors and organizations' social structures, their culture, their power relations, and their practical knowledge.

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