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ATTITUDES ABOUT THE FIELD OF ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT 20 YEARS LATER: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

Amanda C. Shull, Allan H. Church and
W. Warner Burke

ABSTRACT

Organization development (OD) and the business environment, more generally, have seen many changes in the last 20 years. This chapter describes findings of a research study that investigated current perceptions of the field of OD as compared to data collected in a 1993 study (published in 1994). Survey data collected from 388 OD professionals indicated findings along the following themes: (1) continued perceived weakening of traditional OD values; (2) focus on business effectiveness and fewer perceptions that OD is too “touchy feely”; (3) increase in commitment to organizations and standing against the misuse of power; (4) coaching is seen as an integral part of OD; and (5) practitioners are very optimistic about the future of OD. Implications for the current and future practice of OD are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

While much has changed in the last 20 years regarding the theory and practice of organization development (OD), one aspect that seems to have remained constant is the debate over the founding principles, their appropriateness, and relevancy in the field today (regardless of the time period in question). Around 50 years ago, the field of OD was in its heyday and became a movement with a focus on the humanistic side of organizational life (Burke, 1982; Friedlander, 1976; Margulies & Raia, 1990). Over the years and as a result of other influences (the field being an inclusive one by its nature), OD has taken on various attributions and incarnations and people have disagreed on what the field should stand for and/or how it should evolve. Popular business consulting movements, for example, such as total quality management or business process reengineering were linked to OD efforts in the 1980s. Today, the trend is moving toward integrating other areas such as talent management and sustainability as recent issues of the *OD practitioner* have suggested.

That said, some practitioners have argued the opposite end of the spectrum as well – that is, whether the field is ill or should even exist at all (cf., Golembiewski, 1990). Due to these varying perceptions of the field and the constant influx of new entrants and influences, scholars in the field of OD have sought to synthesize and understand these different viewpoints, including recent attempts to identify a unified definition of the OD field (Bradford & Burke, 2004; Burnes & Cooke, 2012). While some have created new models or frameworks in an effort to dimensionalize the field and describe different types of OD that exist today (e.g., Bushe & Marshak, 2009; McLean, 2006; Porras & Robertson, 1992; Waclawski & Church, 2002), others have debated the pros and cons of instituting professional boundaries and certification for practice (e.g., Church, 2001; Gottlieb, 1998; Weidner & Kulick, 1999) building on the work initiated by the now defunct Organization Development Institute (replaced by the new International Society for Organization Development – ISOD). Despite the value of these conceptual approaches, relatively few research studies have been conducted on the practice of the field and what OD practitioners actually believe about their own efforts. Although there were a series of studies conducted in the 1990s (e.g., Burke, Church, & Waclawski, 1993; Church, Burke, & Van Eynde, 1994; Fagenson & Burke, 1990; McMahan & Woodman, 1992), many of these centered on the utilization of different OD interventions and activities rather than specifically on attitudes about the field. Only Church and Burke (1995 – collected in 1993) explored specific reactions and

perceptions based on a survey of OD practitioners at the time. While these findings were interesting, they were reflective of a point in time of the evolution of the field. Since that time, there has been dramatic change culturally, politically, and economically in both the business and global environment. The primary question then is to what extent the perceptions and attitudes about the field of OD have changed or stayed the same as a result of these broader influences or has the field, in fact, remained essentially the same in its core belief structure? The goal of the current research was to take another look at where OD stands today and to draw comparisons with previous research from 20 years ago on the topic.

The fundamental values issue with OD is a simple one. Essentially, OD practitioners continue to debate the differences and similarities of OD work compared to that of closely related fields, including human resource development, organizational behavior (OB), and industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology. At the onset of OD, while closely related fields existed, it was easier to distinguish the democratic, humanistic values of OD work from its closely related fields. However, over time as business conditions have changed, new challenges for OD work have emerged. Over the years, there has been a progression to a focus on business efficiencies and effectiveness with less focus on the interpersonal, humanistic side on which OD was founded. This shift is largely reflective of business realities of recent decades. Globalization, a rapid and uncertain marketplace, an increasingly diverse workforce, and new technologies and innovations have all had an impact on the type of work being done by practitioners in the organizational sciences field in general, and OD in particular ([Greiner & Cummings, 2004](#)). The field of OD has evolved over the years as a result of the business environment, trying to maintain its core values and founding principles and ideals, while adapting to the emergent concerns of organizations. OD practitioners reacted to these changes in various ways, which ultimately fragmented the field as people began to move in different directions ([Greiner & Cummings, 2004](#)). The current study sought to address this issue by examining the perceptions of OD practitioners today to see if and how attitudes of the field have changed in the last 20 years since the original study by [Church and Burke \(1995\)](#), and whether the founding principles still inform practice in the field today.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The field of OD can be traced back to the 1940s, although it gained popularity and was officially given its name in the 1960s. The field of OD is

grounded in theory, applied research, and experiential consulting (Burke, 1994), and has roots from a variety of practice areas including psychotherapy (Bion, 1959), group dynamics (Lewin, 1948), participative management (McGregor, 1960), survey methodology (Likert, 1967), and social psychology (Homans, 1950; Katz & Kahn, 1978). The foundation of OD began with the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940s (Lewin, 1948). Lewin's work established the core practices of the field of OD, including action research, participative management, and T-groups, a self-education technique resembling group therapy. In the 1960s, the OD movement experienced growth and activity as academics and professionals used a holistic systems perspective and emphasized group process, and learning and data-based feedback methods (e.g., Nadler, 1977; French & Bell, 1973) as a means for driving change in organizations.

Many of the ideals of early OD aligned with the civil and social movements of the 1960s, and it picked up popularity and became a movement during that time. However, by the 1970s, OD had begun to gradually take on "fad-like" characteristics (Greiner & Cummings, 2004). With increased competition in the business environment and changing organizational needs, criticism and skepticism of OD emerged, often attacked as based on naive idealism. As a result of these reactions and an opportunity to realize profits, practitioners saw a need to transform the work being done in the field to offer more business and results-focused interventions that provided what companies wanted (Greiner & Cummings, 2004). As a result, some believed OD was drifting away from its humanistic and ethical roots and lost focus on the interpersonal side of work for an increased focus on making businesses more productive (Burnes & Cooke, 2012). According to Greiner and Cummings (2004), traditional OD values of trust, openness, and involvement in decision making have been replaced by a focus on short-term gain and business efficiency. "Frequently, the organization's decision makers have omitted OD, and more important, people from the solution" (Greiner & Cummings, 2004, p. 385).

Overview of the Current State of OD

To date, the OD community continues to debate the field's values, relevance, and even possible demise (Greiner & Cummings, 2004). Boundaries of the field have become blurred over time with the adoption of new practices, and the growing popularity of closely related fields including organizational change management and human resource management. This broadening of the field

of OD and adoption of new practices have been recently described in detail by [Bushe and Marshak \(2009\)](#) as a broadening of the field rather than a change or elimination of the more well established OD practices. In their article on “Revisioning Organization Development,” they contrast traditional OD as “Diagnostic OD” with a focus on collecting data to analyze and diagnose organizational issues that need to be “fixed” (e.g., similar to the classic approach described in various OD consulting process models) with a new term, “Dialogic OD,” which focuses on promoting effective dialogue and conversations in organizations and that through those conversations organizational change occurs. [Bushe and Marshak \(2009\)](#) describe “dialogic OD” not as a new form of OD per se, rather they sought to describe these other practices of OD that do not quite fit within the traditional domain of OD interventions.

For example, some popular methods of dialogic OD described by [Bushe and Marshak \(2009\)](#) include techniques such as appreciate inquiry designed to promote self-organizing change in organizations through uncovering new ideas, search conferences and future search to help large groups arrive at decisions and actions for the future, and open space, a bottom-up approach to identifying common interests in a large group. What is new about [Bushe and Marshak’s \(2009\)](#) argument is that these “new” OD techniques are just a different type of OD that is grounded in traditional OD and still shares many of the same values as what they call “Diagnostic OD”: focus on humanistic values, search for awareness and understanding of the larger system, process role of the consultant, and concern for developing and enhancing effectiveness of organizations and systems.

[Waclawski and Church \(2002\)](#), on the other hand, took a slightly different approach in framing the rise of these “new” OD techniques as examples of other forms of data-driven methods for driving change. In their review of various interventions in the field of OD, they suggested that all forms of OD work are grounded at least to some extent in the action-research paradigm and, as a result, utilize some form of data whether that change is quantitative, qualitative, or process based in nature. Just because large group or appreciative inquiry interventions may not produce quantifiable outputs does not mean that data have not been used to unfreeze the current state per Lewin’s classic model. Regardless of the orientation taken with respect to the emergence of new techniques and influences, however, the fact remains that OD has historically been about (and focused on internally) its own evolution and boundary spanning activities in practice. Given the wide range of theories and frameworks in the social sciences that have influenced the origins of the field, it is no

surprise that authors continue to examine and reflect its changing nature as is the purpose of this research and chapter.

Given the above description on broadening of practices of the field and blurring of boundaries, it is no surprise that many OD practitioners have made the observation over the years that there are no clear standards for admittance into or practice in the field and a lack of consistent training (Bunker, Alban, & Lewicki, 2004; Church, 2001; Church & Burke, 1995; Minahan, 2010; Weidner & Kulick, 1999). These issues contribute to a lack of agreement and consistent definition of OD.

There are many definitions that exist in the field; however, researchers are still trying to identify a unified position on the nature of OD work. More recently, researchers have tried to draw on previously existing definitions of OD while also clarifying the new aspects of the field. One such definition was provided by Cummings (2005): "Organization development is a system-wide process of applying behavioral-science knowledge to the planned change and development of the strategies, design components, and processes that enable organizations to be effective" (p. 5). From time to time, as the field has evolved, it seems that researchers have sought to address this topic as well as other questions about OD: "Is OD dying?," "Are OD people still doing OD work?," "Do organizations know what OD is and do they perceive a use for it?" (Church & Burke, 1995). We believe that many of the issues discussed thus far still remain in the field of OD today. In fact, the discussion throughout OD's more recent history about the demise of OD continues to be discussed and argued. More recently, Bartunek and Woodman (2012) provide a compelling counterargument to the death of OD by presenting examples grounded in data and practical examples from the field that OD work persists on because practitioners have continued to use it. Simply put, "Organization development lives because people keep using it," according to Bartunek and Woodman (2012).

PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

Given that the field of OD continues to both evolve and embody a reflective spirit and recognizing our own data-based biases and action research roots as OD practitioners, we decided to pursue a research agenda. The purpose of this chapter is to present research that sought to identify current perceptions of the field of OD and to provide an update to existing research on the field that addressed similar issues 20 years ago to see what has changed and what has stayed the same. We identified three reasons for

doing this research again 20 years later: the changing nature of the field, rise of other disciplines doing similar work, and lack of research in this area in recent years.

First, we believe that the changing nature of work and organizations calls for another look at the field of OD and the types of activities with which practitioners are involved. While certainly not an exhaustive list, some factors that may have influenced OD work being done today include technology advancements, interest and focus on employee engagement, the economic downturn, aftermath of downsizing, sustainability, and the “war” for talent. In this paper, we will consider what these organizational and environmental factors mean, if anything, for perceptions and relevance of OD today. In particular, we will examine whether the core values of OD have weakened over time or become stronger. Given these contextual factors, in addition to considering the values, another point to determine is whether the criteria for being considered within the realm of OD work should be more or less open than they were in the 1990s when we previously looked at the state of the field.

This brings us to the second reason we felt it was important to revisit this study. The boundaries around work that is considered OD work, and the field of OD in general, have continued to blur over the last 20 years. The rise of other subdisciplines in HR (i.e., I/O psychology, human resources development, organizational change, coaching, talent management, learning, etc.), while perhaps drawing more attention to the type of work that OD practitioners are known for, has in turn created a surge of new types of activities in organizations with which the OD field may or may not identify. While some OD professionals see the need for change and welcome the continued expansion and inclusion of new approaches and techniques that OD practitioners are using such as those discussed by [Bushe and Marshak \(2009\)](#) and [Waclawski and Church \(2002\)](#), others are less optimistic about the future of the field and lament the loss of more traditional OD values and practices. These two groups were described, respectively, as the “new practitioner” and “old guard” by [Church and Burke \(1995\)](#). We were curious to see if these same two types of practitioners remain in existence today (even if some of those actually practicing that responded in 1993 sample have since retired from the field).

A third major reason why we would like to revisit values in the OD field in the last 20 years is simply that there is a lack of research in this area. As OD practitioners ourselves, we believe it is important to provide an update on the current state of the OD field and understand how it has changed or remained the same. In addition to being of interest to current OD practitioners, this is

important to the field because it will help inform academic programs in OD of which there are a great deal, as well as potential efforts to build certification programs. Based on the reasons described above, we conducted a study to investigate the current state of the OD field. The following section describes the research methodology used in detail.

METHOD

Background

The data presented in this chapter were collected as part of a survey on the field of the organizational sciences to measure the values, attitudes, motives, and activities of academics and practitioners in the field of OD, and the organizational sciences more broadly. This research was undertaken as an update of and expansion to the original study conducted by Church, Burke, and Van Eynde in 1993 (and published in 1994). The questionnaire used in the current research was developed based on the original survey used in 1993. That measure, which had been based on prior research on OD activities and interventions ([Fagenson & Burke, 1990](#)), as well as personal observations and in-depth interventions with practitioners in the field ([Church, Hurley, & Burke, 1992](#)) examined a series of constructs regarding the field of OD in particular.

Attitudes and Values Questionnaire

Data were collected via an online survey questionnaire. The current data collection tool, the Attitudes and Values Questionnaire, was adapted from the questionnaire originally developed by [Church et al. \(1994\)](#). Overall, the survey included sections pertaining to values, motivators, and attitudes of the field of the organizational sciences in general, attitudes specific to the field of OD, and utilization of a host of activities and interventions (as was the case in the original study). Items for the Attitudes and Values Questionnaire in the current research were modified from the original questionnaire to incorporate topics and issues relevant to the OD field today. Additional content was identified through newly conducted individual interviews with 10 experienced OD practitioners, chosen for their expertise in the field. The practitioner attitudes items addressed in this article (and which compare to those used in 1994) were part of the larger

questionnaire. More specifically, the OD attitudes section was composed of 16 statements about the field developed primarily as a result of the expert interviews. As a result of those interviews, a series of provocative statements were included on the survey to assess practitioners' reactions primarily in the form of agreement or disagreement to those statements about the field. While the majority of these items were retained, a few new items were added and some existing items were updated to reflect the current context and goals of this research study. Table 1 provides a comparison of the original and current questions asked.

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each of these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*. Examples of these items include "OD has become too 'touchy feely' and needs to have a more practical focus" and "The field of OD is in a state of crisis." In addition, respondents' demographic information was collected including gender, ethnicity,

Table 1. List of OD Attitude Items.

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- | | |
|----|---|
| 1 | OD practitioners could typically be characterized as missionary, spiritual, or almost religious in the pursuit of their work. |
| 2 | As a field, OD tends to attract people who prefer interacting on the fringe of organizational commitment, rather than committing fully to the organization. |
| 3 | OD stands against the misuse of power and authority in organizational life. |
| 4 | Practitioners of OD work should focus more on effectiveness, efficiency, and competitive advantage to remain viable organizational assets for the future. |
| 5 | OD interventions should be focused on enhancing the spirit of the institution and not on the functional mechanics of the system. |
| 6 | People doing OD work today are typically too focused on interpersonal and group process issues and not enough on larger systemic issues. |
| 7 | There has been a weakening of the traditional values as espoused by the founders of OD. |
| 8 | OD has become too "touchy feely" and needs to have a more practical focus. |
| 9 | The field of OD has moved from a group of generalists to a mass of specialists. |
| 10 | OD is becoming too mainstream and watered down, and there is a great need for overarching theory. |
| 11 | Many of the new entrants into the field of OD today are lacking the theoretical background in the social sciences and organizational theory. |
| 12 | Many of the new entrants into the field of OD have little understanding or appreciation for the history or values underlying the field. |
| 13 | The weakening of the traditional values of the original OD theorists and practitioners is inevitable. |
| 14 | I am optimistic about the future of OD as a field (new). |
| 15 | Coaching is an integral part of OD (new). |
| 16 | The field of OD is in a state of crisis (new). |
-

educational background, and years of experience in the field. The three other primary sections of the survey (values, motives, and interventions) will be explored in detail in future papers. However, relationships with these other constructs will be highlighted in this chapter where appropriate.

Sample Characteristics

In order to obtain the maximum distribution of responses regarding attitudes, values, and practices in the broader field of the organizational sciences in general, the sample used in this research was based on a convenience sampling methodology using a broad net cast across a number of different professional groups. These consisted of the Organization Development Network (ODN), the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP), the ISOD, the National Training Laboratories (NTL), the Organization Development and Change Division of the Academy of Management, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the Mayflower Group (a survey consortium), and a collection of other personally networked practitioners in the field. Unlike in the 1993 study, however, where random sampling via postal mailings from membership rosters were employed, for this research respondents were recruited via the web through membership lists and officially endorsed/supplied and in some cases moderated and endorsed LinkedIn groups. As a result, the total sample in the present study of 1201 respondents overall is somewhat different in composition (breadth) and depth (penetration of membership lists) as compared with the sample from 1993 (where only ODN, SIOP, and ASTD members were included and in those cases only a random sample of one-third of the total). In addition, because in some cases it was unknown as to the precise size of the membership list of the LinkedIn groups, we were unable to calculate a total response rate for the survey. Despite this issue, and as was the case in the 1993 research, those individuals who elected to respond were motivated enough to provide their feedback on the field and, as such, provide at least some useful indicator of trend data and perceptions about the field overall.

In order to make the historical comparisons in attitudes more equivalent to the prior study, however, the very first question we asked in the survey was a filtering one specifically aimed to identify professional orientation. More specifically, we asked “please indicate which of the following professional areas with which you most identify” and perhaps more importantly, “please use the field you select below as a frame of reference for the rest of this

survey.” Response options included I/O psychology, OD, human resources or industrial relations, social psychology, clinical or counseling psychology, and OB (including management). For the purposes of the research described here, we will only focus on the 388 individuals (or 32.3% of the total response set) that selected OD in response to the question. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the professional membership (i.e., respondent source) of these 388 practitioners.

In general, this is quite comparable on a size basis to the 416 self-identified OD practitioners from Church and Burke (1995). Moreover, as might be expected, the vast majority of the present sample were from the OD Network (54%) which reflects a distinct emphasis of this subpopulation versus the total survey respondent pool (where SIOP was by far the largest respondent group at 59% overall). Based on this information, we believe that the sample used for the current research is representative of the OD community that self-identifies as specializing in OD.

In terms of other demographics, of the 388 respondents, 53% were female and 47% were male. This is a dramatic shift from the 36% female and 64% male respondent pool from the 1993 study. Respondents identified themselves ethnically as 78% White, 7% Black, 7% Asian, 2% Hispanic, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% two or more races, and 4% other (race was not reported in 1993 so there is no comparison available). About half of the participants (50%) were external consultants, 39% internal practitioners, and 11% academics. If we adjust these categories to compare with 1993 responses (i.e., we did not offer the academic category at the time), we see that 56% are external consultants and 44% are internals which is slightly more skewed toward externals but not by much (e.g., 49% vs. 51% in 1993, respectively). Also, consistent with the 1993 sample, many respondents indicated they had some degree of academic affiliation: 15%

Table 2. List of Professional Groups for OD Practitioner Specific Respondents.

Professional Group	Percentage
Organization Development Network	54
Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology	18
International Society for Organization Development	12
National Training Laboratories	11
Organization Development and Change Division of Academy of Management	3
American Society for Training and Development	1

were guest lecturers/speakers, 14% part-time faculty, 7% visiting faculty/instructors, 5% full-time faculty, 4% held tenured positions, and 9% indicated some other academic affiliation. As was the case in 1993, the majority of respondents in this sample have received graduate degrees: 60% of respondents held masters degrees, 31% had doctorates, and 9% had some other type of degree. Interestingly, however, there were 10% fewer doctorates in the present sample compared with the 1993 data.

Our current sample of OD practitioners is very experienced (and somewhat more so than the sample obtained in 1993). More specifically, 18% had worked in the field for 20 or more years, 11% between 16 and 20 years, 6% between 11 and 15 years, 9% between 6 and 10 years, and 8% 5 years or less. However, given that almost half of the OD sample did not respond to this question, care must be taken when making inferences from these data. Other information collected included the size and industry of the respondent's current organization. Over half of the individuals (53%) reported working in a small company with 0–100 employees, 7% from 101 to 500 employees, 5% from 501 to 1,000 employees, 14% from 1,001 to 10,000 employees, and 21% with more than 10,000 employees. With respect to industry, the sample was nicely distributed with 42% of participants in the consulting industry, 10% in government, 9% in health-care services, 5% in education, and a small percentage of respondents reported working in over 20 other sectors including pharmaceuticals, consumer products and goods, automotive, construction/real estate, telecommunications, and nonprofits.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, we will discuss findings that reflect respondents' reactions to the 16 attitude statements about the field of OD. Results from the data are organized into five major thematic areas identified from patterns of responses among sets of related items. Therefore, rather than presenting the data item by item, we will discuss responses around major content areas. This structure is similar to what was used by Church and Burke (1995) in the original research on practitioner attitudes and is designed to make the discussion hopefully more interesting and compelling. While a new thematic framework is presented in this article to reflect the current data, there are considerable similarities with the original structure and we will compare the data at an item level to the corresponding items from the original study where appropriate. In general, the intent is to strike a balance between focusing on the current perceptions versus the change in perceptions over time. Key relationships between items as well as interesting demographic differences will also be noted where they provide additional insights. Finally, it is important to state openly and clearly that some of

what we discuss reflects our collective experience and opinion, and should not be taken as definitive conclusions about the state of the field.

FINDINGS

1. Practitioners once again reported a perceived weakening of traditional values in OD today, and the trend was significantly more pronounced than in the past particularly regarding new entrants to the field.

Perhaps one of the most concerning findings reported in the original research on attitudes of the field was the perceived weakening of the traditional values in OD, and particularly as it related to new entrants. While only 23% of practitioners in 1995 reported a weakening at the time, and a little bit more (29%) felt that such an outcome was inevitable, over half of the respondents (55%) reported that the new practitioners lacked the theoretical background in the social sciences, and 47% felt that new entrants lacked an understanding of or appreciation for the field. Interestingly enough, when we look at responses to these same four items in the present survey, the pattern is almost identical with practitioners again seeing a weakening in values and having concerns over the preparation and orientation of new entrants to the field. In addition, three of the four of these items showed a trend toward greater levels of agreement. More specifically, 38% of respondents reported that there has been a weakening of the traditional, founding values of the field of OD, a 15-point increase on that item from 1995 (and the third highest increase in agreement with a statement overall). When asked about new entrants in the field, a staggering 70% agreed that they lack the theoretical background in the social sciences and organizational theory needed (also up 15 points). Similarly, 60% felt that new entrants have little understanding or appreciation for the history or values (up 13 points) of OD.

So what does this all mean and should we really be concerned? If we start with the weakening of OD values, at first glance 38% agreement may not seem like that high a number. Moreover, it is important to recognize that 25% of the current sample actually disagreed with the statement (36% were neutral). So fully one quarter of practitioners see no weakening in the core values of OD whatsoever. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, agreement with this item increases significantly with tenure in the field (see Fig. 1) such that half of the practitioners with over 15 years see the issue to be real as well while only 10% of those with 0–5 years feel this way.

If we take the position that OD is indeed an open and inviting field (as many do), then having a distribution of perceptions of this nature should in

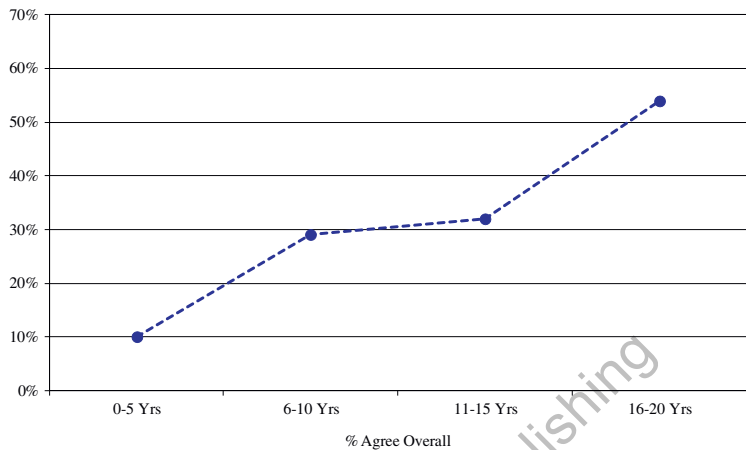


Fig. 1. Perceptions of Weakening Values of the Field by Tenure. There Has Been a Weakening of the Traditional Values as Espoused by the Founders of OD.

fact be acceptable. From our perspective, however, we feel strongly that for the field of OD to have a professional identity, it must have a shared body of knowledge, practice, and research to substantiate its existence. To this end, the fact that one-third of the field sees a weakening in the core values, and 15 points more than in 1995, troubles us deeply. Of course, it goes hand-in-hand that if new entrants are lacking in theory and appreciation of values that there will be a weakening of the core values as well.

Even if one ignores the changes in level of agreement over time, these numbers are very concerning, particularly when one considers the number of formal academic programs (the vast majority of which are masters level) focused on preparing OD professionals that have been introduced over the past 20 years. While one assumes that these programs are all well-grounded and turning out qualified OD practitioners, the data here suggest that at least some sizeable population of practitioners in the field today strongly agree with the assertion that new entrants are lacking in some significant way as well. Moreover, this trend appears to have increased substantially from the data collected in 1995.

While we can only speculate as to the reasons for this trend in increasing concern, responses to these items by practitioner data source may provide some interesting insights. In fact, responses to both of the items having to do with new entrants yielded significant differences between practitioners

sourced from NTL versus those from other groups collectively. In both cases, individuals originating from NTL agreed that new entrants lack the theoretical background (89%) and have limited appreciation for the history and values (81%) at far greater levels than those from any of the other professional groups (approximately 25 points higher overall). Conversely (and perhaps related), the NTL professionals were also more likely to report seeing a weakening in the traditional values of OD. While we might expect tenure in the field to be somewhat of a moderating factor here, given the trend above the differences in experience collectively across the groups was only about 5 years in total, this suggests that the differences in perceptions may in fact be linked to the origins of someone's training in OD (i.e., NTL) more than anything else.

Whatever the reason for the perceived differences, we would still contend that based on these data the weakening of the core values of OD continues (and has increased) and that it will continue to do so over time as the new entrants have less and less grounding in the fundamentals of the field. At a minimum, these data might suggest the need for the establishment of an over-arching curriculum standard for OD preparation and some formal review process for accrediting academic and professional programs. Of course, a recommendation such as that one will take us right back to the calls for professionalization and parameterization of the field of OD in the past (e.g., [Church, 2001](#)). It would also require that some professional organizations or associations take the lead in creating guidelines for the field which to date has not been done with any force of conviction.

So far we have discussed the three items that show a trend in the negative direction with respect to traditional OD values. The only exception to this trend, and it is an encouraging one, are responses to the fourth item in this cluster. Interestingly, while 20% of respondents from the present study report that such a weakening is indeed inevitable, this actually represents a decline of 9 points from the 1993 sample. If we take the other side of the response scale, 46% feel that the values need not be in decline at some point. So what might account for this increased optimism about the field particularly in light of (a) the perceived weakening of values and (b) negative attributions directed at new entrants particularly by those with significantly more tenure in the profession? An analysis of this item by demographics unfortunately revealed nothing – that is, there were no meaningful differences by professional affiliation, education level, or tenure. Moreover, while one might hypothesize that general optimism in the future of the field would be correlated with this item, it was not. In short, it appears that despite the negative trends, respondents believe that the weakening in values

is not a *fait accompli* and, therefore, can potentially be addressed through intervention.

2. Practitioners continue to agree that OD work should focus on business effectiveness and efficiency and the perception that OD is too interpersonal, “touchy feely,” or missionary in orientation has declined from years past.

During the heyday of the OD values debates (e.g., Burke, 1982; Church et al., 1994; Friedlander, 1976; Gellerman, Frankel, & Ladenson, 1990; Goodstein, 1984; Greiner, 1980), one of the core discussions was the extent to which OD efforts should be fundamentally focused on factors such as employee empowerment, autonomy, justice, equality versus organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and/or tangible business results. Although there will likely never be a true resolution to this debate, progress has been made over the years, and the passion in the literature seems to have waned as definitions and frameworks for OD have become more expansive and inclusive of various types of data, models, and outcomes. When we first asked about some of these issues in 1995, we learned that 69% of practitioners at the time felt the pressure to focus on the business side of the equation. We also reported that over a third (37%) felt that OD practitioners were seen as almost religious zealots or missionaries (per Jerry Harvey’s classic piece in 1974), 55% thought OD was too focused on interpersonal and group processes, and that 32% felt that OD had become too “touchy feely” at the time.

Twenty years later, it appears that having OD efforts linked to business outcomes remains of paramount importance to practitioners (with 71% agreement overall). While this result makes total sense given the current business environment, it was somewhat surprising to us that it had not increased even further. That said, only 11% disagreed with the statement down 5 points from the 16% in 1995. The only interesting difference on this item was among respondents sourced from the various professional groups with SIOP respondents reporting the highest level of agreement at 87%, followed by ISOD at 78%, ODN at 68%, and NTL at 56%. This would suggest that even though I/O psychologists (and more specifically those who self-identify as affiliating primarily with the OD profession) are focused on helping organizations and their people, the emphasis may be on effectiveness at a more systemic level.

On the opposite side of the OD values debate is the notion that OD is characterized by missionaries out to change organizations and that their approach is often too “touchy feely” or group/interpersonal in nature. Of course, to some practitioners these attributes were seen as positives and in

fact reflected a point in time during the evolution of their field. This was the context during which the interviews were conducted in the 1990s to develop the initial survey measure. As a result, the survey questions used reflected a bias toward over-utilization of these characteristics (e.g., OD has become too touchy feely, missionary, interpersonal/group focused, etc.). Interestingly despite no change in a move toward greater emphasis on effectiveness, all three of these items on the other end of the spectrum showed declines in levels of agreement among the current sample. More specifically, perceptions of OD practitioners as missionaries, spiritual, or almost religious zealots declined 8 points (from 37% to 29%) and disagreement with the notion increased 10 points to 43%. Similarly, perceptions of OD as being too “touchy feely” also dropped (5 points) from 32% to 27%. With respect to practitioners as overly emphasizing group process and interpersonal issues (and not larger systemic issues), the decline was far more dramatic (from 55% to 39%) down 16 points overall. While OD still has some negative connotations with respect to being too soft in orientation, clearly based on these data and trends, the continued emphasis on business outcomes over the last few decades has resulted in a slow decline in these perceptions. Overall no differences were present by any of the demographic variables on these items. Moreover, while one might wonder whether there was a relationship between those who perceived a weakening in the values and these items with respect to practice-based perceptions, the data suggested very little in the way of cross-item relationships here.

Another item that is related to the theme above concerns the extent to which OD is seen as focused on enhancing the spirit of the institution versus the functional mechanics of the system. This question was based on the initial interviews conducted in the early 1990s and as such is reflective of the thinking at that time. Even in 1995, only 23% agreed with the statement (and 48% disagreed). Practitioners in the present sample essentially provided the same result with 20% agreeing and 53% disagreeing. While this makes sense to us, we did wonder why this had not declined even further given the lack of business orientation of the term “spirit” in the statement. That said, perhaps the rise of more positivistic OD approaches such as appreciative inquiry may have served to counterbalance the increasing emphasis on business efficiency, in effect, yielding no change to this item’s response overall. It is impossible to know, as with the items above there were no differences by any of the demographics on this item suggesting that perceptions on this item simply reflect the diversity of thought in the OD space overall.

3. Practitioners have aligned in greater numbers against the misuse of power and authority in organizational life and have become much more committed to their organizations.

As noted earlier, one of the core values of OD has historically been as an employee advocate in support of empowerment, equality, and so on. In this context, one of the original questions asked in the OD values survey was phrased as “OD stands against the misuse of power and authority in organizational life.” While this may in some ways seem as humanistically and 1960s culturally influenced an item as the one about emphasizing spirituality, it did in fact gain considerable agreement in 1995 at 59%. Moreover, in the present study that number jumped significantly higher (up 19 points – the highest overall) to 78% agreement, with only 10% disagreeing with the statement. Given the clear traditional values, orientation of this item such a ringing endorsement is somewhat surprising. Moreover, this trend held across all professional groups, types of practitioners, different educational backgrounds, levels of tenure, and so on.

Given their role in standing against the misuse of power in organizations, it comes as no surprise that historically OD professionals have been characterized as being somewhat on the fringe of organizational commitment (Burke, 1982; Margulies, 1978). While this is particularly true for external consultants, even some internals have developed detached modes of operating (e.g., the ombudsman role or personal advisor to the CEO) in some organizational contexts. As reported in 1995, almost 40% of respondents agreed with the notion that OD tends to attract fringe dwellers rather than those who are fully committed to the organization. Interestingly, however, despite the increase in focus on employee advocacy (in the context of power misuse anyway), this perception of OD on the fringe dropped 16 points to only 23%. Moreover, there was a 31-point swing in disagreement with the item from 31% in 1995 to 62% in the current sample. While there was a small difference of 6 points between externals and internals on this item (externals were slightly more likely to agree with the concept), the difference was non-significant overall. This indicates a real change in the way practitioners see their roles (and the extent to which they connect) with respect to their client organizations. Whether this is a good or bad change remains to be seen. While we do not have data to explain why OD practitioners (both internal and external) are becoming more committed to their organizations, perhaps this may stem from the growth of other closely related disciplines doing similar type of work in organizations. OD practitioners may feel a need to more fully immerse themselves in their organizations as a member of the HR department, or to work more closely

with members of the HR department and senior executives. Therefore, this could be as a result of the phenomenon described recently by Minahan (2010) of the OD practitioner's role changing in many organizations from that of consultant focused on systemic issues in the organization to one focused more on HR-related activities.

4. Practitioners see coaching as an integral part of OD today.

Given some of the trends in the field with respect to practice, we added a new question to the survey regarding the nature of coaching and OD. While coaching per se has always been part of the practitioner's toolkit to some degree (although most likely in the form of process consultation instead), it has not historically received the attention in organizations that it has today. In the past, OD practitioners have served as coaches more in the context of working through consulting and culture change-related issues than as personal advisors. Between the rise of executive coaching in general, professional organizations, associations and certification programs just in coaching itself, and the influx of psychologists (clinical, counseling, and industrial-organizational) into the coaching space, we also expected that OD practitioners would be in competition for this type of work. Thus, we were not surprised at the positive response received to the new question "coaching is an integral part of OD." We were surprised, however, at the level of agreement (87%) which held across professional groups and level of education and even experience. Moreover, only 4% responded that this was not part of OD. From our perspective, this is either reflective of a fad with respect to the practice of coaching or some aspect of social desirability at play (though we cannot find a good reason for the latter explanation).

While respondents from the NTL sample were the only group with lower responses overall (at 75%), the differences were not statistically significant. What was significant, however, was the effect by gender (92% for females and 79% for males). This is not entirely surprising, given that there is a majority of women in the coaching profession compared to men. In addition, in an article based on the 1993 data, women in OD listed process consultation as one of the top three interventions they used most (Waclawski, Church, & Burke, 1995). While traditional process consultation (in its original classic form) is one of the interventions that is used less frequently today in OD than it was in the 1960s, today one could argue that other process-based approaches such as "executive coaching" (and other individual interventions such as mentoring and feedback and improving interpersonal communication skills) have emerged as the individual development intervention of choice of today's OD practitioners instead.

In addition, Wacławski and colleagues (1995) also reported that female OD professionals listed social contact and helping people as the two primary motivators for joining the field. Coaching certainly would help to fulfill both of those desires; and therefore, it is not surprising that women would list coaching as an integral part of OD work.

While a hot topic in the field of OD, clearly coaching is seen as valuable and relevant to the practice of OD work. The debate that has emerged in the field largely has to do more with who is qualified to coach and the type of coaching being done. This finding is interesting in that it is contradictory to the view that the humanistic, intergroup process work in OD has diminished. However, a closer look at the type of coaching being done may help to clear up that apparent contradiction in the data.

While we do not have data in this study to support this assertion, anecdotally we believe that what practitioners associate with the practice of coaching today is different from the set of practices that were used in one-on-one consulting previously. While traditional OD tended to focus more on working with individuals through techniques such as process consultation, we believe that this practice is considerably different from the practice of coaching referred to in this study. While traditional OD tended to focus on enhancing interpersonal dynamics and bringing to light “below the surface” interpersonal dynamics in order to improve individual and group functioning, this type of work being done today tends to focus more on directive business coaching through individual assessments, development plans, and skill building. Another reason that this is a hot issue in the field has to do with boundaries and intrusion of new entrants from other disciplines. Coaching has become part of a heated debate within the American Psychological Association, specifically around whether I/O psychologists and others conducting coaching in the field need to be licensed to practice coaching. While not the focus of this article, it is worth mentioning that this debate exists and that OD practitioners continue to feel strongly that coaching is one of the core interventions that belong within the OD field and that OD practitioners have the qualifications to perform this type of work.

5. Despite other trends practitioners are very optimistic about the future of OD and only a fifth see the field in a state of crisis.

Interestingly enough, despite some of the findings described above (and from the 1995 study) as well as the general perception of many in the field today, the vast majority of OD practitioners in the current research study are optimistic about the future of the field of OD (79% favorable). This

finding is not entirely surprising given the positive approach to OD that has been taken by OD practitioners more recently in the field as described by [Bartunek and Woodman \(2012\)](#). Only 8% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and only 13% had no opinion one way or the other. Similarly, although results were slightly more mixed, the majority of practitioners in this sample do not believe that OD is in a state of crisis (54%). Only 21% of respondents agreed that the field is in a state of crisis suggesting that while there are some practitioners in pockets of the field who are concerned about the future of OD, this is clearly not the prevailing perception. Because both of these items were new it was not possible to provide comparisons to the 1995 result.

However, it is possible to examine differences across groups. In general, while the grand means were non-significant at the aggregate level, it was interesting to note that the respondents from NTL were the least positive about the future (75% compared to the others all in the 1990s), while the ODN and ISOD respondents were the most likely to see the field in a state of crisis (22% and 24% vs. the others in the mid-teens). Perhaps more insightful is the significant effect for tenure on optimism of the future (not on the crisis question) such that practitioners with more experience are less positive overall (mid-1960s). This relationship is consistent with trends identified earlier regarding tenure and a perceived weakening of the traditional values of the field and is further supported by a significant correlation between these items.

One final data comparison that serves to provide a nice summary of the data collected here is to construct a simple matrix of responses to the new optimism and crisis items. Table 3 provides the data for each of the cells when classified this way.

Based on these results, it is clear that the vast majority (69%) of the almost 400 practitioners who align most closely with OD as a field are both optimistic about the future and do not see a crisis of any kind. These are clearly the positive group and their strength in numbers is a good indicator of the overall health of the OD field. Another 10% are optimistic but do see a crisis brewing. These individuals are statistically significantly more likely

Table 3. Optimism by Crisis Matrix.

	No Crisis	Crisis
Optimistic	69%	10%
Not Optimistic	10%	11%

to agree with concerns specifically regarding the new entrants in the field lacking the theoretical background or values. These are likely individuals for whom corrective action could be taken to readjust the training and education of new OD professionals using some form of certification or review process. Another 10% of respondents were pure pessimists – not optimistic about the future and saw the field in crisis. Interestingly, there was no real discernible pattern in their results suggesting just a general negative trend overall.

Finally, there was also a small (11%) group of apparently somewhat apathetic individuals who were not optimistic about the future but did not see a crisis either. Oddly enough, the two items on which this group stood out were the most likely overall to see OD as being too “touchy feely” at 47% (vs. 27% for the total) and OD as too focused on interpersonal and group processes (64% vs. 39% overall). Although it is difficult to speculate as to exactly what is driving this response set (and their response to the importance of focusing on effectiveness and efficiency at 74% was only slightly higher than the overall average of 71%), it may be that this subgroup is less enamored with the classic OD process-oriented tools of the past. This group may in fact reflect one side of the debate that was being driven in the 1980s and 1990s. That said, they do not seem to be overly concerned with these areas of over-emphasis (with respect to their levels of crisis).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the major thematic areas discussed above, we can draw some general conclusions about the state of OD today. The mixed results on some items reflect that the field of OD remains fairly inclusive of other disciplines and new entrants. This is demonstrated by the blurring of the boundaries of OD and merging with other areas of HR and organizational sciences. While in general we believe that this openness is a good thing, it has also led to OD becoming fractured as a core discipline (Church & Burke, 1995). Whether you see this openness in a positive or a more negative light, the key question is: does it matter? Given that almost half of respondents from the current study (47%) agreed that OD is becoming too mainstream and watered down (an 18% increase from 1995), OD professionals today do seem concerned that some of the founding values and principles of OD have changed or disappeared altogether. That said, overall the major trends in the data indicate that the majority of OD practitioners today seem to be comfortable

with the direction of the field. Results from this study indicated an increased importance of standing against the misuse of power and authority in organizations, as well as greater commitment, and by implication engagement, of OD practitioners in organizations. This is interesting to reflect on because, while many factors of the external and business context have changed, practitioners seem to be more committed to their organizations rather than taking a more traditional approach to OD consulting of staying on the fringe of the organization. The misuse of power item was the highest overall, even increasing from 1993, which demonstrates that this traditional value holds and has even strengthened in the field today.

Results of the present research also suggest that the field remains focused on business effectiveness. While the focus on business effectiveness item did not change from 1993, the perceived over-emphasis on soft skills in OD declined, suggesting that this focus is going away in the OD of today. This is consistent with trends that we have seen in professional organizations where the majority of practice areas and presentations are primarily focused on quantitative research and topic areas that are focused on improving business results. While OD's humanistic roots have traditionally led to a focus on topics such as group dynamics and techniques like process consultation, this has changed over time and individuals who view the field as being too touchy feely might be pleased that this perceived over-emphasis on soft skills has diminished across the field. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing depends on the direction you would like the field to take; however, overall it is interesting to note this change given some historical perceptions of the field as not having enough of a practical (read business effectiveness) focus (Church & Burke, 1995; Greiner & Cummings, 2004).

The current findings indicate a strong perceived weakening of the core OD values, particularly with regard to new entrants. This is indicated by findings that tenure and optimism are correlated such that those practitioners with more seniority in the field are less optimistic about the future direction of OD. This could be related to the substantial growth that the field has experienced in the last 20 years, expansion of other closely related disciplines such as coaching, and growth of the number of educational and training programs in the field. With this growth, OD professionals, particularly those who have a longer tenure in OD, have called for a review of professional programs in OD. Perhaps some believe that this review would help prevent further fracturing taking place in the field and serve to retain some of the core OD values with which practitioners identify.

Finally, the organizational context within which OD practitioners work has continued to change with time in terms of technology advancements, the

economic downturn, globalization, and war for talent. With these contextual changes, some of what is thought of as core OD work has changed (i.e., coaching). The growth of coaching as a core OD activity is not all that surprising given the traditional value of a humanistic approach in the field; however, most types of coaching are decidedly quite different from the traditional process consultation model. For example, while some forms of coaching follow a more traditional action-research approach based on behavioral data and feedback, others emphasize unique interpersonal elements or have a focus on improving specific business skills and performance. Again, this could be seen as good or bad, but we present it as a trend, particularly, given the overwhelming agreement with that item in this study.

Overall, our findings indicate that the field is actually in good health, and that there is optimism about the field overall, but some continued concern over weakening of values remains for more senior practitioners in the field. Perhaps we are losing the humanistic values of OD, or it seems likely that we are just losing the emphasis on classic process-related activities. Some of the traditional values have stayed consistent, while others have changed. There is a continued trend away from original humanistic values to more of a focus on both humanistic issues and enhanced productivity and business effectiveness. In general, it is positive to see that the majority of OD practitioners remain optimistic about the future of the field. When considering the trends described above, we refer back to the comparison of the “Old Guard” to the “New Practitioner” by Church and Burke (1995) at the time of the original study. Throughout this paper, we have described current attitudes among OD practitioners today as compared to those 20 years ago. Thus, we have now added a third comparison group, the 2012 practitioner (see Table 4). While many of the elements that characterized the “New Practitioner” in 1995 are still relevant today, there have been a few changes to today’s practitioner as highlighted in the table. In particular, a focus on coaching as an integral part of OD and being more fully committed to organizations are characteristic of the 2012 practitioner. Practitioners today also feel more strongly in taking a stand against the misuse of power and authority in organizations and feel that OD is no longer seen as too “touchy feely.”

In sum, a variety of areas have changed in 20 years including activities that OD practitioners are involved with, perceptions of training programs and new entrants to the field, and boundaries around the field of OD. However, there are other areas that have remained about the same in the last 20 years which may provide some level of comfort to those individuals who perceive the field to be in a state of crisis. Overall, it seems clear that the

Table 4. A Third Type of OD Practitioner.

1995		2012	
Old Guard	New Practitioner	New Practitioner	The 2012 Practitioner
<i>Areas of difference</i>			
Generalists in theory and practice	Specialists in specific areas of expertise	Operate on the fringe of organizational commitment	More committed to and fully immersed in organizations
Human relations emphasis	Business outcomes emphasis	Move away from group/interpersonal issues	Less of a perception that the field is too “touchy feely”
Missionary orientation to consulting	Career orientation to consulting	Standing against misuse of power and authority is one of many concerns of OD work	Feel strongly about standing against misuse of power and authority
Passively market self and products	Actively market self and products	Actively market self and products	Must compete with emergence of other closely related fields
Group process focused	Business process focused	Focus on individual through process consultation	Coaching is integral part of OD
<i>Areas of similarity</i>			
Systems focus	Systems focus	Business outcomes emphasis	Business outcomes emphasis
Need for self-awareness	Need for self-awareness	Specialists in specific areas of expertise	Specialists in specific areas of expertise
		Career orientation to consulting	Career orientation to consulting

majority of respondents included in this study are optimistic about the future of the field.

Finally, and at the risk of being overly interpretive, it may be that this optimism also reflects a degree of complacency. As the title of our chapter connotes, much in the field of OD is the same as it was 20 years ago. Some of us (Burke, 2011a, 2011b) believe that OD needs to be much more expansive and innovative regarding the tools of our trade such as how to change effectively loosely coupled systems like universities, and how to develop potential leaders on the job rather than sending them off to some training program. Realizing change in these and other domains of OD 20 years from now would indeed warrant considerable optimism.

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