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Forty Years of
Organization Studies:
Reflections from a
Micro Perspective

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This essay conveys my views of the past 40 years of organization studies. It is written from a micro perspective, representing my roots in psychology. The successes and the disappointments — what I believe the field has accomplished or failed to accomplish — over these four decades are reviewed, followed by some thoughts about what I think ought to happen in the future if the field is to continue to advance.

As it turns out, the mid-1950s were marked by several “births” relevant to the field of organization studies. An obviously important one was the launching of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* in 1956. While that birth was highly visible and applauded at the time, there was another important “first” around that time that went totally unnoticed. I am referring to the fact that, insofar as I have been able to determine, the term “organizational behavior” was used for the first time in print in a major publication in our field: by Chris Argyris in 1957 in his classic book, *Personality and Organization*. I’m not sure that Chris or anyone else realized the significance of the term at that time, but for me and for many others the phrase eventually came to the forefront as the focus for our professional identity in a newly emerging field.

The year that ASQ was first published also, coincidentally, happened to be the same year that I began my own professional career in this field. The fact that my first university position was as a faculty member in a department of psychology was no accident, as my doctorate was in general/experimental psychology. Thus, my own orientation to the broad field that we now refer to as organization studies was from a distinctly psychological or micro vantage point. It is a perspective that I have maintained, without apology, for these past four decades, even though for the last three of them I have been a faculty member in a business school rather than a psychology department. It is this micro perspective that frames the comments that follow in this essay.

Organization Studies’ Accomplishments over the Last 40 Years

What has been accomplished over the last 40 years? For me, this question is an easy one to answer: the development of a truly multidisciplinary field. In my view, the most satisfying and interesting characteristic of our field here in the mid-1990s is precisely that it is the province of a number of disciplines and does not belong exclusively to any single one, or even two, of them. Although ASQ has always been relatively multidisciplinary in its orientation since its inception, this was really not true of the field of organization studies back in the 1950s. It was dominated then, it is fair to say, mostly (though certainly not completely) by psychologists and what we would now term a micro viewpoint, although the micro-macro distinction certainly was not salient or even evident at that time. It should be noted that in recent years the name organizational behavior (OB) has been used by some to signify the micro end of the spectrum of organization studies, but I still regard OB as a term covering the range from micro to macro topics.

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By the early 1970s or so, the field was clearly broadening and expanding from its largely psychological roots, and *ASQ*, in my opinion, was a major force in this development. It was providing a significant outlet and a congenial home for those sociologists, and those with sociological leanings, who were interested in organizational phenomena from a combined empirical and conceptual approach. It is no overstatement, I believe, to say that *ASQ* in that era helped to convert organization studies from a micro-dominated field into more like what it is today: a multidisciplinary field that encompasses micro, meso, and macro perspectives and paradigms.

The development of such a field is no mean feat. I can recall that in the early 1950s when I was a Ph.D. student in psychology at Yale, the department was housed in a building with the name Institute of Human Relations. The Institute, both the building and the organization structure for which it was named, had been set up in the 1930s to bring about a much closer alliance and interaction among the behavioral and social sciences at Yale under the umbrella of a then-fashionable term, "human relations" (for which Yale might have to give some credit to Mayo, Roethlisberger, and the Harvard-based Hawthorne studies for helping to popularize the term). By the early 1950s, the building was still there, obviously, but there was precious little interaction among psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Each discipline was largely going its own way, not only at Yale but around the country. The idealized objective of a highly integrated combination of these disciplines was just that: an unrealized ideal. Certainly, "human relations" served to have almost zero impact as an overarching label under which at least parts of these disciplines would find common ground and common research problems. It was not just that human relations turned out to be a particularly ineffectual designation and rallying banner; rather, in the 1950s there seemed to be no focal subject matter of any kind that excited common interest and commitment across more than tiny handfuls of behavioral and social scientists. That is why I aver that the emergence of organization studies as a field that is both multidisciplinary and that appeals to large numbers of individuals as a topic for research and theory construction represents a nontrivial accomplishment.

Some will argue that while organization studies may be a multidisciplinary field, it definitely is not an integrated interdisciplinary one. I agree. But that is probably not an attainable or, perhaps, even desirable objective. In fact, if it becomes a single new discipline itself, I would probably begin to worry about the possible dangers of too much convergence. I think a worthy and more reachable goal, at least for the present time, is to strive for increased cross-disciplinary attacks on common intellectual problems as they relate to organizations. This, I predict, is what we probably will see with expanding frequency during the next 40 years. At least, I hope so, because this is where I think we will find valuable lodes of intellectual and scholarly ore.

The building of a multidisciplinary field is not, I think, the only major accomplishment in organization studies these past 40 years, even though it is, in my view, the most

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significant. At least several others deserve mention. One is the fact that the field of organization studies has been a not-inconsiderable factor in putting organizations and, especially, the management of organizations, under critical scrutiny. No doubt there are those who would argue that we have not done enough of this or that we have not done it effectively. I would contend, however, that something is better than nothing. The field, in its most encompassing sense, provides an open forum for factual and soundly reasoned critiques, as opposed to mere polemical diatribes or journalistic-type descriptions of organizational and managerial policies and practices. For this, I think all of society is well served. Organizations and the management of them are too important to be left only to their inhabitants and the popular press to criticize and analyze.

Still another but related accomplishment of the field so far is that its collective writings have served to demonstrate the futility of simplistic solutions to organizational and managerial problems. If our field has proven anything over the years it is that things are not always as they seem. Thus, our accumulated findings have turned out to be fairly effective antidotes to many of the fads that run rampant in the so-called real world of organizations. There often have been unfortunate time lags involved, and some fads have been quite resistant to frontal research assault, but eventually many of them are attenuated if not eliminated by our analyses. Of course, the counterpoint is that new and better approaches to the solution of organizational problems and issues is not always the result of those analyses, only that the problems have been exposed to be more complex than originally understood.

Finally, in my list of the accomplishments of organizational studies: a fledgling field has gotten off the ground. For that, we should all take some modest amount of credit.

Organization Studies' Failures or Lack of Accomplishments

A listing or discussion of the lack of accomplishments of the field in the past 40 years could probably go on for some length, since, as with any field, there is always more that we have not done than we have done. And ideally such a compendium should be open-ended and never complete. For the present, though, I will focus on this issue from a strictly micro-OB angle and will leave the more macro issues to others.

Probably the most significant failure of micro-OB, in my view, is that we have tended to ignore the "O" in our studies of micro phenomena. We clearly have emphasized the "B," especially in recent years, but we have by and large been remiss in considering *organizations* as critical contexts affecting the behavior occurring within them. Stated differently, we have given too little attention to the internal, organizational environment affecting behavior. To develop evidence on the potential magnitude of this problem, a few years ago I asked one of my doctoral students to make a detailed survey of how four major micro-OB topics — leadership, motivation, groups, and communication — were dealt with in the most recent editions of six leading

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textbooks on organizational behavior, all of which included one or more chapters on each of these topics. A detailed paragraph-by-paragraph analysis showed that 60 percent of the paragraphs on all four topics across the six books made *no* reference at all to the organization as a context affecting the phenomenon, about 35 percent made slight or passing reference to the organization as context, and only 5 percent made explicit reference to the organization as consisting of factors that could potentially influence the specific behaviors or processes under consideration. For two of the topics, motivation and leadership, in fact, the percentage of paragraphs with explicit reference to the "O" as context was less than 2 percent in every one of the six texts. Assuming that leading textbooks reflect the cumulative knowledge in our field, this is hardly an encouraging picture!

If the organization were taken into account more explicitly as a context influencing behavioral phenomena relating to individuals and groups, we might gain greater leverage on our understanding of some of the complexities involved. Groups can behave differently when there are other groups around. Specific acts of leadership can be differentially effective when they involve individuals who will be interacting across extended periods of time, rather than merely coming together for a transitory situation. Rewards and incentives given in one part of an organization can have a broad range of positive and negative effects on other individuals and units elsewhere in the organization. In short, much of what we claim to know at present about groups, leadership, motivation, and the like seems unduly constrained by a lack of this kind of organizational-context focus. For a field that calls itself *organizational* behavior, this is a bit ironic.

Another element of the micro side of the organizational behavior field that seems to have been underemphasized, at least until recently, is the topic of lateral or horizontal relationships. A tabulation several years ago by one of my research assistants of articles in three micro-OB-oriented journals (*Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Journal of Applied Psychology*) across a five-year time span showed that of those articles that dealt with some aspect of the organizational hierarchy, about four times as many were concerned exclusively with the vertical dimension as compared with the lateral dimension. A similar five-year span fifteen years earlier showed a ratio of 5:1, vertical to horizontal, for articles in these same three journals. This distribution is analogous to developing a city that has many tall buildings but that gives relatively little attention to the transportation infrastructure that connects those buildings. Given the changing nature of organizations and the hierarchies within them, it would seem that people's relationships across organizational units should receive at least as much attention as those across levels within units.

In a list of general failures of the micro-OB field one could note that the world of practice (in organizations) is still frequently ahead of the science of organization studies. We seem to be constantly trailing after practitioners to determine why and how something they are innovating is or

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is not working, rather than leading practitioners to implement innovations that flow from the findings that we have uncovered in the course of our (we hope) rigorous investigations. This is probably somewhat of an overstatement on my part, but I think it would be hard to argue convincingly that micro-OB research has led organizational practice, rather than the other way around. Certainly there may be instances of counterexamples, but the overall pattern seems rather clear.

Yet another area of the organization studies field (micro and macro) where one cannot point to a high level of accomplishment is the global dimension. American-based research on organizations, especially research on behavior within them, has been largely U.S.-domestic focused. The picture has been improving in recent years, with at least a modest increase in attention to multinational perspectives, but those of us in the field who have been raised and educated in the United States have been slow to embrace the necessity of a more overtly international orientation. There are obvious reasons for this, especially the size of the country and the consequent availability of research populations of organizational members and of organizations, but the time has more than come for the field to become much more globally focused. For the past 40 years, one could not accurately use the term "cosmopolitan" to depict the field of organization studies.¹

One more widely discussed critical issue in the micro domain of organization studies, an issue that some people prominent in our field would call a failure, is the absence of any clear and compelling paradigms. Perhaps we will never generate them, and some would argue we never should develop them. While acknowledging the very real dangers of paradigm orthodoxy, however, I would hope that we might eventually develop some compelling theoretical and conceptual frameworks that would at least cut across various "people" issues and topics within organizations. Micro-OB is still essentially fragmented, and what we use to organize (no pun intended) our thinking about, say, leadership in organizations, seems to have relatively little to say about how we analyze motivation or communication or group behavior. The lack of such organizing conceptual frameworks has not stopped the field from advancing, in my opinion, but it probably has slowed down progress and reduced the impact of the sum total of our findings.

Looking to the Future

Adding up the pluses and minuses of the preceding 40 years leads naturally to such questions as What of the future? Where do we go from here? As a wise person has said, there are no experts on the future, only on the past. If the issue is one of prescription rather than prediction, however, then any of us is qualified to talk about what we think *should* happen in the future, even if we don't know what *will* happen. To this end, then, here are a few thoughts, or, should I say, "oughts":

I'm firmly in the camp of those who maintain that we ought to let many flowers bloom if the field is to remain alive and vibrant. We should encourage the development of new

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To buttress this assertion, I did a rough count of all of the articles published in ASQ in the most recent 10-year span from 1986 through 1995. The numbers show that only about 12 percent of all of the authors were non-U.S. raised and educated, and only about 10 percent of the articles explicitly dealt with what might be termed global — i.e., not exclusively U.S. — topics and samples. Are those figures as high as they should be for our field? This is debatable, but a safe bet is that the next 10-year span will show marked increases.

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theories and new approaches to looking at organizational problems and issues. At the same time, however, we also need to continue to challenge each and every such new and, for that matter, old contender for structuring our thinking. The interplay of thesis and antithesis in the study of organizations is no less essential now than it was 40 years ago. Since there are many ambiguities in our understanding of organizational phenomena, there is always a tendency to want to latch on to apparent insights and explanations that seem to resolve or reduce these anomalies and uncertainties. I doubt that our field will advance, though, without the vigorous contesting of the latest and most influential intellectual trends and ideas.

A continuing and frequently stated challenge that we ought to keep trying to meet is to forge a stronger link between the macro and micro parts of the field. This argues for giving more attention to what have been labeled meso phenomena and also to research attempts to show how individual and group actions can affect organizational actions, as well as vice versa. A focus on only the macro side or only the micro side of the organizational studies coin, as it were, will keep giving us an incomplete and ultimately unsatisfying picture. Fundamental issues in the field, such as how organizations attempt to find an effective balance between centralization and decentralization and the consequences of the balances chosen, would seem to require a combined macro and micro analysis. Since the scope of knowledge relating to organization studies has increased so markedly in the past four decades, new entrants to our area of intellectual endeavor are less and less likely to be equally versed in both major components of the field. As a consequence, the need for collaboration among sets of researchers across the macro-micro boundary will become progressively more important.

A stronger link between our scholarship, on the one hand, and our management education activities, on the other hand, is another "ought" — or at least a hope — for the future of organization studies. During much of the past 40-year period, and especially in the early years, there often seemed to be a disconnection between these two realms. One researched in the field or in the lab, and then one taught in the classroom. It was as if these were two separate tasks held together only by a professor's job description. In the future, the increasing prevalence, power, and sophistication of information technology should allow for more real-time interface between our research endeavors and our educational and instructional activities. The logistical impediments for accomplishing this integration have been reduced to near zero and, therefore, so have been our excuses for not doing it. Likewise, there should be no reason why those who are active in the field of organizational behavior scholarship should not play a central role in management education in the future.

Another interface that still continues to need attention is that between scholar and practitioner. The challenge here is to develop that interaction for the benefit of the advancement of knowledge in the field of organization studies, without at the same time being co-opted by the immediate needs of

the practitioner. In recent years, business schools in the U.S. have been getting increasingly closer to the world of business practice, primarily (though not only) because the corporate world is seen more and more as a source of nongovernmental financial support. A positive by-product is that through executive education programs and other similar activities, organizational scholars have gained new insights into the problems and issues faced by practitioners, and this, in turn, has generated research ideas and sites for testing hypotheses. The downside of this developing circumstance, however, is that we can become too familiar and lose an independent and critical perspective on those problems and issues. Clearly, this is a classic Catch-22 situation that will require continuing attention in the future. To paraphrase an old adage slightly, the price of research and academic independence in organizational studies is eternal vigilance.

On a somewhat more upbeat note, I propose that in the future we make a concerted effort in organization studies to collect benchmark organizational data points across time. We need this kind of benchmark information to help us and future generations answer the questions How, and how much, are organizations changing? What is being advocated is more than a simple plea for longitudinal research. That is important too, of course, but in addition we need to have systematic data on specific features and characteristics — both micro and macro — of various types of organizations collected at regular intervals over extended periods of time. This is utterly unglamorous work, and that probably accounts for the fact that up to now it hasn't been done on any extensive scale. Nevertheless, some sort of endeavors along these lines — and they can be multiple efforts — are needed if the field is to realize more of its potential than it has to date in these first 40 years.

Some Concluding Observations

Forty years has seen great changes in the world, in society, and, consequently, in the academic field called organization studies. Certainly our field has been a "growth industry" these past four decades. We have produced more of almost everything relating to the field: books, articles, journals, theories, paradigms, scholars, and, some would argue, even confusion. We know a great deal more about organizations than we did in the mid-'50s, but we also know there is more that we don't know than we do know. The field has expanded in the amount of research being done but also in the breadth of topics investigated. The latter is probably the greatest single change that has occurred since the founding of ASQ, and it is a change that should be celebrated. No one could fairly claim that any topic even remotely connected with organizations is somehow off-limits for exploration or serious consideration for publication in respected scholarly outlets.

The field is indisputably bigger and more expansive than it was 40 years ago, but is it better? Since there barely was a field then, this is probably not a meaningful form of the question. Rather, a more appropriate version might be: How healthy is the field now, in the mid-1990s? Each of us would have our own answer, but mine is: Its health is robust. I

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believe the quality of our research methods, of our theory building, and of our attempts to integrate knowledge about organizations is better now than it ever has been. This is certainly not a cause for relaxation or overconfidence but, instead, represents a solid foundation for moving into the future.

Speaking personally, I am still as excited, if not more so, about studying organizations and the behaviors associated with them, as I was when *ASQ* and I started in the field back in 1956. For me, it is hard to think of a more challenging and stimulating field in which to work — or, as Jim March would say, play. I envy the young people coming into the field now for the opportunities they will have to investigate important and intellectually intriguing problems. The issues are ones that will be of significance not only for all of us associated with organization studies, but for society as well. Society needs our research. For all of the above reasons, I am convinced that the best is yet to come for the field of organization studies — definitely a work in progress.