

Organizational Immersion and Diagnosis: The Work of Harry Levinson

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It was in 1968 that Harry Levinson established The Levinson Institute during his years on faculty at the Harvard Business School. The Institute emerged from 14 years of work at The Menninger Foundation of Topeka, Kansas where he was director of the Division of Industrial Mental Health. His goal with The Levinson Institute was twofold. First, he wanted to develop and apply psychoanalytic theory to managerial practice and organizations and second, he wanted to develop ‘a more sophisticated understanding of the psychology of leadership and organizational processes’ (personal correspondence, 1985). This understanding ‘would simultaneously inform and enrich the activities of management and leadership, and by so doing also contribute to the mental health of people who worked in organizations’ (*ibid.*). This article is a retrospective of the work of Harry Levinson and his contributions to our understanding of organizations.

In the following, I present readers with an overview of Levinson’s contributions to psychoanalytic organization psychology. Then, I share excerpts from an interview conducted with Harry Levinson in August 2002 during the American Psychological Association meetings in Chicago, Illinois. Finally, I provide a listing of his books and articles, which include published works not reviewed here. My intent is to offer readers a perspective on his impact on the psychoanalytic study of organizations.

BACKGROUND

Harry Levinson, the son of a Polish, Jewish tailor from Lodz, was born in Port Jervis, New York more than 80 years ago. Considered by many as the founder of psychoanalytic organization psychology, he was

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awarded the prestigious American Psychological Foundation Gold Medal for Life Achievement in the Application of Psychology in 2000. Now semi-retired and living with his wife Miriam in Delray Beach, Florida, he is chairman of The Levinson Institute and Clinical Professor of Psychology Emeritus in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He received his BSc and MSc degrees from Kansas (Emporia) State University and his PhD in psychology from The University of Kansas, where he received clinical training in psychology at the Veterans Administration and The Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas.

From 1950 to 1953, he was coordinator of professional education at Topeka State Hospital and had a central role in the reorganization of the Kansas state hospital system. In 1954 he established, and for the next 14 years directed, the Division of Industrial Mental Health of The Menninger Foundation. According to Levinson, 'I had begun the task on January 1, 1954, when Dr William C. Menninger asked me to undertake a project that would do something about keeping well people functioning well'. He wrote later:

Naturally, if one is to do something in a public health sense about keeping people well, that is most easily done through social systems and primarily, therefore, with those institutions in which people work, inasmuch as their work is of great psychological significance to them. (personal correspondence, 1993)

During the academic year 1961–1962 he was Visiting Professor in the Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and in 1967 in the School of Business at the University of Kansas. From 1968 to 1972 he was Thomas Henry Carroll-Ford Foundation distinguished visiting professor in the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration. Throughout his career, he has sought to create a systematic application of psychoanalytic theory to management (Levinson, 1976; W. Lorsch, ed. 1987).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Levinson is known for developing insightful and practical concepts informed by a deep appreciation of the nature of the workplace. What follows is an overview of many contributions by Harry Levinson.

The emotional first aid stations

In 1954 Levinson along with William C. Menninger wrote 'Industrial mental health: some observations and trends' in the *Menninger*

Quarterly and in 1956 he wrote 'Employee counseling in industry' for the *Bulletin of The Menninger Clinic*. These articles were groundbreaking in their acknowledgment of the need for emotional support and care for workers and managers. These articles were precursors of today's employee assistance programs.

The psychological contract

In 1962 Levinson (with Charlton Price, Kenneth Munden, Harold Mandl, and Charles Solley) wrote *Men, Management, and Mental Health*, which introduced the concept of the 'psychological contract'. In the book, Levinson explained how the psychological contract shapes the expectations of employees and the organizations they work for. Levinson's notion of a psychological contract encompassed an acknowledgement of conscious and unconscious human needs and desires that employees invest in their relationship with the organization and its leadership. He argued that unless management is psychologically aware of these manifest and latent dimensions of worker motivation, it is highly unlikely that employees will feel adequately nurtured by their employers. This oversight of course can lead to demoralization and poor performance.

The psychological contract is a valuable conceptual tool for managers and consultants as they consider failures of supervision and communication between supervisors and subordinates, executives and their staff. Application of the psychological contract between employer and employee requires perpetual dialogue between the parties, acknowledging the dynamics of mutual needs and expectations, conscious and unconscious. Levinson's use of ego psychology and the management of the ego ideal shaped his earliest thinking about motivation and emotional well-being at work.

Reminiscent of the human relations and humanist movements in management theory at the time, Levinson's psychoanalytic approach was distinctive in its application of a systematic model of human personality. His stress on the individual ego ideal and one's emotional investment in the workplace provided a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the collision between individual and organization.

Psychological anthropology

Men, Management, and Mental Health (1962) also provided a groundbreaking multidisciplinary study of the Kansas Power and Light Company and was an example of (what Levinson calls) psychological anthropology – a notion he uses to this day to describe

a process of 'immersion' central to psychoanalytic organizational diagnosis and consultation. In the spirit of Kurt Lewin's action research model for applied social science, Levinson's notion of immersion is indicative of his belief that knowledge of organizations requires experience of the organization from the inside – what some anthropologists and social scientists would call 'participant observation'. Although, in Levinson's framework, psychoanalytic theory, self and other awareness, provide researchers and consultants with the conceptual model and potential psychodynamic awareness necessary for constructive and insightful immersion as observing participants.

Over 40 years ago, Levinson and his colleagues spent time out in the field with workers, observing, participating, interviewing, and eventually understanding and documenting the crucial role of work groups and their leaders in organizations. In particular, they illustrated how the paternal foreman established meaningful and familial-like emotional ties (positive transference and counter-transference) with his workers and consequently enhanced their safety and minimized accidents under typically dangerous working conditions. For Levinson, the informal and affectionate bonds between workers and their foremen (supervisors) helped to explain effective, physically safe and emotional healthy, management performance in the workplace. The study also pre-dated much of the popular enthusiasm several decades later with organizational culture.

Management-by-guilt

In 1964, Levinson observed difficulties of supervision in managing subordinate performance in the workplace. In particular, he saw a problem for managers that some individuals understood intuitively, yet had no psychological basis for articulating and correcting it. Managers often found it troubling and many felt conflicted, that is guilty, about evaluating subordinate performance, especially when the evaluation required negative and critical feedback of the employee's work.

Levinson not only explained the psychodynamics of guilt, he emphasized the human compassion inherent in and necessary for providing subordinates with unambiguous, direct, and honest feedback in performance evaluation. From the notion of 'management-by-guilt' supervisors came to better appreciate their ambivalent feelings surrounding the act of subordinate evaluations. They also came to appreciate the value of sincere feedback in the development of subordinate career opportunities. Consultants learned to pay attention to these difficulties of supervision and provide help to their clients. Out

of these insights surrounding the ego ideal at work, Levinson came to stress the leadership's role in mentoring and educating workers.

The organization as learning institution

In 1968, Levinson published *The Exceptional Executive*, later (1981) revised and updated in the *Executive* and published by Harvard University Press. Subtitled 'The guide to responsive management', Levinson continued his investigation of managerial performance through the lens of psychoanalytic ego psychology. Progressing on themes he started to explore in earlier writings, he argued that one of management's primary failures is their unawareness of the depth and dimensions of human needs of employees. Executives and their management must become better mentors, he argued, and to do so they must become more knowledgeable about what motivates their employees.

In the *Executive* (1968, 1981), Levinson asks managers to pay attention to three primary human drives: ministration, maturation, and mastery. Ministration, according to Levinson, takes into account needs for gratification, closeness, support, protection, and guidance. Maturation needs comprise fostering creativity, originality, self-control, and reality testing. Mastery needs encompass the demands for ambitious striving, realistic achievement, rivalry with affection, and consolidation. With these human needs in mind, executives could engage in more thoughtful and reflective dialogues with their workers and might establish management systems responsive to individual potential and desire for advancement. Motivation could be understood as multidimensional and leaders could actually facilitate growth and maturation in their own careers and the careers of their employees. One cannot help but reflect on how challenging such sensitivity to human needs of workers has become in our contemporary global economy of volatility, downsizing, and re-engineering.

A framework for problem analysis

In the *Executive*, Levinson (1968, 1981 revised) provided a psychoanalytic framework for problem diagnosis as well. The framework was designed to assist managers in problem solving focused on personnel conflicts and performance issues. Here he presented a template for analysing troublesome human relations at work and a practical application of psychoanalytic theory in the workplace.

Consistent with his earlier writing, he suggested examining the individual ego ideal in the work setting and the degree to which the

individual manager, executive or worker feels he or she has lived up to this ideal. Many consultants and researchers of organizations can recall the frequency with which workers feel they fall short of their personal goals or are not working at their level of competency and training.

Next, Levinson looked at how the individual deals with needs for affection and his or her desire to develop close ties with colleagues in the workplace. Certainly, Levinson's earlier experiences in the field indicated that informal attachments in work groups, such as the case with his study of the Kansas Power and Light Company, are often critical to understanding dynamics in the organization. Then, he asked how the individual copes with feelings of aggression at work. Here, the influences of drive theory and ego psychology come through in an implicit acknowledgement of the role of work as a form of sublimation and the absorption of aggressive energies. Finally, Levinson encouraged paying attention to how workers react to dependency demands (1981, p. 33). Given the hierarchic structure of most organizations, the phenomenon of dependency enabled consultants and researchers to examine more closely the nature of super- and subordinate relationships at work.

In *Psychological Man* (1976), this framework is formulated into questions. In a rather simple and unforgettable outline, Levinson asks the following: Who is in pain? When did it begin? What is happening to needs for: aggression, affection, and dependency? What is the nature of the ego ideal? Is the problem solvable? If so, how? Thus, Levinson illustrated how one could arrange and interpret data (in a psycho-analytically informed way) around problems and conflicts in the workplace that might otherwise leave managers and executives perplexed and seemingly without recourse. His (1972) book *Organizational Diagnosis* expanded this capacity for analysing problems to the systemic level of analysis.

Organizational diagnosis

In 1972 Levinson's book *Organizational Diagnosis* was published by Harvard University Press. The book is a comprehensive guide to analysing organizations and arranging the complexity of varied data (factual, historical, genetic, interpretive) into a systemic understanding of its integrative and adaptive processes. According to Levinson:

this was an adaptation of an open system biological model, which had been applied to individuals, for the study and analysis of organizations. It emphasized the need to understand organizations and their problems before trying to intervene into them. The diagnostic emphasis was a uniquely clinical contribution because so much of what had been done in organization

development was essentially ad hoc application of established techniques without adequate diagnosis. (correspondence, 1985)

Organizational diagnosis, arguably, may be Levinson's most important contribution and in 2002 the American Psychological Association published an updated and revised version in *Organizational Assessment: A Step-by-Step Guide to Consulting*.

For many organizational analysts and consultants, particularly some psychoanalytically oriented, organizational diagnosis became the central component to comprehensive processes for 'real' organizational change. This meant that prior to engaging or contracting for a particular intervention strategy (such as strategic planning, reorganization, team-building, executive coaching, and the like), the client and consultant would agree to a comprehensive study of the organization as an open system. This meant that, regardless of the executive leadership's assumptions of 'the problem', these assumptions would need to be suspended until a comprehensive analysis of the organization was complete and not until the consultants collected historical, factual, and interpretive data through extensive interviews and observations. In other words, strategies of intervention and change, in Levinson's model of organizational diagnosis, would follow and be governed by an organizational assessment. It was also in this extensive work that Levinson articulated the nature of transference and counter-transference between the organizational consultant and clients, encouraging consultants to pay attention to how they are received and 'used' emotionally and psychologically by their clients.

Loss in organizational change

In his 1972 *Harvard Business Review* article 'Easing the pain of personal loss', Levinson explains the psychodynamics of organizational change from the standpoint of change as a personal experience with loss. Here and elsewhere in later publications, he described processes of grief and mourning that gave emotional legitimacy to the human defences and reactions of denial, anger, searching for the lost object, disorganization, and reorganization. Management from this point on was encouraged to acknowledge that changes in the workplace are not effectively implemented without processes that acknowledge participants' feelings of attachment to routines and structures and the pain of relinquishing social defences and embracing the uncertainty of the future workplace. Difficulties in mourning or inadequate attention to the emotional dynamics of loss could sabotage an otherwise systematic effort at organizational change.

The fallacy of reward–punishment psychology

In his (1973) *The Great Jackass Fallacy*, Levinson explains why the carrot and the stick are ineffective management techniques. His psychoanalytic framework for understanding human motivation and the vicissitudes of the ego ideal shape his criticisms of most traditional management theories of motivation and performance. These theories often apply a ‘rational economic man’ model and ignore unconscious and latent dynamics beneath the surface and inside the worker. Certainly the ‘carrot and stick’ approach cannot address the sentient world of workers and their search for meaning and dignity through their productive lives in the workplace or as part of a profession.

Following this overview of Levinson’s contributions to a psychoanalytic study of organization, I provide the reader with the text of an interview with Harry Levinson during the annual meetings of the American Psychological Association.

**HARRY LEVINSON INTERVIEW
(CHICAGO, IL, JUNE 2002)**

MD: What are your concerns with the state of theory and practice of organizational diagnosis today?

HL: I see a pretension to knowledge without knowledge. By that I mean a pretence among consultants of paying attention to unconscious processes within and between the consultant and client. Without the concept of unconscious processes, consultants work at a manifest and superficial level of structure and strategy without understanding the psychological meaning of these perpetuated structures and strategies and thereby without a lens for interpreting irrational and dysfunctional practices.

MD: What drives the analysis of organizations deeper?

HL: The framework for organizational diagnosis was intended to provide analysts and consultants a method for studying manifest and latent organizational dynamics by combining factual, genetic, and historical data with crucial interpretive [or narrative] data. More importantly, it enables consultants to root their articulation of organizational problems in a consensually validated narrative.

MD: Can you say more about this issue of ‘knowing without knowing’ in the practice of organizational consultation?

HL: Another dimension of ‘knowing without knowing’ refers to the consultant’s use [or lack thereof] of self.

MD: Do you mean self as instrument of observation, interpretation, and understanding?

HL: Psychoanalytic organizational consultancy, unlike most consultancy practices, requires a stance of open mindedness – an acknowledgement of ‘not knowing’ and thereby a suspension of the assumption of knowing. This humility is derived from self-knowledge. My concern with the theory and practice of organizational diagnosis today is that some organizational analysts and consultants, particularly those who claim to assume a psychoanalytic orientation, are not sufficiently equipped with adequate insights into their own defensive proclivities and are thereby incapable of differentiating between their private world of internal object relations and that of their clients and their client systems. In other words, unanalysed or unacknowledged emotional immaturity and narcissism in the consultant will lead to an incapacity to adequately delineate self and object, internal and external realities.

MD: Are you suggesting that organizational analysts and consultants ought to be psychoanalysed?

HL: I think consultants who claim to work psychoanalytically ought to get psychoanalysed. We risk pretension without confidence in a method of working with the client and the client system and without having undertaken psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is a theory of human needs and as a clinical practice for organizational research and consultation is best practiced and more deeply understood when the organizational researcher or consultant has had a personal analysis. Among organizational analysts and consultants today I see an ‘absence of understanding the dynamics of repression’. Many consultants working without the methodology of organizational diagnosis ignore the impact and significance of historical data for present day organizational challenges and for understanding more deeply the stories and themes of interpretive data. Without the concept of repression (or suppression) the organizational analyst cannot find meaning nor locate psychic reality in the workplace because he or she is unaware of the multiple functions and dimensions of stories (much like dreams) and the degree to which they operate as defensive screens concealing fundamental issues, problems, and motivations. Without the experience and conscious awareness of how one’s own repression functions, the consultant will be incapable of sensing, feeling, and observing these repressive processes within the client system.

MD: How does theory shape your work with organizations?

HL: In the Lewinian sense I believe in the value of good theory and by

that I mean that theory informs practice and is simultaneously reformulated based on practice. Students need to immerse themselves inside organizations in order to learn and experience first hand what goes on in systems they wish to understand and help. We need to stress the critical importance of *immersion* in the training and education of psychoanalytic organizational consultants. Again, by immersion I mean the integration of theory and practice in the context of ongoing fieldwork and consultation experience under the supervision of a practiced mentor. In sum, humility about what you do comes from immersing yourself in the work – in the field.

MD: What additional oversights do you find in the present work of psychoanalytic organizational students and practitioners?

HL: I do not see a sufficient emphasis on understanding and applying transference and counter-transference among consultants in dealing with the client and the client system. There are multiple dimensions of transference and counter-transference that if not understood and incorporated into the work can leave the consultant vulnerable to seduction by those in positions of power and authority and can leave one vulnerable to provocation – that is being unwittingly provoked by a client. It is compelling to get close to people in power and to over-identify with them and to get manipulated by them. We [consultants] are not power people; often to the contrary, we assist people in power. Organizational analysts and consultants are frequently deluded by their proximity to power, magnifying their own narcissism, particularly if they (as consultants) are unaware of their own narcissistic injuries and proclivities and how these [unattended fragments of self] influence their work with client systems.

MD: Can you say more about the function of narcissism in the process of consultation?

HL: Only that professional narcissism is a problem. It shuts out learning from others and their experiences.

MD: Do you mean that it [professional narcissism] works against 'knowing what we don't know' and may delude consultants into viewing themselves as experts with some magic solution to their clients' problems?

HL: Fundamentally, it [unawareness of narcissism] limits reflective learning and thereby interferes with developing insights and observations helpful to clients and their organizations. There are no built-in protections such as ethical standards against human aggression and narcissistic injury. Like Freud, we have to teach ourselves what goes on

in our guts and what goes on in our clients and their systems. Organizational analysts and consultants are vulnerable here, since there can be no policy that might guard against narcissistic hunger for aggrandizement and approval. Some might argue that policy in the form of ethical standards does not necessarily work to defend against sexual improprieties either – a subject for another time.

MD: Beyond attending to transference and counter-transference as well as professional narcissism, what additional tools, conceptual or personal, are necessary?

HL: Organizational diagnosis as a method helps to manage consultant unawareness, because it requires interviewing many people. The consultant subjectivity is to some degree tempered by the methodology of data collection and interpretation – assuming that the processes of developing the organizational story involves either a team of consultants and/or an outside consultant's consultant or analyst. Psychoanalytic organizational consultants need their own consultants or analysts to assist them in processing their own internal object relations during consultations. They need someone to turn to while they're consulting with clients – the consultant's consultant or analyst. Also, keeping a diary to understand one's reactions as well as processing with the team, is helpful. Ideally, you find help from outside the consultation project as well.

MD: What are your thoughts on the popular trend toward executive coaching?

HL: I see what passes for executive coaching today as 'consultation for many'. Consultants are easily manipulated in this era of instant gratification. The model of organizational diagnosis, or what we might call psychoanalytic organizational consultation, is not for everyone. It's too complex and time intensive. There may be gradations in which people use the model and that's to be expected. Organizational diagnosis is an ideal model. People will do as much of it as they can or they may reject it. The model is a standard of practice – an ego ideal, aspiration – within it there is a possibility of continued learning and immersion.

MD: So you are saying that the psychoanalytic approach to organizational diagnosis and practice is not for everyone due to its intensity, comprehensiveness, and long-time commitment?

HL: I am critical of the 'brief time-frame' of many consultants and clients today, which does not allow for sufficient commitment of time for diagnosis and psychoanalytically informed consultation. I admittedly

have moderate expectations about the future prospects for psychoanalytic organizational consultation. Clients and consultants prefer the 'quick fix' approach to organizations. This approach assumes the consultant somehow magically knows what the client and client system require without organizational assessment and diagnosis. Moreover, it is this impatience and short sightedness that has led to the acceleration and popularity of more prescriptive approaches that promise more than they can possibly deliver. These approaches include executive coaching as practiced by many non-psychoanalytic consultants. Furthermore, these practices tend to focus on a part of or member of the system rather than the system as a whole and that contradicts the spirit of organizational diagnosis. One can imagine how this sort of orientation would leave consultants vulnerable to counterproductive collusions with the executive client, particularly in the case of narcissistic executives with mirroring self-object needs and consultants with idealizing self-object demands.

MD: Do you have other reservations on some forms of psychoanalytic consultations popular today?

HL: I am critical of those consultations that move people off-site and out of context: the work must take place in the 'natural workplace setting' rather than off-site somewhere that takes the consultancy work and a potential understanding of the systemic psychodynamics out of context. Consultants cannot understand the subjective and psychological reality of organizations without exposing themselves to the experiences of an organizational culture. This exposing or immersion, then, requires the psychoanalytic consultant to engage him- or herself in what I call psychological anthropology [psychoanalytic fieldwork and participant observation]. We need to understand that the psychoanalytic organizational consultation requires an understanding of and engagement with psychological anthropology.

CONCLUSION

Harry Levinson's contributions to the theory and practice of organizational consultancy are extensive and relentless. His commitment to psychoanalytic theory and the integrity of organizational consultation shaped by psychoanalysis are legendary. His conceptualization of organizational diagnosis has established a framework and benchmark for genuine systemic analysis and change – that is a measure of consultants and clients commitment to real change. For many individuals in the field he has been a mentor and for others he has been an outspoken yet constructive critic. In the early years of the

International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, during my presidency of the Society and beyond, he fulfilled a learned role at the end of each symposium where he would summarize what we may have learned and where we might go next in the advancement of the application of psychoanalytic theory to organizations. Always the mentor, educator, and responsive leader, Harry Levinson's impact on the field and the people he has worked closely with over the years is infinite.

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