DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENTIAL AND NON-EXPERIENTIAL LEARNERS' REACTIONS TO CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ORGANIZATION BEHAVIOR

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Personnel in industrial organizations everywhere are engaged in activities aimed at resolving conflicts between organizational and individual needs. The psychological tendency of individuals to seek fulfillment of their various needs, beliefs, and expectations which often conflict with organizational goals underlies much of the explanation of personnel motivation and behavior. [8, p. 372] The research reported here was conducted to focus attention on differences in how experiential and non- experiential learners respond to conflicts between individual traits and organizational demands. Understanding these differences has essential implications for teaching topics in organization behavior.

Rarely, if ever, are behavioralists able to predict the precise way in which conflicts are Likely to be resolved. Teachers of organization behavior are confronted with some crucial questions concerning differences in experiential and non- experiential learners' reactions to organizational conflict: (1) Are there recurring reactions to conflicts which are specific to experiential and non-experiential learners? Or are differences in reactions among experiential and non-experiential learners greater than those between experiential and non- experiential learning groups? (2) Are efforts to resolve such conflict directed more toward rejection or acceptance of organizational controls and change? After discussing the relevant features and criticisms of the "personality and organization" hypothesis, these questions will be examined.

Personality Versus Organization

A popular view of human behavior in industrial organization, largely credited to Argyris, [1, p. 50], is predicated on two essential features: (1) assumed psychological tendencies of individuals and (2) analysis of the impact of formal organizational demands on these tendencies. These features can be stated briefly and quickly reviewed.

The development of most psychologically healthy individuals in industrial society seems to proceed in certain similar directions. More specifically, individuals tend to develop from:

1.   ...a state of passivity as infants to a state of increasing activity as adults…

2.   ...a state of dependence upon others as infants to a state of relative independence as adults

3.   ...being capable of behaving only in a few ways as an infant to being capable of behaving in many different ways as an adult

4.   ...having erratic, casual, shallow, quickly-dropped interests as an infant to having deeper interests as an adult

5.   ...having a short-time perspective (i.e., the present largely determines behavior) as an infant to a much longer time perspective as an adult

6.   ...being in a subordinate position in the family and society as an infant to aspiring to occupy an equal and/or superordinate position relative to their peers.

7.   ...a lack of awareness of self as an infant to an awareness of and control over self as an adult.

Moreover, most healthy individuals desire to mature, to satisfy increasingly higher levels of needs. In practice, they often want more opportunity to form strong social groups, to be independent, creative, to exercise autonomy and discretion, and to develop and express their unique personality and freedom.

The organization, on the other hand, may seek to program individual behavior and reduce discretion. Thus, it may demand conformity, obedience, dependence, and immature behavior. In such a situation the assembly-line worker, the engineer, and the executive are all subject to strong pressures to behave in a programmed, conformist fashion. [11, p. 245-259] Consequently, managers and employees alike may become alienated from their work. In short, the requirements of formal organizations placed on individuals are sometimes incongruent with the adult modes of behavior enumerated above.

In turn, individuals react to organizational pressures of this kind in a number of ways, most of which are dysfunctions to the organization. Individuals may retaliate through union activities, sabotage, output restriction, and other forms of rational or irrational behavior. Or they may withdraw and engage in regression, sublimation, childish behavior, or failure to contribute creative ideas. At any rate, individuals usually struggle not to conform. To reduce the imbalance and adjust, organizations must impose still more restrictions and force still more immature behavior. Thus, a vicious cycle begins. This is an unhealthy situation for the individual, the organization, and society as a whole.

A healthy solution is for management to adopt policies which promote intrinsic job satisfaction, individual development, and creativity, according to which personnel will willingly and voluntarily work toward organizational objectives. [7, p. 43-46] More specifically, management should promote job enlargement, general supervision, strong cohesive work groups, and decentralization. In capsule form, management should adopt participation and involvement techniques.

Criticisms

This explanation has been attacked on tightly reasoned grounds as being visionary and impractical; as approaching problems of organization from the wrong direction, when modifications in structure, work-flow, technology, communication and interaction pattern can achieve results more economically. [4, p. 161] It has been overemphasized as something unique, while it is merely one aspect of what has been variously characterized as the conflict between "individual and society," "desire and reality," "id and superego." With strong emphasis on individual dignity, freedom, creativity, self-development and actualization, it constitutes a normative prescription for organizational behavior implicitly involving debatable value judgments. It is questionable whether these values are equally functional and applicable to all aspects of organizational endeavor. Where, for example, creativity is not required for accomplishing organizational objectives, but only the ability to conform. [2, p. 281] Perhaps the most fundamental criticism is that a large number of individuals do not seek autonomy, creativity, or self-actualization with respect to on-the-job satisfaction. Recognizing that there are indeed numerous opportunities to redesign organizations, jobs, and work flows to permit greater fulfillment of autonomy and achievement needs, it is argued: (1) such changes are more appropriately a matter of organizational economics requiring simultaneous consideration of costs and gains and (2) many individuals find a full measure of need fulfillment in extra-organizational affairs, i.e., in family, community and other off-the-job arrangements. [3, p. 161]

Need for a Synthesis

These contrasting views do not mean that either the personality-organization hypothesis is meaningless or that the criticisms raised are untenable. Neither view has universality; both have merit. For some individuals, the personality- organization conflict may be felt quite acutely. Quite likely, these are the very individuals whose work cannot be programmed and from whom management expects more than merely adequate performance. Conversely, others may more easily accommodate themselves to the demands of the organization without too much psychological loss, and for them the conflict is not particularly

frustrating. The former may seek and be capable of tolerating much broader limits of individual freedom than do the latter, who become upset if the limits of discretion are not firmly defined. Consonance of organizational and individual behavior does not mean complete freedom from, or restriction by, organizational constraints; it implies successful adjustment to them. [6] Moreover, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that sudden attempts to increase or diminish the individual's sense of autonomy may well be the source of maladjustments and conflict.

Most cognitive theorists posit that an individual experiencing conflict or tension will seek to reduce dissonance and restore cognitive balance. When expectations are not met in a particular situation, an individual will react in one of several ways. [5] It was a specification of these types of reactions to organizationally incongruent situations and their relation to an individual's instruction by experiential compared to non-experiential learning techniques that served as focus of the present inquiry.

Alternative Reactions to Incongruency

When an organizational role of achieved status is asserted to require low level needs for autonomy--i.e., when status indicators are "out of line"--this information represents a situation of incongruity. In other words, we expect personal characteristics of high achievers to correspond with achieved roles; and conversely, we expect low achievers to occupy an ascribed status and role. [9]

It is possible to identify five different reactions to in- congruency between personal traits and role--all of which serve to restore congruity. For example, take the following incongruent assertion: "Those personnel having qualities of energy and initiative are more passive and dependent than those who do not." Respondents to such an assertion may react in one of the following ways to this discrepant relation between traits and behavior:

1.   Reject the relationship..."That is not true."

2.   Discredit the relationship..."Qualities of energy and initiative do not result in being passive and dependent."

3.   Refute the relationship..."Qualities of energy and initiative result in being more active and independent."

4.   Reinterpret the relationship..."This happens when individuals are inappropriately suited to job requirements ."

5.   Tolerance..."This is possible; however, the notion needs more qualification and specification of circumstances."

Neither exhaustive or exclusive, these alternative responses are considered to be representative of quite different psychological reactions to ambiguity and incongruity. The assumption is that these response categories represent different means for reducing dissonance and restoring cognitive balance. Ranging from outright avoidance (rejection) to temporary acceptance (tolerance) of incongruity, these differences are largely characterized by (1) what the respondent assumes to be the relationship between psychological traits and behavior and (2) how he perceives socially defined determinants of traits and behavior. Another important factor determining the selection of one category of response rather than another is likely the respondent's past experience with dissonance and how he has learned to cope with conflicts between his own personality and socio-organizational requirements. [10, p. 42-55]

It thus seemed plausible to hypothesize that students **ex**posed to different instructional techniques, each with their own distinct means of coping with conflict situations, would exhibit differences in the frequency of selecting any given category of response in reaction to dissonant relations between individual traits and organizational behavior. This approach was examined in a recent study outlined below.

Methodology

The College of Business Administration at Northern Illinois University provided 200 student subjects--l03 taught by experiential and 97 taught by non-experiential (lectural) techniques in the course of organization behavior. Using the assumed psychological tendencies of individuals described in the "personality and organization" hypothesis, it was possible to construct six incongruous assertions about organizational behavior:

1.   "Personnel having qualities of energy and initiative are more passive and dependent than those who do not."

2.   "Individuals who accurately understand others as well as themselves are less sensitive and flexible in job relations than those who do not."

3.   "Personnel having versatile skills and talents are more rigid and limited in the ways they act than those who do not."

4. "Individuals having broad interests and experiences are more technical in their jobs and narrowly specialized in the organization than those who do not."

5. "Personnel having a long time perspective in planning their work are more pressured to make rapid decisions and take immediate action than those who do not."

6. "Individuals having high level needs for achievement occupy lower level jobs in the organization than those who do not."

An unambiguous seventh question was added to provide a control condition:

7. "Personnel having a keen awareness of their own high capabilities and potential exercise stronger self- determination and control over their actions than those who do not."

Respondents were asked to select only one category of response for each of these statements. These categories corresponding to the alternative reactions explained above were randomly arranged after each assertion to test for differences in experiential and non-experiential learners' reactions to conflict set forth in the findings below.

Differences in Reaction

Unlike assertions one through six, assertion seven represents a control measure. Since it represents a congruent assertion, it would not be expected to reveal differences in reactions. Moreover, some form of acceptance, i.e., tolerance rather than rejection would likely occur more frequently. Comparisons of responses for assertion seven in Table I (far right column) shows that this is, in fact, the case.

Reactions for assertions one through six, however, show significant differences between experiential and non- experiential learners' response to the incongruous statements.

These differences indicate that instructional technique is strongly related to the means whereby students seek to resolve inconsistency between personal traits and organizational behavior. Difference in instruction for this particular sample is an important determinant of reaction and resolution of personality-organization conflicts. Further examination of assertions one through six reveals a common pattern of reaction differentiating experiential from non-experiential learners. On the average, almost three-fourths of the experiential learners selected the categories of Reinterpretation and Tol-

TABLE 1

Chi Square Comparisons For Assertions One Through Seven

Response Category	Assertion Number												
	One		Two		Three		Four		Five		Six		Seven	
	E*	N	E	N	E	N	E	N	E	N	E	N	E	N
Reject	0	16	2	20	2	17	8	13	5	23	6	13	5	7
Discredit	4	16	4	13	5	15	14	28	10	26	13	20	4	8
Refute	1	38	6	25	9	20	24	30	17	16	20	38	6	9
Reinterpret	35	19	49	19	45	19	34	22	34	12	23	18	28	24
Tolerate	63	8	42	20	42	26	23	4	37	20	37	8	60	49
Total	103	97	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
X^2	247.09		52.04		35.19		22.29		34.20		31.50		5.53	
df	4		4		4		4		4		4		4	
p	.001		.001		.001		.001		.001		.001		NS	

*
E--Experiential Learners
N--Non-experiential Learners

erance while only one-third of the non-experiential learners selected the same categories. The largest contribution to Chi square came from Reinterpretation and Tolerance, which experiential learners most frequently select, and from Rejection and Discrediting, which non-experiential learners tend to select. Major differences between the two groups occur with respect to how they seek to resolve conflict between personality and organization. With these findings, a closer look can be made to shed light on implications of the personality-organization hypothesis.

Summary and Implications

Different patterns of reaction distinguish experiential and non-experiential learners' response to incongruity. Non- experiential learners appear more likely to be influenced by certainty (need for clarity) experientialists by uncertainty need for greater specification of particular circumstances; operating with a limited amount of information, they characteristically modify unpredictable relationships by fitting them to the familiar expression--"It depends."

As suggested by the study, non-experientialists may not perceive complete autonomy in the relationship between psychological traits and organizational behavior. Rather, they want to know the limits within which personality-organizational relationships will occur. Put another way, some non- experiential learners are willing to tolerate unpredictable relationships between traits and behavior, but the majority insist that psychological traits manifest themselves as expected. Experiential learners on the other hand, appear more amendable to the novelty and uncertainty of the relationship between individual and organization. Unlike non-experientialists, they do not as strongly insist that such relations be as regular and predictable.

It should be noted that the degree of conflict between individual and organization is conditioned considerably by the element of expectations. Non-experiential learners may be more accustomed to thinking in terms of resisting the advent of novelty and surprise to relatively stable situations than experiential learners. Experientialists are more likely conditioned to thinking in terms of enduring and/or internalizing the forces and uncertain consequences of change. Hence, socio- organizational factors of experience, as well as subject content are important variables influencing student attitudes toward personality-organization conflict. The basic implication for teaching topics in organization behavior is that the ability to endure inconsistency provides a correlative measure of the magnitude of maturity in grasping insight into organization conflict. Admittedly, much of this explanation has been developed a posteriori; only further longitudinal research will make these explanations less equivocal.

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