

The Road to Here, The Road From Here

On What Was Done, Not Done, and Yet to be Done

As I neared the completion of this thesis, a colleague asked what I wanted to accomplish with this work. It is an astute question, one to which I would reflexively apply Valence Theory itself, and particularly, the notions of *effective* theory and *tactility*: Who is to be touched by the findings and insights of this thesis, and in what substantive, transformative ways? From the first inspirations that ultimately led to my fully formed articulation of Valence Theory, I have always considered this work to be, first and foremost, the creation of a vocabulary and rudimentary grammar of contemporary *organization*.

There is the apocryphal cliché of a so-called Eskimo having an extraordinary number of variants of the word, “snow,” to precisely and accurately describe the nature and characteristics of her/his environment. Despite a remarkably rich literature of management, leadership, organization behaviour, theory and development, strategy, organizational learning, communities of practice, and a plethora of other, more specific aspects, I remain struck by one observation: The research conversations with diverse participants from a wide variety of organizations revealed a dearth of vocabulary that could accurately characterize their experiences. Everyone could more-or-less express their impressions, feelings, and perceptions using anecdotes, metaphors, and rich situational descriptions. There was not, however, a common vocabulary with which individuals could clearly explain organizational dynamics from one situation to another.

An interesting phenomenon began to emerge long after the research conversations, as the analysis work progressed and I began to share and discuss the ideas of Valence Theory with some of my participants. They started to explain other dynamics and incidents in their respective organizations in valence terms. My feeling during these casual conversations (some via email) was that they weren't using my language simply as a means of communicating with *me*. I had the distinct impression that they found Valence Theory language useful for themselves, to make sense of interactions and organizational dynamics that otherwise might have been easily dismissed as arbitrary, illogical, inconsistent, or simply a result of "the system."

At one point, Loreen sought my advice on a challenging matter concerning a critical business negotiation. By reframing her inquiry using the five valence relationships, especially with her having an intuitive understanding of creating and sustaining organization-*ba*, she was readily able to make sense of a complex situation and decide on an appropriate – and ultimately successful – course of action.

My hope, that is, the effects I intend for Valence Theory, is that more CEOs, more executives, more managers, more workers – more *members* – will be able to engage one another in productive conversation about their personal and collective aspirations for *their* organizations. I expect that reframing the vocabulary will necessarily reframe the tenor of the conversation, that is, the meta-conversation about *organization* in its societal context. Just as the epochal changes in the dominant mode of communication enable fundamental structural changes in society throughout history, there is the possibility that a change in the dominant vocabulary and grammar of *organization* may (eventually) enable structural changes in the locales of organizational conversations—

board rooms, seats of government, educational institutions, business schools, community centres, union halls, the archetypal start-up garages and grassroots church basements.

Valence Theory is, of course, incomplete. Although the research sought to include organizations large and small, for-profit and not-for-profit, public and private, new and old, BAH and UCAPP, there were only five participating organizations. Additional conversations with many more organizations at various places in their respective organizational lives may enrich the vocabulary, adding more descriptive organizational adjectives and adverbs, and more nuanced understandings of the five valence relationships and two valence forms.

Additionally, the research participants were exclusively so-called knowledge workers, privileged and secure in their jobs¹. Given the overwhelming contemporary discourse concerning organizations in the “knowledge economy,” an organizational vocabulary that applies primarily to knowledge work may well be useful, despite this situational limitation. Nonetheless, there is considerable opportunity to expand the exploration of Valence Theory to include organizational environments that are contingent, involve itinerant workers or manual labourers, and are outside of what is generally considered as white-collar work in a North American context.

Within the domain of those who have already contributed to this knowledge, the respective organizational and functional roles played by the participants have been

¹ The two who were leaving their positions – Frances and Aaron – were voluntary departures. They were both unconcerned about their then-future prospects.

painted with a particularly broad brush. There are more focused questions that can be asked relative to a Valence Theory reconception of the basic premises of specific organizational practices, such as marketing and sales, finance and economics, human resources practices, strategic and tactical leadership, and other, similar management disciplines. Exploring concepts such as “valence marketing,” “valence-relationship human resources,” or the like may be a rich source of new praxis in these, and other, disciplines—despite the potential for cliché co-option and cargo-cultism.

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, Ecological valence was scarcely touched on by the participants, and therefore played a minimal factor in the empirical results. Given the critical importance of ecological concerns, and the conflicted discourse in general, there is yet tremendous potential to explore the nature of *organization's* Ecological connections among their members and with other, diverse constituencies. As I suggested earlier with respect to organizational dynamics in general, introducing a reframed vocabulary of an organization's relationships and responsibilities to the discourse on environmental issues may prove to be both enlightening and useful.

Of necessity, this research was conducted from my social and cultural location as a privileged, white, male researcher in a Canadian university, with a long history of corporate business involvement as employee, manager with relatively senior responsibilities, and consultant. It is very likely – to the point of near certainty – that research conversations with members of organizations grounded in non-Western (specifically, non-dominant, North American) cultures would yield additional, illuminating results. Although business organizations throughout the world have adopted American-style management practices, they have been interpreted,

implemented, and translated according to their own indigenous history and culture. Thus, I would expect that the constructs of Valence Theory may as well have interesting and potentially useful, alternative interpretations, implementations, and translations. This, too, presents an opportunity for future research, especially for researchers who have a first-hand knowledge of the respective diverse histories and cultures in question.

There is one additional discursive area that may prove fruitful for enriching the vocabulary of *organization*, to which I would like to direct some final attention: What does it mean for an organization to be organic?

The Organic Organization

Ever since Burns and Stalker introduced the concept in 1961, there has generally been a favourable association with the idea of an organization being *organic*, as opposed to mechanistic. An organic organization, in their view, responds better to dynamic situations and unforeseen circumstances, relying more on adaptable application of specialized knowledge. It tends towards a highly mutable application of control, authority, and responsibility derived contingently from the specific circumstances with which it must contend. Its communication structures and mechanisms are information-based, rather than being oriented towards establishing command-and-control structures (Burns & Stalker, 1961/1990). A recent test of Burns and Stalker's work finds that "organic, self-organising working structures are shown to enable creative commercial innovation more easily than hierarchical settings," (Cooper, 2005, p. 525), providing more motivating environments for

innovators (in Cooper's case, development engineers) and a leadership style more conducive to new, creative work.

But, what does it mean for *any* organized system comprised of mostly independent elements – of which *organization* is but one instance – to be organic? Can an organization be alive? Fritjof Capra (1996) suggests that a system can be considered to be living if it possesses: (a) a *pattern of organization*—“the configuration of relationships among the system's components that determines the system's essential characteristics” (p. 158); and (b) *structure*—“the physical embodiment of its pattern of organization” (p. 158); linked by (c) *process* fully contained within the living system. Process, in other words, is the continual embodiment of pattern (the relationships) in a reified structure. A mechanical system, for instance, cannot be said to be alive according to this definition, as its process is external, existing in the mind of its designer. Capra maintains that,

...all three criteria are totally interdependent. The pattern of organization can be recognized only if it is embodied in a physical structure, and in living systems this embodiment is an ongoing process. Thus, structure and process are inextricably linked. One could say that the three criteria – pattern, structure, and process – are three different but inseparable perspectives on the phenomenon of life. (Capra, 1996, p. 160).

Capra identifies Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980) *autopoietic network*² as the pattern of relationships, Ilya Prigogine's *dissipative structures*³ (Prigogine

² An autopoietic system creates its own boundary that defines the resultant entity as distinct from its encompassing environment, yet remaining open to that environment to effect exchange (as, for example, in the case of a cell that exchanges nutrients, energy, and waste products). An autopoietic system is *self-organizing*, that is, the system itself determines its overall behaviour, and the interconnecting relationships among its component elements, rather than having those imposed deterministically by the external environment (Capra, 1996).

& Nicolis, 1977; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), as the embodied structure of that pattern, and *cognition*, drawing from Maturana and Varela's Santiago theory, as the linking process. The Santiago theory posits that mind (cognition) is a process that links perception, emotion, and action, and therefore applies equally to all living entities, irrespective of the presence of a brain or nervous system. It does not necessarily involve thinking in the human sense. Essentially, it recognizes that cognition, as distinct from thinking and abstraction, involves environmental perception, a resultant change in structure and behaviour ("emotion"), and a (non-deterministic, and therefore unpredictable) response, through which the system adapts to changes in its environment through autopoietic processes of self-generation and self-perpetuation. Cognition continually links pattern and structure.

A traditionally conceived, BAH organization is neither self-forming nor self-sustaining. The fact of hierarchical, bureaucratic structure and administrative procedures means that these organizations are formed and sustained according to external patterns and structures. Simply, from this perspective, a BAH organization is *dead*—that is, not alive.

On the other hand, patterns of interconnected relationships within a valence-conceived (and especially, UCaPP) organization result in a self-forming, self-bounding, self-sustaining emergent form. A valence organization can be understood as an

³ Dissipative structures are stable forms that characteristically exist far from equilibrium and maintain their stability by passing energy and matter through them. Without a constant flow, the structure collapses; with an increased flow of energy beyond a point of homeostasis, the structure becomes unstable and chaotic, until it reaches a bifurcation point, beyond which it regains stability at a higher degree of complexity—a phenomenon known as emergence (Capra, 1996).

autopoietic network. The mechanisms that are used to sustain organization-*ba* throughout the organization provide the “energy” that maintains it as a dissipative structure. *Effective* theory – environmental perception, feedback processing relative to intended effects, and feedforward anticipation through which the organization responds – provides the linking process of cognition. *Organization* conceived according to Valence Theory is *alive*—it is the contemporary realization of the early conception of a truly organic organization.

As a basis for a new vocabulary, and a fundamental reconsideration of our collective *place* in this world, the conception of *organic organization* may well provide inspiration for us all.