

An Interview with Chris Argyris

by Victor Woodell, *RODP*

Organization and Employee
Development Services

Introduction

Chris Argyris has been one of the single most influential scholars in the field of organizational development. His ideas on organizational learning, reasoning and thinking have had a tremendous impact upon the field. He has been conducting research on the behavior of individuals within organizations since the early 1950's, and is still very much active today. He is also winner of the ASTD Lifetime Achievement Award for Advanced Workplace Learning and Performance, as well as being the author of many books, including most recently *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap*, a book about the shortcomings of the types of interventions that management consultants typically propose.

Is there anything that you would like to say about your latest book?

My bottom line conclusion is that when the recommendations of OD people to managers involve what I refer to as "single loop learning" then it basically works, but when they involve transformational change or "double loop learning" they become problematic in several ways. For example, Steven Covey talks about qualities such as initiative, trust, personal responsibility, and so on. In the book I analyze some transcripts of his that seem to show mistrust of others, not trust. My book is full of such examples of management gurus who engage in various types of defensive routines. The problem is that many people are telling executives how to behave, but their advice is not connected to reality.

One example that I use in the book is a consultant who is trying to help some line managers integrate the technical side of their subordinates' work with the human side. Yet the commitment of the line managers declines over time, because they cant

see how to do that while making their production numbers. His answer was more "participation", but that wasn't credible to the managers, because they had no model or theory in their heads that would show them how to accomplish both goals. When I use this example at seminars with OD consultants, I role-play the consultant in the scenario, and I ask them to help me work with the managers. What I usually get, **as I illustrate in the transcript in the book**, is more defensive behaviors.

Are there any consultants or theorists that you do admire?

There is Kurt Lewin, who began all this back in 1939. Also Ren Likert. In the present, there are people who are beginning to combine various approaches in a constructive way, people like George Roth, who just wrote a book on learning histories, and Roger Martin, who wrote "The Responsibility Virus." There are a number of small groups of people who never publish anything but who share their work with me, small numbers of people who are trying out new ideas.

You just mentioned Kurt Lewin, whom I know you encountered early in your career. Can you describe how much influence he had upon you?

Tremendous. Kurt Lewin had a deep commitment to observing the world the way it is, especially in terms of direct observational data. He used to say, "Like a child sitting on a stump." But he was also committed to changing things, not just observing them. Like his work on reducing racial prejudice, for example, or his concept of Quasi-Stationary Equilibrium, which I consider to be one of the major contributions to social psychology. He never respected the work of scholars who would only describe the world through their own eyes, and not

through the eyes of the people they were observing.

If you look at his early studies on group leadership, **the research began** by developing quantitative instruments. Then they would go out and observe. As a result of that they would refine their instruments. But the point of all that was to see if they could actually change autocratic leadership, make it more democratic, not just describe it. By trying to change it you have to combine the quantitative data and the ethnographic observations. You combine practice and theory by changing the thing you are studying.

In my book (The Unintended Consequences of Rigorous Research,) one example that I use is John R. P. French, who wrote a series of articles on **leadership studies**. He reviewed Lewin's studies, and concluded that they were important, but didn't have scientific rigor. What I demonstrated was that French did have rigor, but he also lost his connection to the reality of what he was studying by becoming too abstract. This also applies to many studies today. The overly "correct" use of science can lead to a disconnection.

I would summarize by saying that Lewin did three things: he was committed to understanding reality as his participants understood it, he used a combination of so-called “normal” science with a **narrative-integrative approach**, and he tested his ideas by trying to change the things he was studying.

What other important influences do you recall from your early years?

Bill Whyte. He wrote the book about gang life in Boston (**Street Corner Society**). He was part of the Chicago School of Sociology that also focused on observing reality. He would send us out as graduate students and tell us to “observe something.” He really helped us build a strong commitment to connecting with observational data. But he **was** also interested in change. In the last 30 years I would say he did more than any other sociologist to promote social change, especially in the area of labor-management relations.

How did you begin working with Donald Schon?

Don is a philosopher who is more concerned than most have been with action. This is a real problem for most of philosophy. For example, lots of people have studied Socrates, and see him as being someone who was very open to new ideas. But how can Socrates help us to educate people to become more open to new ideas? If you examine him closely, you will find that he was a great manipulator of people. Well, that’s not very helpful, we can’t manipulate people the way he did. Martin Buber is another philosopher who tried to analyze moral responsibility and ethics. Yet he says almost nothing about helping **individuals to become more skillful in using** these concepts in the world.

One other philosopher who did have an answer was Dewey. His solution was to develop new types of schools. He became known as a “Pragmatist” philosopher, although some people used the term “pragmatism” as a hidden way to condemn anyone with a concern for practice.

I was always taught to avoid normative theories and to concentrate on description, but I think instead that you have to combine the two. I was also taught that first knowledge must be additive and then later it will become actionable. But that simply isn’t true if there is no integrative theory to tie things together.

At what point did you begin to shift your research interests away from individuals to organizational change?

Very early on I wrote a book called *Personality and Organizations* (1957). I wanted to have a theory to **explain** what I saw in the world. The question was what units to focus on: people or organizations? So I asked myself “what makes up an organization?” The answer that I found in the literature of the time was “a hierarchy and a pyramid structure.” This led me to ask what the impact of this was upon human beings. My conclusion was that these features place people into “infant-like” situations, and that that results in conflict, hostility toward management, etc. This finally led to the question of how to implement change. I could find no approach, at that time, which was both powerful and efficient enough to do the job. After all, you can’t put thousands of employees through therapy. Then NTL got started, and I went there. Here was an approach to help top management change their behavior and create enabling conditions for lower ranking employees. Things like job enrichment

and so forth. I felt that I had finally found a way to integrate the individual and the organization.

What is the relevance of Action Research today?

It’s extremely important, if you are talking about the kind of action research we had in mind when Kurt Lewin was still around, and not the kind of action research I sometimes see which is just another version of the so called “normal” science approach. The question is how can we connect the solution to a research problem with social action? The answer is to develop a theory to test your ideas.

Action research is terribly important and necessary not just to improve practice but for the development of science. Lewin adopted what he called the “Galilean” as opposed to the “**Aristotelian**” approach. Develop your hypothesis, test it, and consider even one exception to disconfirm the hypothesis. There are no “outliers”. What scientists want are criteria that accurately predict things, and that’s exactly what practitioners need too- knowledge of what interventions will work and which one’s won’t.

Why did you begin to regard the researcher as an actor, as opposed to simply an observer?

I never trusted distant observation. I have always felt a commitment to learning to what extent myself or others were producing unrecognized errors. You can’t get at that without becoming part of the study.

Why is there such an emphasis on cognitive reasoning in your work, as opposed to behavior or emotions?

I would like to turn that around a little. I think that if we can understand how

emotions are produced in the heads of human beings, then we will find designs that are rational. No emotion is irrational. I think that I am focused on emotions but on discovering why a person feels that way and what can be done about it. Emotions can't be disconnected from reality. **Recall that Freud created concepts like defensive routines in order to understand the rationality (he called it the economy) behind feelings.**

Much of current OD practice emphasizes passion and emotion. What is your reaction to this?

I have conducted three separate seminars with OD practitioners, and in all three about 80% of the participants mentioned that, but they couldn't produce it. I would ask them to tell me what compassion looks like, how do you produce it, and they couldn't tell me. A lot of consultants who talk about compassion sound a lot like the disconnected executives that I work with. You have to go beyond abstract examples and show how people can manage their emotions more effectively, how you can use compassion to help line managers. Incidentally, one person who could do that very well was Carl Rodgers. He knew how to use theory to influence his practice.

What exactly is a "Theory of Action?"

It's a theory that we use to explain to ourselves how human beings produce the behavior we observe in others. Everything we do is by the use of our brains. So what our theory needs to answer is which actions are produced by which conditions? People have these designs in their heads to tell them the answer to this. And these designs are intended to explain all behavior, not just reasoning or just feelings.

Why is there a difference between the theories we espouse and the theories we use?

We become skilled at what I call "Model I Thinking." We get good at defensive reasoning, and then we get good at denying that we are good at defensive reasoning. Then we build a theory to explain other people's behavior to ourselves. People do see the discrepancy between the two forms of reasoning, but only while they reflect on it. Otherwise, people are more likely to develop what I call "skilled unawareness" of inconsistency. Yet, when it comes to the important issues, none of us have any trouble seeing other people's inconsistency.

I remember one workshop that I held in which one executive said to another one: "What you just said was competitive and evaluative and doesn't help learning." As we analyzed what he said, we determined that what the first executive had said had **also** been competitive and unhelpful. We do this sort of thing all the time.

As a practitioner, how do you encourage your clients to reflect on the difference between espousal and action?

We use the "Right-Hand/Left-Hand" case study approach. Down the left hand side of a piece of paper, we have the participants record a conversation that they have had regarding a problem that they want to solve. Down the right hand side of the paper, the participants record any unspoken thoughts or feelings they experienced next to what they were actually saying at that moment. Then we discuss the results as a group. We help each other see the discrepancy between what they are saying and what they are actually thinking. Then the next question is

how to produce something that is consistent. How can we actually become good at it? So we begin analyzing the actual conversations we are having in the workshop, in a situation where people can feel safe.

What leadership style best promotes this type of thinking?

The most typical leadership style is Model I leadership. This is advocating courses of action, evaluating others, and making attributions that are not subject to a reality test. Unfortunately, this is often seen as "strong" leadership, to be able to bully others into agreeing with your way of thinking. The job of an effective leader is still to advocate, evaluate and make attributions, but to do so in a way that corresponds to reality, that can be tested. You do this by inviting others to confront your views and conclusions. This will result in a sharing of information that should produce a stronger theory.

How important is a perception of trust in an organization?

It's critical. Trust determines how discussible are the real issues that need to be confronted. Many people say that this is important in their organization, but very few can show how to produce it. They can't see their own inconsistencies and become indignant when someone says to them "Let's examine how you actually behave, and compare that to what you say you should do." There are so many examples of this today: Enron, the Catholic Church, teachers who just want to get their test scores up. This is counterproductive to learning and trust.

I remember recently a woman who was describing a report that she delivered to her executive, but also how she hadn't thought that he would really look into the issues that she was raising. He, on the other hand,

was thinking that she wasn't a team player. Yet neither of them said any of this to the other (*this was something that happened during the Enron scandal: interviewer*). People fail to give necessary feedback to each other, yet continue to act as if they are. That is how scandals like this develop.

What are your future projects and interests?

I am doing for academics what I did for managers and consultants in "Flawed Advice and the Management Trap": it's a follow-up book **of the one entitled** "The Unintended Consequences of Rigorous Research." In it, I attempt to show how to combine the best of both normal and narrative **modes**, and the implications of this for theory. This is the idea that came from Lewin, that the researcher has to be committed to developing rigorous theories that explain how real people see the world. Theories like this do not simply describe, they **can be used** to change something that people are doing **at the level of what I call double-loop learning**.

Thank you.



Chris Argyris



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