
Organizations and the end of the individual?

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Introduction

The concept of the individual has achieved “centrality and sovereignty” in western thinking[1, p. ix], and as such is largely taken for granted. However, this concept derives from a particular philosophical position, and there are other ways in which the individual can be understood. The alternative perspective of social constructionism not only conceptualizes the individual differently but locates the traditional view in its historical context and interprets it in terms of the needs of industrialization. Adopting this alternative viewpoint, this paper argues that work organizations have played a significant role in both the western conceptualization and the very formation of the individual. It speculates whether, with the organizational changes now taking place, this conceptualization and formation are also likely to change, and whether we shall therefore see the end of the individual as traditionally understood.

The paper opens by examining some of the traditional western assumptions made about the individual, largely enshrined in psychology and unquestioned in organizations, and then the alternative perspective which sees both the individual and the concept of the individual as socially constructed. It notes how the traditional understanding derives from its historical and social context, and examines the role of work organizations in both reinforcing the traditional concept and forming the individual. It points to the possible implications of changes in organizations, and concludes by discussing the potential emergence of a new individual.

Traditional and alternative conceptualizations of the individual

Some assumptions about the individual are deeply embedded in western thinking, and hence in organizations. The individual is conceptualized as “a natural entity”, independent of society, with “attributes” which can be studied empirically; this “naturally occurring reality” is “firmly bounded, highly individuated”, “a relatively autonomous self-contained and distinctive universe”[2, pp. 1-4]. Based on a positivist philosophy, these assumptions are espoused by the discipline of psychology, the task of which is “to study the individual and develop the laws of his or her functioning”[2, p. 1].

One branch of psychology has wrestled with identifying the ways in which individuals differ, and dealt with this issue by construing the individual as having component parts such as personality, intelligence and attitudes. A standard definition of personality, for example, is that it is “those relatively stable and enduring aspects of the individual which distinguish him [*sic*] from other people and, at the same time, form the basis of our predictions concerning

his [s/c] future behaviour”[3, p. 511]. Operational definitions and psychometric techniques have enabled psychologists to identify the dimensions of these component parts in the general population and to locate individuals along them, so allowing comparison between a particular individual and general norms.

In traditional western thinking the individual is also conceptualized as “the integrated centre of certain powers: one who is aware, who feels, who thinks, judges and acts”[2, pp. 13-14]. From infancy, individuals have to embark on the process of individuation, developing from a diffused to a clear, focused and continuing sense of self in relation to and separate from the external world. Hence the humanistic school in psychology construes the integrated, whole person as having a coherent, continuing and realistic self-concept, an orientation to the future, and the impulse for development towards greater complexity, integration and self-actualization.

Others, however, reject traditional western positivist assumptions, with their duality of objective and subjective, in favour of social constructionism: they conceptualize the individual as a social construction, not a category derived from nature. This interpretation denies the notion of a central organizing self or “transcendent entity”[2, p. 4] and challenges the assumptions that the actions of individuals can be causally explained by internal states or mechanisms, and their maturity and development attributed to innate predispositions. Instead of conceptualizing the individual as separate and autonomous, with a decontextualized self, it embeds identity in its context and understands it as constructed through relationships with others, thus giving rise to the notion of “possible selves”.

The assumption that the individual has a continuous and coherent self is further challenged in various postmodern conceptualizations[4]. Giddens[5, pp. 75-7] sees the individual as a “reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible... We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves... The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future”. Self-identity is constructed and sustained through narrative: “the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences”[5, p. 2]. Nor is it self-contained: individual and society interpenetrate:

In forging their self-identities... individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications[5, p. 2].

In summary, although the western conceptualization of the individual is largely taken for granted, there are alternative interpretations that challenge some of its basic assumptions.

Assumptions about individuals in their historical context

The social constructionist perspective suggests, of course, that not only is individual identity socially constructed, but the conceptualization of the individual is as well. Hence it recognizes that the traditional western understanding of the individual is constructed in a particular historical context, and that several stakeholders, with differing interests, have a part in it.

Thus, if we now find ourselves experiencing ourselves as self-contained, self-controlled individuals...we need not presume that this is a fixed or "natural" state of affairs. Rather, it... is a moment in a still ongoing historical process and may be reconstituted as understandings change[1, p. x].

According to Giddens[5, p. 74], today's notion of individuality was unknown in pre-modern times. Watson[6] points to the emergence of the traditional western concept in the period of the Reformation and Enlightenment, when questioning, rationality and dissent were encouraged. It was then that "the forces of modernism were stressing the importance of the individual, the virtue of thinking for oneself, and the necessity of self-interest"[6, p. 7]. Protestantism "laid a massive stress on the individual, on a striving for individual achievement, on human competitiveness"[6, p. 86]. Others stress the ideological basis of the concept: the notions of autonomy and individuality served the needs of liberal capitalism[2, pp. 4-5]. The conceptualization of individual subjects as objects facilitated the rational control of the new industrial workplaces, the success of which, according to Rose[7, p. 120], depended on organizing the capacities and attributes of those individuals, fitting them to the demands of the tasks to be undertaken, co-ordinating them with one another in space, time and sequence, and identifying and excluding those lacking appropriate capacities. Moreover, as other commentators suggest, the attributes of individualism, such as the need for self-fulfilment or status, drive consumption and hence fuel a market economy. There is, therefore, a functional relationship between the traditional conceptualization of the individual and western societies.

From this perspective, it can also be seen that psychology played its part in constructing an appropriate concept of the individual. It provided "the devices by which human capacities could be turned into information about which calculations could be made ... the vocabulary, the information and the regulatory techniques for the government of individuals"[7, p. 121]. Hence psychology contributed to the conceptualization and making of the individual: "individualizing humans through classifying them, calibrating their capacities and conducts, inscribing and recording their attributes and deficiencies, managing and utilizing their individuality and variability"[7, p. 123].

This conceptualization was further refined by the development of psychometric testing, which was stimulated by the need for the selection and training of large numbers during the two World Wars[8], and facilitated by the availability of and access to appropriately large numbers of respondents. Herbert[9] notes how during the First World War the American Psychological Association was brought in to help deal effectively with the problem of individual differences presented by the conscription of millions into the army.

Work organizations, by taking for granted the western concept of the individual, have served to buttress it. As can be seen in the notion of the "psychological contract", although the organization comprises individuals, the individual is nevertheless regarded as an entity separate from it, while the organization itself is reified. The understanding of individuals, however, is

achieved through the filter of the nature and needs of the organization. In what is regarded as good organizational practice, the starting-point for recruitment and selection is job analysis, job description and a person specification; for training, it is training needs analysis; for management development, it is the present state of the organization and its need for development. The resulting understanding is then applied in organizational approaches to many issues, such as motivation, employee development, management development, career development and self-development.

Organizations have, moreover, been major consumers of the psychology of individual differences:

...the activities of psychologists led to major contributions in selection, classification, performance appraisal, and personnel assignment techniques ... the scientific management experience and army efforts went hand in hand in advancing the cause of consciously taking into account individual differences and needs in the job [9, p. 13].

Like the army, complex work organizations have needed procedures, such as psychometric tests, to facilitate the differentiation between individuals in selection, appraisal, training, promotion, or the construction of teams. Such procedures make the traditional assumption that the individual can be fragmented into parts.

In summary, it is argued that the conceptualization of the individual has been influenced by the needs of a particular society in a particular phase of its development, and that work organizations have both employed and contributed to this conceptualization.

Organizations and the making of the individual

The question of how individuals become who they are is conventionally answered in terms of nature and nurture, with nurture playing a significant role in both traditional and alternative interpretations. From the traditional viewpoint, the social structure stands outside and impacts on the individual. Stereotyping, the operation of group norms, the steering by rewards and sanctions, comparison with models, coaching and mentoring combine to inculcate and sustain acceptable behaviour and identity. From the constructionist perspective, the making of the individual takes place in the daily engagement with other people, in interpreting and negotiating with others' expectations and behaviour. The individual constructs and learns to project an identity that is expected or desired in a given situation and that makes actions meaningful and acceptable to, and largely predictable by, others [10,11]. In so doing, each individual plays a part in forming the identity of others: in constructing self through interaction with others, the individual is also constructing society.

From the traditional perspective, society with its social class and age-status systems provides the norms and stereotypes, for example of gender and age, that influence individual behaviour and identity. From the alternative perspective, the processes of construction generate a pool of social meanings on which individuals draw as reference points to orientate themselves to their

society as they learn who they are in contrast to others and develop expectations of themselves and others. Work organizations do not encounter “raw” individuals, but engage with a narrow band of individuals who have been groomed (or have constructed themselves) for that engagement. In effect, then, the process of ensuring that individuals display the characteristics required by employers and indeed characterize themselves in these terms begins even before they enter the labour market. Family, peers, educational curriculum, educational guidance, careers guidance and the media have already played a part in constructing identity and encouraging the individual towards some paths through the labour market and away from others. Their influence on (or construction of) behaviour and attitudes such as punctuality, acceptable forms of speech and interpersonal behaviour is both direct and indirect through anticipatory socialization.

Membership of work organizations continues in a significant way the process of the making of the individual, whether construed traditionally as socialization or alternatively as social construction. The organization comprises a framework of roles. It is considered good practice to design and define these roles and the relationships between them rationally and clearly. Job design, job analysis, and job descriptions are the procedures which establish the nature of and relationships between roles and specify the nature of the individual to fill them – the person specification. The roles, with their job titles, give a formal recognition to the individual’s distinctiveness and set the boundaries for individual behaviour: they mark out who the individual is in the organization’s terms. Through the operation of rewards and sanctions, the individual is influenced to adhere to the norms of the work group. Moreover, because work organizations have largely offered different types of work, progress and rewards for, and expected different forms of behaviour from, men and women, young and old, the individual is also likely to conform to the stereotypes of the wider society.

The spatial and temporal existence of the organization beyond the tenure of particular members offers them a potential future and potential movement which, in a hierarchically structured organization, could be upward. This promise of hope and a glimpse of a future self in a future place stimulate both endeavour and conformity: individuals have every reason to tailor their identity to the needs of the organization as they interpret them.

The emphasis on rationality and suppression of emotionality in organizations and the separation between home and work roles play a further part in socializing or constructing the individual, and may do so in ways that are interpreted as distorting or damaging[12, pp. 42-3] or as discouraging the development of a nurturing, expressive self[13, pp. 134-5]. Despite organizations’ potential to harm, individuals may come to depend on them for their identity. A powerful witness to this can be found in the negative experiences reported of individuals who have had to leave an organization unexpectedly because of redundancy or ill health, or after a long period of membership.

Retirement is seen as “premature death”[14], and evidence is cited of disorientation, ill health, suicide and early death[12].

In summary, work organizations not only contribute to and uphold the accepted conceptualization of the individual, but they also have a major role in the making of the individual. From the traditional viewpoint, the organization can be seen as a structured and relatively predictable “container” for the individual’s self. It establishes key areas of the individual’s identity, which are reinforced through the routines, regularities and rewards of organizational life. From the social constructionist perspective, the individual forges a self in interaction and negotiation with other organization members.

The effects on individuals of the changing nature of organizations

Having suggested that work organizations have a significant influence on the formation of individuals, the paper will now discuss the possibility that the organizational changes that are now transforming the “psychological contract” may also come to modify that formation. It is recognized that the picture is very unclear. Some of the changes that have taken place could yet be reversed; others that are anticipated may not come to pass, or not in the way currently expected; and there may be even further surprises to come. What follows, therefore, is conjectural.

Organizations are restructuring in ways which enable them to be responsive to external changes; the new technologies give them this flexibility without loss of control. Practices, such as total quality management and business process re-engineering, are redrawing the external and internal boundaries of the organization, and in so doing eliminating some jobs and modifying others significantly. The effect of this is to change the boundaries of many roles, weakening them, perhaps making them permeable. According to Hammer and Champy[15, p. 72]:

For multi-dimensional and changing jobs, companies don’t need people to fill a slot, because the slot will be only roughly defined. Companies need people who can figure out what the job takes and do it, people who can create the slot that fits them. Moreover, the slot will keep changing.

With concomitant challenges to routines and rituals, these changes, it can be suggested, will start to dislodge some of the certainties and predictabilities organizational members have experienced. They will have to face disruption and ambiguity without the familiar cues for behaviour or the support of their bounded role that had previously contained their feelings and sense of self. As well as the stresses of the new and of overwork that are increasingly being recorded[13], these experiences are likely to generate very deep levels of anxiety.

The new practices in organizations encourage their members to look outwards from procedures to the needs of the customer, whether internal or external. In other words, greater novelty, complexity and randomness are being introduced into their world. This increased uncertainty, and the greater responsibility and need for self-monitoring being placed on them through empowerment, could augment this anxiety.

Increasingly, jobs are being reconfigured into tasks for teams of multi-skilled individuals rather than for individuals working singly. Designed to augment organizational flexibility, this will also further loosen the attachment between individual and a specified, bounded job. It will become more difficult to have a sense of owning a job, which hitherto had shaped the view and experience of the organizational world – and, ultimately, of self. The more flexible self that this could engender could be liberating; it could alternatively create a sense of diffusion and role confusion, and increase levels of anxiety.

Decentralization, delayering, and downsizing have not only removed whole strata of employees in many large bureaucratic organizations, but are also reducing the opportunities for upward movement for those who remain. The new organizational practices emphasize lateral rather than upward movement. In the re-engineered organization, according to Hammer and Champy[15, p. 69], “personal development does not mean climbing up through the hierarchy but expanding one’s breadth”. While they view this kind of growth and learning as motivating, it can also be construed as limiting the individual’s horizon, temporally and spatially. Without a glimpse of a future in the organization, it may be difficult to hold on to a sense of future self, which may be essential not only for motivation to work but also for investing in self-development for the future. Simultaneously, the restructurings are denying individuals the opportunity to observe the progress of others who, in the past, had been models for their own development.

There are also shorter or more insecure employment contracts for many who are peripheral rather than core workers, thereby creating greater fragmentation in working lives and less opportunity to sustain and develop a particular organizational identity over time. This too could shorten individuals’ time horizons, diminish the sense of a future self and generate a sense of fragmentation of identity. At the same time, increased part-time working, temporary and flexible employment contracts, greater home working, all of which are starting to erode some of the traditional gender divisions in organizations and society, will create greater insecurity, stress and anxiety about identity.

Organizational changes are curtailing the working lives of many via redundancy or enforced early retirement, with the potentially damaging psychological effects on them referred to in the previous section. They are also contributing to major social problems by augmenting unemployment. This has a disastrous effect on young people, robbing them of the traditional socializing influences of employment. Many can expect to have no experience of continuous or coherent work lives to help shape and sustain their identities, nor a clear view of the future and their future self. In the context of urban decay, they could almost be feral children. The enormity and enormity of the potential for individual suffering, scandalous social inequity and devastation of society have yet to be recognized.

The emergence of a new individual?

In many respects, the picture of the future of individuals in organizations, and of individuals generally, which emerges from this paper is somewhat bleak. The changes that have been identified disrupt the way the individual has traditionally been formed, and hence threaten some of the core concepts of the traditional view of the individual: as an autonomous, continuing, developing, coherent, relatively predictable identity. Flexible organizations, however, mean flexible jobs, flexible contracts, flexible futures – and flexible selves. Fragmenting organizations mean fragmenting work experiences, fragmenting working lives, fragmenting personal lives – and fragmenting selves.

Construed positively, such changes could allow individuals to work and think flexibly, uncorseted by a specific role. In conjunction with other changes in society, there could be greater choice in experience and identity, just as there is increasingly in sexuality and gender. There could be the possibility for greater integration of home and work roles and a revised balance between the genders. This could develop and nurture the “feminine” characteristics which are often lacking in organizations. Moreover, the new forms of organization could actually seek such characteristics, in men as well as in women. However, construed negatively, these changes could mean that new individuals would, compared with the old, be weak and damaged. They could lack focus, a future time perspective, coherence and a sense of continuity. Many are already said to be experiencing considerable anxiety about their future, and guilt that they are the survivors; some may be prepared to become “avengers”[16]. They could well experience a sense of threat created by the social problems generated by the disintegrating social fabric and, significantly, suffer deep levels of anxiety.

These are clearly not the characteristics anticipated by those currently advocating major organizational changes. They are assuming that the vibrant organizations of the future will be peopled by traditional, entrepreneurial, individualists[15]. They are assuming that core employees will take responsibility for their own development, to keep themselves flexible and employable. But without a clear and stable sense of self, can there be any meaningful self-development?

What are the implications for organizations and those who manage them? Could they operate effectively with such a different kind of individual? If so, how? And if not, what would they do? How will they organize, motivate, control and develop these different kinds of people? Managers who may well be experiencing these threats personally will need to be aware of the needs of others. They could perhaps find ways of devising some form of temporary “scaffolding” to support individuals during a period of change. The provision of counselling could be made more widespread, but recognizing that individuals may not be dealing with an aberration of life caused by undue organizational pressures, but a major fault-line in existence caused by a diffuse sense of self that cannot be “fixed” by the organization.

What of the “psychological contract”? The argument of this paper suggests that this construct was meaningful when individual and organization were

regarded as separate entities. In the emerging world this may no longer be the case. A new construct that captures the meaning not only of interdependence but also of interpenetration is, therefore, needed. It could become a powerful means to express the process of reconstructing individual, organization and society.

These are essentially moral issues and, should the changes discussed in this paper materialize in any significant way, considerable thought would have to be given to them. New individual, new organizations – new society? This possibility would raise issues of organizational strategy and public policy, and would therefore have to be considered at an appropriate level. Ways would also have to be found to support both the “victims” and the “survivors”.

While the disturbances that are taking place may be seen, from the traditional perspective, to threaten the end of the individual, the picture is far more optimistic from the constructionist viewpoint. The old conceptualization and construction of the individual is passing; as individuals construct themselves differently in their changing contexts, so a new conceptualization of the individual will be constructed by society. Meanwhile, individuals need transitional support, and help to recognize how they may in future be able to author their own narratives and so construct their society anew.

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