The Interpretive Stance

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In our studies of the borderline patient, we saw that family members' inability to value a child's experience contributed to their shared sense of being lost in the world of the familiar. An individual's experience provides the primary data source for any interpretive effort, yet by itself it is incomplete; in order to be interpreted adequately, the individual's experience needs to be placed in context. We can see this clearly in the following account.

A psychiatric clinic appointed a young woman to introduce a new program in child psychotherapy. She was herself a trainee in psychology, so she had to cope with the clinic's expectations as well as the general suspicion that such an inexperienced person could not competently introduce a new program. About the same time a new senior doctor was appointed. He publicly proclaimed his support for her approach. Her own perception, however, was that he was ambivalent about it. Her anxieties began to focus around one small piece of repeated behavior. The doctor would come into her office, which contained only her desk and some chairs for the children being treated in the clinic. While talking with her he would sit on the desk and rest his feet on the chairs. The trainee found this extremely annoying, but, aware of her junior position, felt she could not discuss it with him. She therefore held the experience within herself and reported it to her psychoanalyst. The analyst suggested that she might be re-experiencing in this interaction with the doctor her early angry reaction to her father who "stepped on the child" in her without loving it or respecting its value. Though this interpretation resonated with part of her experience, it did not connect with other parts, chiefly those aspects that involved her role in the clinic. She felt but could not articulate to herself or her analyst a vague sense that something important was being lost. On reflection, we can begin to see what was happening: the behavior of another person (the senior doctor) was stirring aspects of the trainee's self with which she was coming to terms. Her use of this bit of data with her analyst was proper and reasonable in relation to their task of better understanding her life. However, since she and the doctor also had symbolic roles in the clinic, the interaction between them might also have represented an organizational dynamic concerning commitment to or ambivalence about a new treatment. Her irritation with the way the doctor apparently trod on the children (putting his feet on their chairs) might thus have been potentially as useful for the organization as for her private self.

The trainee's difficulty was that the more she attempted to grasp what was happening in terms of her own dynamics (or, for that matter, in terms of her projections about the personality of the doctor), the more problematic the experience became. In her familiar places— her transference world with her analyst and her professional world as a child psychotherapist (and no doubt in other roles, too)— she felt increasingly lost. She was unable to use her reactions to engage with and change her environment. She needed a way to gain perspective both on herself (with her analyst's help) and on herself-in-role within the clinic. It was not a question of one or the other; both facets belonged to her world, and an interpretation that incorporated both was needed. In the absence of connecting interpretations, she

was finding herself increasingly confused about the significance of her experience within a primary organization in her life— her place of work.

This is a problem we all have in everyday life: disentangling context and personal experience quickly enough to achieve the integration needed to act effectively, or indeed even to think clearly. We need a stance for interpretation.

By "stance for interpretation," we are not talking about a specialized stance toward organizational interpretation that formally appointed consultants might adopt. We are instead proposing a method that individuals might use to integrate an evaluation of their experience (which the psychoanalyst provided in the story about the trainee) and an interpretation of that experience from the context of their institutional role (a form of group consultation). Integrating experience and context could lead to a thoughtful study of the organization, a deeper commitment to it and, in collaboration with the linked interpretations of others, to organizational change.

The notion of "role" is a key element in the integrative interpretative stance that we are advocating, as the story of the trainee demonstrates. The trainee found that her assigned role provided the crucial link between her self (in analysis) and her context (in the clinic). A role is not a position that is assumed, much less one that is "played." Instead, a role provides the framework in which person and context meet. In our model, role is a function of the organization's task. Thus, for example, the role of "father" derives from the developmental task. The role of psychotherapist may be a function of the therapeutic task that is institutionalized in a clinic. However, similar roles may be occupied by different people who experience them in differentiated ways. Thus, although interpretation of personal experience affirms the uniqueness of the individual, placing that experience in the context of a role affirms the connection to the organization. Such affirmation is an aspect of an organizational holding environments.

When we discussed the development of roles within the family, we noted the significance of a holding environment that allows for containment of impulses and affirmation of individual experience as it interacts with the experiences of others. The essence of this, it will be recalled, is that the holding environment is negotiated. Although it may appear that the mother provides a holding environment for the child, in fact there is mutuality in the arrangement. The loved child also has an affirming role within the parent-child unit, which is the initial organization that manages the developmental task. The holding is created collaboratively.

The same applies in other settings. Membership in an may create a organization shared notion of task that sustains individuals in their roles. So long as we have a sense of what we belong to, we can struggle to discover the task the organization is performing and the roles we have in relation to that task. By creating, managing, and developing a shared task, one function of organizations and institutions is to provide a holding environment similar to that first experienced in the family. But just as such holding is negotiated in the family, so, too, is that provided by organizations. Members can create these holding qualities through the negotiation of a shared culture in which the individual's experience as articulated through his organizational role is assumed to illuminate underlying values, characteristics, or assumptions of the organization. Once this culture has been created, individuals can begin to link their

experiences through interpretations, creating a shared picture of the organization that both affirms individual experience and provides a starting point for organizational development and change.

One outcome of this organizational holding is the intense group loyalty that can emerge in role-determined groups. So, for instance, players on a football team, with their different abilities and personal experiences, become deeply connected to each other and to the larger team in relation to the shared task of winning. By attempting to interpret individual experiences that are acquired and generated in role, therefore, individuals may discover a similar depth of connection between themselves and their institutional settings and may find themselves once again in familiar places. This is the case with life in the family. It is also, we suggest, a consequence of adopting such an interpretive stance in relation to all of our contexts and the roles we occupy in them INTERPRETING **EXPERIENCE IN ROLE** For interpreting how our individual experience takes on additional meaning in the context of institutions, we propose a broad, selfreflective model. We call this model "the interpretive stance." The interpretive stance has two features of primary importance.

First, the stance is speculative, imaginative, and heuristic. In other words, it allows the possibility of proceeding from one hypothesis to another hypothesis rather than from uncertainty to certainty But these characteristics are not unfortunate problems to be solved or irrationalities to be avoided; rather, we begin to recognize them as realities that link individuals with their social settings. Indeed, these qualities reflect the ambiguities and uncertainties of life as we know it.

At any given moment in any social or organizational setting, one or two of our roles are likely to be prominent in our minds. Most of us conceptualize our roles in some way and connect these concepts to our sense of our organizations. These concepts thus become the temporary structures in the mind within which and in relation to which interpretations of individual experience may be made. Such interpretation does not require special expertise or training. Because experience is always available and is never devoid of context, the interpretive stance is always possible. Though profound emotional or organizational disturbances
can shift us from this ideal, these shifts should be temporary. Given the opportunity for reflection, even disturbing experiences provide vital data for the initial interpretation that can facilitate our discovery of connec tions to others. Using these connections, we can enhance our usefulness to our various organizational contexts, whether domestic, professional, or in society at large.

The second feature of our stance is that it allows us to connect hypotheses that originate in different sectors of our lives without producing confusion. The experience of fragmentation is a significant part of feeling lost. Here, the "familiar place" is "I" — we are truly lost when we feel fragmented within ourselves. Since individual experience is, by definition, indivisible within the individual, the use of different roles as contexts for interpretation allows different aspects of the individual's experience to be creatively connected.

An example may clarify these points. A company's stated policy is that it is an equal opportunity employer. Women and men, as far as anyone can tell, seem to be treated equally on the basis of proven competence. However, as a result of difficulties with her husband, a female staff member may be

acutely aware of her gender experience— women are devalued or powerless; women are always put upon; women are treated nicely but not seriously. Because each of these expressions generalizes in terms of "all women," this gender formulation may obscure the thrust of her own feelings— "I am devalued" and so on. We may locate her experiences in the context of the overlapping roles that she occupies— wife, mother, spouse, lover, but also business woman, executive, member of the company. Rather than trying (probably in vain) to disentangle these roles and claim that the experience of gender-related difficulty is related particularly to one facet of her life— probably problems at home — the interpretive stance would suggest the potential usefulness of reflecting on these experiences in the context of her role within the company.

Examining her experience, from wherever it arises, through the filter of her organizational role could offer clues about particular aspects of her work setting. So, for example, she may discover that in her organization women are mostly employed in underpaid support systems, such as secretarial and housekeeping departments. Or she may note aspects of vacation scheduling that reveal an underlying, and hitherto unsuspected, organizational bias. The possibilities are endless. If others within the organization participated in a similar reflection, her gender-related issues might not be so easily dismissed by others as her private agenda or simply projected by her as a product of "the system." This interpretive stance assumes that individuals bring their own particular lenses for seeing the nature of the world around them. If a person is feeling acutely the dilemmas of gender issues, she may similarly be bringing, and seeing more acutely, gender-related issues throughout her interpersonal world. The clarity of her perspective, in conjunction with others' related views, might illuminate an aspect of her organization that had not been fully understood.

This broadening of her experience does not diminish the realities of her home situation or her life in other roles. Instead, our interpretive stance takes seriously the indivisibility of individual experience: we cannot really separate our lives into a home part and a work part.

INTERNALIZED CONSULTANCY
We may now begin to examine how individuals may come to be their own consultants — that is, to acquire an internalized interpretive stance. From the perspective provided by one role, individuals can reflect on their experiences and the reason for those experiences in another role. But most, if not all, of us can manage only moments of such reflection, for reflecting consistently on one's experiences would be a daunting prospect, although perhaps an exhilarating one. Although there is always value in self-scrutiny, isolated reflection by individuals would only confirm a sense of being lost in the familiar. This was the case with the young trainee in the clinic.

If, however, the interpretive stance were adopted in that clinic by both the trainee and the senior doctor and interpretations of their interactions were linked, then a central dynamic of the clinic itself (ambivalence toward clinical interventions with young children) might be uncovered. A commitment to developing such a shared interpretation would require all the participants to be willing to consider each person's experience as potentially valid— that is, "How is he or she right?" In this case, taking seriously the senior doctor's belief that placing his feet on the chairs was insignificant may lead him to acknowledge his refusal to join an interpretive culture. Or, if he could articulate further his

disconnection from the trainee he might uncover an interpretive connection to his role relationship with the children. Then the trainee's experience, if taken as potentially valid, might lead
the pair interpretively into the organization and its task. The doctor might then allow himself to consider the possibility that he was unwittingly enacting in his role a larger organizational ambivalence about treating children. As a result, all involved might develop a deeper grasp of their roles within the clinic. Additionally, we would have the beginnings of an organizational effort to become, in a sense, consultant to itself.

THE MEANING OF "CONSULTANT"
The term *consultant* is widely used today to cover a range of meanings. In some instances, it simply describes an imprecise affiliation, such as when retired politicians— as a form of sinecure— become consultants to industrial companies. Some consultants have or are believed to have greater skills or more specialized knowledge than their associates. For instance, there are consultant engineers or consultant architects. In Great Britain and the United States a consultant is also a senior doctor who holds a tenured post or valued role within a hospital or health service. The criterion common to these examples is status deriving from knowledge, whether actual or presumed.

Our use of the term brings together aspects of these descriptions, but with crucial differences. For example, the areas of expertise are the indi¬ viduals' sense of themselves and their immediate experiences. And the activities that concern the individual consultants are these inner worlds
of experience at the boundaries with the roles they occupy. In other words, individuals who adopt the interpretive stance possess and employ knowledge about themselves and their feelings to examine what is happening to them in a role. The stance is not one of specific cognitive expertise, acquired through study or through years of participation in a particular field. The people who operate with this stance are best described as participant-observers in relation both to their own affective experience and to that reflected from people with whom they have dealings in various organizational roles.

We may, therefore, define consultants as individuals who, in using and interpreting their feelings in their roles, stand both inside and outside themselves, and both inside and outside their organizations. Such consultants become immersed in the dynamics of the organization and consciously try to discover within themselves and through their own experiences a sense of the issues that are important to the organization. They consider how their feelings generated in their roles reflect both organizational process *and* an outside perspective. This provides data from which an interpretation may be attempted (Carr 1985a, pp. 14—18; Miller and Gwynne 1972, pp. 4—15).

Individual experience, which has inevitable priority in all of us, thus progressively becomes a tool for engagement with others around a task. Three facets of this model link individuals' experiences to what is happening in the organizations in which they participate and to the tasks from which they derive their roles. These three components are: using internal experience, testing interpretations against available data (for example, the interpretations of others) or reality, and discerning the relevant context forinterpretation. We shall examine each of these in turn.

Using Internal Experience

Internal experience provides the primary data for the interpretive stance, But such experience is not simply engendered from within. As we have illustrated in the earlier chapters on the family, relationships constitute the crucible within which internal experience is forged. The notion of isolated experience is inconceivable, since we all live in an interpersonal swirl of projections from others that affect our internal lives.

The practical skill the interpretive stance requires is differentiating those feelings that arise from without from those that derive from within. This is a complex task. We are caught up in and contribute to a profoundly interdependent world. As a result, final and assured differentiation is impossible: "I" cannot be defined apart from its interaction with "not I." Since we exist in dynamic interchange with ourselves and one another, to claim personal certainty is to deny an essential uncertainty about life. A fundamental aspect of the interpretive stance for each individual in any setting involves making this internal frame of reference, including its doubtfulness and uncertainty, usable.

Working in organizations engenders feelings in us. It might be useful, then, to consider to what extent organizations have an internal life of their own that can be recognized, so that people can locate themselves and their internal experience in relation to it. Obviously no organization is wholly analogous to an individual. But it is worth testing to see if the attempted comparison produces useful and enlarging ideas.

Organizations may be thought of as collections of persons with experiences. These individuals may use these experiences empathically in the direct service of work, as is the case in organizations such as hospitals, churches, and welfare agencies. But people's experiences may also be if indirectly related to work. For example, the introduction of modern technology has frequently generated in people powerful fantasies and feelings about their and others' dehumanization. Such feelings are often displaced and projected, leading to alienation between sectors of an organization. These collective defenses constitute significant aspects of the "internal life" of the organization. Problems with these phenomena are often presented as issues involving communication. However, this is usually only a minor factor in a central dilemma. Communications and relationships are important, but in the contemporary world, even more important is the issue of *relatedness.*

"Relatedness" describes that quality of connectedness that we have with notions that are *only* in the mind, in contrast with "relationship," which indicates at least some actual personal contact. Through our relatedness to aspects of organizations, whether from a limited perspective within them or from the outside, our feelings and behavior may be profoundly affected. For example, in a large industrial firm with many subsidiary companies, the Board of Directors may never meet or see the management and work force of a subsidiary. There is no personal relationship between them, no data that can be examined for reality testing, since there is no actual encounter. Yet it would be foolish to pretend that no connection exists. "Those at the top," though never in direct contact, undoubtedly have an effect on the behavior and performance of the managers and workers of the subsidiary. But this relatedness is not unidirectional: the existence of the subsidiary company also affects the behavior of the directors.

When we discussed projective identification within the family, we noted how projections that occurred in relationships between members not only involved the individuals concerned but also effectively constructed the network that was "the family." This unit could be considered a product of projective behavior that was something more than the sum of the projections, That "something more" was the shared notion in the minds of the family members of "the structured family," which had a task and with which the members in their various configurations were related. Family members' behavior was affected by their connection to their idea of the family at least as much as by specific personal relationships. The therapist was unable to be effective by taking into account solely what he could grasp about relationships within the family and between family members and himself. He also had to consider the less tangible, but no less powerful, impact of the family members' connection with the family unit and with the idea of the task of therapy, from which he derived his role — that is, their senses of relatedness.

In a less emotionally intense context, such as a company and its subsidiary, relationships may not be so discernible. The president and the floorsweeper can scarcely be described as "in a relationship." But they each have ideas about the enterprise in which they participate and so each is 'related to' it and through that to each other. As persons, they are not particularly important to each other; but the roles that each occupies significantly affect each other's behavior, albeit unwittingly. Thus even where no discernible relationship exists, significant shared relatedness exists. And since the company, like the family, does not exist in isolation, we may further discern relatedness between people and many other enterprises with which they have no direct connection. In fact, we would suggest that relatedness is to be found anywhere projections are at work, even if, as frequently in our somewhat impersonal world, no relationship is to be discovered.

Relationship and relatedness, therefore, are key concepts for thinking about interlocking and unexamined projections and internalizations; they have profound impact on our internal experience. They are also ways of conceptualizing central connections between individuals and their roles and society at large. We become so preoccupied with the problems of what we belong to that we overlook the impact that more distant organizations and institutions have on our behavior and hence on our quality of life. The more we become preoccupied with things with which we are in direct contact (that is, "in a relationship"), the easier it is to lose sight of this less immediate, but no less important, dimension of our lives.

When we speak of organizations as entities that handle people's feelings, the context inevitably includes feelings of which they are not consciously aware. However confident an organization may appear in its public presentation, uncertainty and ignorance always exist within it. Questions arise in most organizations, for example, about meaning, identity, survival, and values. Individuals and subgroups who work within the organization and therefore find themselves identified with its various complex dynamics become filled with this uncertainty. Thus, the displaced feelings of individuals and subgroups within the organization provide data concerning not just individuals and their immediate environment but also pressures elsewhere in the organization.

From this perspective, then, we can speak of an organization's "internal life." This is not to say that we conceive of organizations as quasi individuals. We are merely acknowledging that people's feelings and experiences are confined neither to their private lives nor to their roles in organizations. These experiences also reflect the confused dynamics of relatedness that affect the organization, its subgroups, and its wider context. The existence of such a dynamic internal life for both organization and individual makes the first facet of our model of the inter pretive stance— using internal experience — both necessary and possible

Testing Interpretations against Available Data or
Reality and Discerning the Relevant Context
The second and third facets of the interpretive model must be discussed together. These facets involve testing reality and discerning the relevant context. The range of experience and fantasies with which each person lives lias at least as much of an impact on organizational behavior as any so-called external reality. To test reality within an organizational context, therefore, means to examine the validity assigned to any experience: is it congruent with other people's feelings or is it idiosyncratic? If there is congruence, around what is it coalescing? If there is idiosyncrasy, why tins particular type, and why might it be located in this particular individual or role? For us, reality testing is concerned with the creation of shared hypotheses.

Anv shared interpretation may be the result of a series of unconscious collusions between those involved and thus may run the risk of being delusional. Therefore, whenever we consider shared interpretations and the need to test them against reality, we also require an external reference or context that transcends individuals and their potential for irrational collusion.

But how do we avoid merely projecting onto this external frame of reference those aspects of ourselves, our organizations, or our roles that we wish to disavow? Although this bind seems serious, in practice it is only apparent. The frame of reference that meets all the requirements we have noted so far, is already available: it is found in the organization's task, that is, the activity the organization exists to perform and around which its members cohere (Miller and Rice 1967).

We have already noted that the notion of organizational task is intimately linked to unconscious connections between people and the way these connections inform behavior. Me saw this in our study of the family, whose task we suggested was to facilitate the development of its members. This would not, of course, be how any family would necessarily articulate it. The term *task* here defines the reason for the organization's existence. It is, therefore, a concept, but one that is immediately connected with personal feeling and organizational shape. For instance, in some of our clinical case material we saw that the breakdown of an individual was a symptom of a breakdown in the family organization.
This collapse was not simply the result of the sum of individual pathologies. It was a consequence (or a symptom, and therefore an indicator) of the family as a unit or organization losing sight of the reason why it existed in the first place— namely, its task.

Every organization has a task or series of tasks around which people associate. These are not the same as the aims it endorses. These may be of an infinite variety— making money, being affirmed by success,

filling the employment roles. But people negotiate individually and collaboratively in relation to something that both transcends these aims and enables them to be pursued— something more than personal relationships— namely, that task, the performance of which assures the organization's continued existence.

The following illustration will clarify the difference between task and aims and show how profound organizational change can occur when aims become confused with task. This may lead to a major transformation or to the organization's demise.

When transatlantic travel was possible only by sea, shipping lines were established to transport passengers and goods across the ocean. At first this was a simple task. It was a major achievement to deliver passengers and cargo safely. Once safety was assured, speed became the key aspect of the task. But since transport by ships remained the only option, transportation remained the task. During the era of the great liners, competition developed around comfort and luxury. These highly desirable aims gradually, but spuriously, became identified with the survival of the companies, supplanting the task of safe, speedy transportation. They thus failed to perceive the emerging competition that air travel was beginning to offer. Travel by air was largely dismissed by managers of shipping lines because planes could not compare with ships for luxury and comfort. But air travel was in fact committed to the primary task of getting people safely and swiftly across the sea. The shipping companies that lost sight of their task and failed to acquire airlines are no longer in business.

This familiar story demonstrates that, although aims are not unimportant, a perception of task is crucial in maintaining a grip on reality. When the question of task arises, attention is immediately and necessarily directed to the connections (or absence of them) between an organization and its outside world. The idea of task, therefore, inevitably transcends aims and personalities. In this sense individuals do not have tasks, for task is a collaborative notion. Task, therefore, provides a referent that transcends the individual without diminishing his or her significance. It also transcends the organization and affirms it by drawing attention to its existence in a context.It constitutes not a fixed, unchanging referent but a necessary dynamic point of interpretation.

For example, if we take the family's task to be that of furthering the development of its members, we see immediately that the significance of the individual is at the heart of this task — his or her development. Equally, we may observe how the notion of "furthering individual development" transcends all the familiar aims families would identify— love, success, achievements of various kinds. These are not disregarded, but the interface between the family and its context— in this case perhaps not so much society as an external world of developed individuals— becomes a point of reference that is neither within the family unit nor beyond it, but a point around which its present activity can be evaluated.

Organizations and their members frequently and inevitably lose sight of the notion of task. But without sensitivity to its existence— even when all are unsure about its precise definition— interpretation is not possible. Reality testing, therefore, does not involve finding a fixed objectivity. The reality we seek emerges from the process of creating shared hypotheses about what is goingon. Interpretation,

therefore, is not offered but created and thus has a major function both for interpreter and interpreted. This consultation with oneself in role is the core of the stance we are proposing. The interpretive stance involves identifying individual experience in the context of a role and using such experience with that of others to create negotiated interpretations about the organization.

The interpretive stance we are proposing affirms the range of people's experience and feelings, which may be chaotic and are often projected. But as in our study of the family, they do not so much need interpretation from outside as a context within which they can be contained, affirmed, and utilized— a holding environment. This context— in both families and organizations— is provided by two fundamental notions, task and role.

Individuals using this stance reflect on their experience as they take responsibility for their roles. In so doing, both they — as individuals — and the organization— through its task— are affirmed. The organization develops as its basic mode of scrutiny a style of managed, coordinated self-reflection. The interpretive stance, then, involves grasping a shared system of meaning by coordinating the two primary frames of reference we possess: ourselves as individuals, with our experiences, and our institutions with their tasks and roles.