

**The Stanford Organizational Studies Community:
Reflections of a Tempered Radical**

**Debra Meyerson
Stanford University**

June, 2009

I was a doctoral student in the Organizational Behavior (OB) Ph.D. program in the Graduate School of Business from 1984-1989 and a faithful participant in the annual Stanford Organizations Conference at Asilomar, on the shores of the Pacific. I worked under the guidance of Professors Joanne Martin, Rod Kramer, Robert Sutton, and James March. I also benefited from the support and guidance of sociology professor Richard Scott in his capacity as director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and National Institute of Aging (NIA) Fellows Training Program in which I was a pre-doctoral fellow from 1985-1988. The reflections that follow are based primarily on my experience as a student during this vibrant period, although, as a current a faculty member within the School of Education at Stanford, I cannot resist drawing occasional comparisons between the organizations community then and now.

Most striking in this comparison is the extraordinary sense of community among organizational scholars during the earlier era. Boundaries of membership in the community were defined not by discipline or school, theoretical tradition, or epistemology, but by a shared sense of being part of a vibrant intellectual community that was “onto something,” however broadly defined. As students with few points of comparison, we probably did not fully appreciated the unique qualities of our community, but I believe we knew that we were privileged to be part of it all – we knew that our young faculty (e.g., Rod Kramer, Joanne Martin, Robert Sutton) were on the way up, our

established faculty had authored the core textbooks (e.g., Jeffrey Pfeffer, 1982; Richard Scott, 1987) and theories of our field, and our peers were landing jobs in the top O.B. and organizational sociology programs in the country. Most students belonged to different research projects and subgroups. Despite our separate cohort and project affiliations, we identified with something larger than the sum of our groups.

It is worth noting that, as a student, I felt a strong sense of affinity and shared identity with other organizational scholars around campus even as I felt at odds with many of its dominant values and norms. Motivated by this tension, Maureen Scully and I introduced the notion of “tempered radicalism” (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) to conceptualize our experience of simultaneously identifying and feeling misaligned with our professional community, and we discovered that several of our peers and mentors shared this sense of ambivalence. We were very much “insiders” in that we felt part of the organizations community at Stanford and wanted to fit in and succeed within our institution and the academy at large, but in important self-defining ways we also perceived ourselves to be “outsiders” who deviated from the dominant values and approaches and we aspired to change some of the criteria that marked success (Meyerson, 2001). As a student in the business school (focused on businesses), I wanted to become a valued member of the scholarly community by becoming fluent in quantitative methods and steeped in the macro-theories of organizations, such as neo-institutional theory, population ecology, and resource dependence that were the mainstay of the field even as my choice of subjects (social workers, feminist executives), theories (culture and interpretative approaches), methods (ethnography), and ideology (feminism and radical humanism) were marginalized within the field.

Feeling at once an insider and outsider characterized my experience as a student at Stanford and has continued to define my career as an organizational scholar within various institutional settings. This stance also provides a vantage point from which to reflect on the qualities of the Stanford organizational studies community in the late 1980's that drew so many of us in – the stuff of community and shared identity – and that enabled, even encouraged, deviation and innovation.

What was it about the organizations community at Stanford during this period that fostered a collective identity among scholars from different disciplines, schools, and research groups, across different status levels, theoretical orientations, and even values? While others will undoubtedly offer other accounts, I boil it down to four conditions that fostered a sense of belonging while encouraging experimentation and deviation: an abundance of different types of resources, close mentoring ties between students and faculty, forums for intellectual engagement and cross-fertilization, and opportunities to socialize that built informal ties.

First, there was a perceived sense of abundance among students and, I suspect, faculty: abundant opportunities for students to collaborate with faculty on new and important research topics; an abundant pool of material resources to fund research; and, importantly, abundant job opportunities. This is not to suggest that the organizational studies community, even during its heyday, was flooded with resources and void of competition and political jockeying. From a student's perspective, however, I recall only a sense of plenty. This made for minimal competition and significant collaboration among peers within and between schools at Stanford. The perceived abundance of resources may have also contributed to the significant experimentation and innovation

during the period, although the relationship between slack resources and risk taking and innovation has been the subject of a good deal of scholarly research (see Christianson and Bower, 1996; Noriah and Gulati, 1996; Ajuja et al, 2008 for discussions of resources and innovation)

A number of factors combined to create a real and perceived sense of resource availability. As Scott (this volume) describes in more detail, beginning in the 1960s, the federal government played an important role in supporting the expansion of social science research in general, and this fueled the growth of organizational studies. The expansion of Stanford's organizational studies community was a beneficiary of this wider trend within the academy, but it may have benefited disproportionately as well. Under the leadership of Dick Scott, multi-year training grants from the National Institute of Mental Health became available to support the study of all types of organizations. From 1972 through 1989, these grants combined with a comparable grant from the National Institute of Aging (NIA) from 1986-1989 supported, on average, five pre-doctoral and five post-doctoral fellows in organizational studies annually. As a condition of funding, each fellow was required to work directly with a faculty member in organizational studies, which meant that the NIMH and NIA grants supported the research and cultivated the loyalty of most of the organization studies faculty around campus (Scott, this volume).

These funds were supplemented by other pools of resources that seemed to be readily available to Stanford organizational scholars. For instance, with a five-page proposal, Maureen Scully and I secured a \$50,000 grant from the Haas Foundation to study ethics officers in the defense industry, a role we believed mirrored the structural ambivalence of tempered radicals' position (Scully and Meyerson, 1993). The funding

was part of a larger program to support research on corporate ethics on the tail of ethics scandals in the defense and other industries in the mid-1980s. Because it was our first independent field project, we took for granted the seamless access we were granted to the officers and top executives in all of the major defense contractors as well as the relatively easy funding to support our study. I believe that we were not alone in our sense of boundless opportunities and resources, and, in reflection, I would conjecture that these resources encouraged intellectual risk taking; we didn't have to "play it safe" to secure legitimacy.

It is difficult not to compare this sense of abundance with the current resource conditions facing organizations scholars and social scientists more generally. Although business school faculty and students at elite schools may be insulated from the implications of a shrinking pool of research funding, organizational scholars in sociology, education, and engineering have had to rely on a variety of funding sources, some with significant strings attached. Many of us worry about how we will support our doctoral students who tend to stay in graduate school longer because there are fewer jobs. And, because there is a shrinking pool of resources to fund organizational research, students must now compete with peers to land sponsored research assistantships. How this shrinking pool of resources will affect scholars' choice of topics and the intellectual risks they are willing to take is an empirical question.

Second, as a stipulation of the NIMH and NIA training grants and a norm within the O.B. program (and I believe other organizations programs at Stanford), graduate students worked closely with faculty in an apprenticeship or mentoring relationship (Kram, 1983; Kramer and Martin, 1996). Cohorts within the O.B. program were very small (between

one and three students were admitted per year), which meant that each faculty member mentored only a few students at a time and collaborated closely with them on research and publications. Virtually all of my peers left graduate school with several co-authored publications and multiple methods in their quiver. I learned to do laboratory research by working with Rod Kramer on several experiments and picked up qualitative methods in my collaborations with Joanne Martin and Bob Sutton. Although this apprenticeship model is not unique to Stanford during this period, these relationships were pivotal in cultivating students' and advisors' identification with a broader community as well as providing the psychological safety that allowed for experimentation and innovation (Edmondson, 1999). This was certainly true in my case. My advisors, starting with Joanne Martin, transmitted the norms and expectations of the local and national scholarly communities and, at the same time, provided the permission and safety to deviate from those.

Third, a number of intellectual forums brought together organizational scholars across schools, research areas, disciplines, and status levels that enabled the cross-fertilization of ideas that enriched the intellectual experience (e.g., Saxenian, 1996). The GSB presented regular colloquia, which were well attended by scholars from across campus. For example, the NIMH and NIA training programs held regular seminars and convened post-doctoral and pre-doctoral fellows from different disciplines to discuss research on a routine basis under Richard Scott's leadership. In addition, the Scandinavian Consortium of Organization Studies (SCANCOR), founded twenty years ago and first led by James March, and now Woody Powell, attracted visiting organizational scholars from Scandinavia and other parts of Europe to Stanford for

lengths of stay that varied from a few days to a year. In the early days, the Scandinavian visitors were integral members of the organization community. A favorite among the organization students from around campus was Jim March's Friday afternoon wine and cheese party, ostensibly a party thrown for the visitors, but, like other occasions, served also to bring together local scholars. Most renowned for its cross-fertilization, is the conference at Asilomar – the annual intellectual gathering of organizational scholars. After initially being restricted to members of the Stanford community, the conference later opened to include organizational scholars from neighboring universities and alumnae-turned-faculty. These participants organized their calendars to show up at Asilomar and affirm their identities as Stanford organizational insiders, whether they were interested in the themes of that year's conference or not. In retrospect, there seemed to be a sufficient variety of intellectual gatherings to create what Scott (this volume) calls “collegial capital,” but not so many forums that faculty and students would segregate into sub-communities by theoretical taste, school, or discipline.

Today, like two decades ago, there are organizational studies students and faculty in the schools of engineering, business, and education as well as in sociology. The numbers have grown significantly. The Graduate School of Business alone now has 19 tenure line organizations faculty. Today, most schools, as well as SCANCOR, host their own organizational studies colloquia with regular participants and a few people who occasionally attend multiple forums. There is no gathering equivalent to Asilomar. Thus, while Stanford can still boast a first-rate collection of organizational scholars and students, we are now, at best, multiple communities linked together by idiosyncratic relational ties between individuals from different schools and disciplines.

Fourth, there were a number of opportunities for informal socializing across status-level and disciplinary boundaries, particularly at the Asilomar conference, which built different types of relationships and trust, the raw materials of social capital (e.g., Coleman, 1988; Podolny and Baron, 1996). Parties late into the night leveled status distinctions and smoothed over theoretical and epistemological contests, at least for the weekend. My memories of Asilomar are punctuated by the two years Don Palmer (then a faculty member in the GSB) and I made our way down the coast by bicycle. The pretense for showing up at Asilomar was the intellectual exchange, but the parties, the walks on the beach, and for me, the rides down the coast, were the reasons for coming back year after year. Undoubtedly, these status-leveling social experiences helped build the trust and multiplex connections that characterized the community.

These last two conditions – forums for intellectual exchange across boundaries and opportunities to socialize – helped build the “collegial capital” that contributed to the extraordinary degree of innovation that came out of Stanford’s organizational scholars during this period. According to Scott (this volume), the process involved “not so much co-production, as mutual stimulation – one person’s ideas stimulating or building upon another’s.” This is only possible if people have regular opportunities to interact with one another and “play” with ideas (March, 1976). In contrast, to the extent that organizational scholars from different disciplines or schools come together to play with ideas or socialize, it is strictly the result of personal ties rather than ritualized forums that enable these sorts of exchanges and cultivate collegial relationships.

In sum, I have proposed that four factors – perceived resource abundance, strong mentoring ties between students and faculty, forums for cross-fertilization and intellectual exchange, and opportunities to socialize and build ties across traditional divisions – cultivated a sense of community and shared identity among organizational scholars from disparate disciplines and schools. I posited that these same conditions created a fertile ground for members’ capacity to take risks, deviate, and innovate. I will leave it to others to speculate about what it would take to replicate this sense of community in the context of a much larger and fragmented group of organizational faculty and students and fewer resources to allocate. But a strong funded cross-department organizations fellowship program coupled with an annual bash at Asilomar would probably be a good start.

It seems fitting to conclude with a reflection of my experience at the SCANCOR 20th Anniversary celebration held in November of 2008. As might be expected, the main celebration was attended by dozens of Stanford organizational studies alumnae representing different generations and disciplines. Although many of us from neighboring cohorts had not seen each other in several years, we found each other and made sure to sit together at the gala dinner. We had developed different interests and taken divergent professional paths. Some have left academia; some, like Martha Feldman, Gerry Davis, and Michael Cohen, have built or contributed to impressive interdisciplinary organizations communities in their own universities; others, like myself, have led non-linear academic careers. I have little doubt that all who have remained in the academy continue to draw upon and benefit immeasurably from the collegial capital we acquired during our years at Stanford.

References

Ajuja, G. Gautam, A., and Tandon, V, (2008), "Moving beyond Schumpeter: Management research on the determinants of technological innovation", *The Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 2 No.1, pp. 1-98.

Christensen, C.M. and Bower, J.L., (1996), "Customer power, strategic investment and the failure of leading firms", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 17, pp. 197-218.

Coleman, J. S., (1988), "Social capital in the creation of human capital", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, pp. 95-120.

Edmondson, A., (1999), "Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 44 No. 2, pp. 350-383.

Kram, K., (1983), "Phases of the mentor relationship", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 26, pp. 608-625.

Kramer, R. and Martin, J., (1996), "Transitions and turning points in faculty and doctoral student relationships", in Frost, P. and Taylor, M. (Eds.), *Rhythms of Academic Life: Personal Accounts of Careers in Academia*, Sage Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 165-180.

March, J. G., (1976), "The technology of foolishness", in March, J.G. and Olsen, J. (Eds.), *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations*, Universitetsforlaget, Bergen, Norway.

Meyerson, D., (2001), *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA.

Meyerson, D. and Scully, M., (1995), "Tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change", *Organization Science*, Vol. 6, pp. 585-600.

Nohria, N. and Gulati, R., (1996), "Is slack good or bad for innovation?", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 39 No. 5, pp 1245-1264.

Pfeffer, J., (1982), *Organizations and Organization Theory*, Pitman, Cambridge, MA.

Podolny, J. M. and Baron, J. J., (1997), "Resources and Relationships: Social Networks and Mobility in the Workplace", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, pp. 673-693.

Saxenian, A., (1996), "Beyond Boundaries: Open labor markets and learning in Silicon Valley", in Arthur, M. B. and Rousseau, D. M. (Eds.), *The Boundaryless Career: A New*

Employment Principle for a New Organizational Era, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, pp. 23-39.

Scott, W.R., (1987), *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems*, Prentice Hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Scott, W.R., (this volume), “Collegial capital: The organizations research community at Stanford, 1970-2000”, in Schoonhoven, K. and Dobbin, F. (Eds.), *Research in the Sociology of Organizations: Organization Studies: The Stanford Legacy 1970-2000*, JAI, Greenwich, CT.

Scully, M. and Meyerson, D., (1993), “The separation of law and justice: Managing impressions of corporate ethics programs”, *The Employees Rights and Responsibilities Journal*, Vol. 17, pp. 32-59.