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Learning when and how to lie: A neglected aspect of organizational and occupational socialization (Introduction by Hugh Gunz and Paul Willman)

Edgar H. Schein
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The Hughes Award

Hugh Gunz and Paul Willman

Everett Cherrington Hughes (1897–1983) was a sociologist whose research and teaching career took him to McGill University, the University of Chicago, Brandeis University and Boston College. His name is most firmly linked with the Chicago School of sociological thought, where, with a large team of students and co-workers, among them Howard Becker, Julius Roth and Anselm Strauss, he founded a stream of research which has played an extremely influential role in the development of the careers field in particular and sociology in general.

The Hughes Award is the premier award of the Careers Division of the Academy of Management. It rewards scholarship which has made a significant contribution to the task of linking careers theory with the broader field of organizational studies. It is explicitly an award for the building of bridges and the forging of links between fields of social enquiry and the Editors of *Human Relations* are proud to be associated with it.

The article which follows is by Professor Ed Schein, first recipient of the award. It is based on his lecture given at the Academy meeting in Toronto, 2000. The article builds on Professor Schein's widely cited work on career anchors. It examines the various kinds of socialization that individuals undergo in a typical organizational career, focusing in particular on the norms learned about information management in the different functions that the career occupant will encounter.

Learning when and how to lie: A neglected aspect of organizational and occupational socialization

Edgar H. Schein

Rameau: Why vile, if I may ask? [These tricks] are part of my profession. There's nothing degrading in acting like everybody else. Did I invent these tricks? No. But I should be a clumsy oaf not to make use of them. I know well enough that if you apply to my case certain general principles of morals which they all talk about and never put into practice, it will turn out that white is black and black is white. But master Philosopher, just as there is a general grammar and exceptions in each language that you learned people call – what is it you call them?

Diderot: Idioms?

Rameau: That's what I mean. Well, each profession makes exceptions to general ethics and those I'd like to call 'idioms.'

Diderot: I follow you. Fontenelle speaks and writes well even though his style is full of French idioms.

Rameau: Likewise the sovereign, the minister, the financier, the judge, the soldier, the writer, the lawyer, the public prosecutor, the merchant, the banker, the workman, the singing teacher, the dancing master are very respectable people even though their conduct deviates in several ways from general good behavior and is full of moral idioms. The older the profession the more the idioms; the worse the times become, the more the idioms multiply. A man is worth what his trade is worth; in the end they're equal; hence people make the trade go for as much as they can.

(From *Rameau's Nephew* (circa 1760), a dialogue between Diderot, the Master Philosopher, and young Rameau, who is portrayed as a n'er-do-well musician and scapegrace (Diderot's other self, perhaps).)

Lying is not per se a moral issue. What makes it a moral issue is the degree to which the liar's intent is destructive and the degree to which the target of the liar is harmed by the lie. Society is, in fact, built upon the need for constructive lying as when good manners and tact require us to compliment someone even though we do not feel what we say, or when we uphold someone's 'face' in order to sustain the social order (Goffman, 1959, 1967).

As sociologists have pointed out over and over again, the very existence of society is based on 'hypocrisy' 'self-deception' and the maintenance of 'illusions.' Acculturation and socialization is a process of learning what is OK and what is not OK to tell and do in a variety of situations. To tell the literal truth is, in many social situations, automatically destructive in that the social order requires us collectively to be able to sustain our illusions about ourselves. In fact, what is the 'literal truth' is itself a matter of social construction among the participants in the situation.

Hence we have phrases like the 'brutal' truth and we note the enormous reluctance of superiors to tell their subordinates what their performance flaws are in the work situation. To criticize someone to their face is not only a violation of rules of good manners learned early in life, but also elicits a variety of defensive behaviors which make the interaction acutely uncomfortable for the 'truth' teller. So learning to lie or at least to withhold some versions of the truth is fundamental to the maintenance of the social order and violators who go around telling 'the truth' are seen as tactless, ill-mannered, whistle-blowers, loose cannons and, in the extreme, mentally ill (Goffman, 1961). Only court jesters, innocent children, or the feeble-minded can get away with telling it 'like it is' as innumerable Shakespearean plays and other literature have shown us so eloquently.

On the other hand, organizations have put enormous emphasis on 'openness,' 'information sharing,' 'knowledge management,' and 'telling it how it is' as part of a process of improving performance. In this context lying to a boss about how much was accomplished, or telling a colleague a falsehood about how much of a needed resource is actually available, falsifying accounting figures, suppressing negative information are all viewed as undesirable behavior. What a newcomer must learn, then, is how to differentiate among (i) social situations that require lying or withholding for reasons of tact, (ii) telling some version of the truth for reasons of better job performance, and (iii) telling some versions of the truth for reasons of image management which itself comes to be related to job performance. Beyond that the newcomer must learn (iv) that the definition of truth is itself variable as a function of different occupational groups through which he or she must travel as the career progresses. It is the subtle distinctions between what is truth in different occupations that may be the most difficult aspect of learning a role. This variation in what is true is captured in our general language by terms such 'spin' and what Rameau meant by 'idioms.'

In this essay I would like to examine the various kinds of socialization that a person in a typical organizational career undergoes, focusing in particular on the norms learned about information management in the different functions that the career occupant will encounter during the career.

In my previous research on Career Anchors (Schein, 1978, 1990, 1996, 1998) I emphasized that as we evolve in our career we develop a self-concept based on our competence, our motives, and our values. We come into our careers with values derived from family, school and community and we seek during our careers to find jobs and organizations that permit us to exercise those values. It is equally true, however, that as we evolve in our occupational communities and rise in our organizations our values are influenced by these communities (Hughes, 1958; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). We are socialized into our occupations and have to learn the 'idioms' of that occupation. These idioms generally are norms of what is moral and what is immoral with respect to the key stakeholders of that occupational community.

In this article I want to address particularly the moral issues of information control – the norms that we apply in different occupational communities to what it is appropriate to withhold, what it is appropriate to say 'truthfully' and what it is appropriate to distort. In every occupation we learn rules for 'massaging the data,' 'sanitizing information,' 'putting the appropriate spin on what we say publicly,' 'editing out embarrassing material,' 'making a sales pitch,' or issuing 'propaganda.'

The morals of information management in organizational careers

The recognition that organizations differentiate themselves into functional, geographic and other kinds of sub-systems, and that those sub-systems develop their own cultures has been well accepted since Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) first published their classic on differentiation and integration. What has not been sufficiently understood, however, is that each of these differentiated units reflects an occupational culture and develops its own sub-culture based on (i) its view of its primary task, (ii) its perception of its primary stake holders, and (iii) the realities of the particular environment in which it functions. With these views there also evolve moral principles that can be quite different from one occupation to another. As I illustrate later it is particularly the norms of what is appropriate to communicate and what information is appropriate to use or withhold or distort that become morally impacted by the sense in each community of who their key customer, clients, or stakeholders are.

This variation in norms becomes crucial to understand because in organizational careers a career occupant climbing the ladder may be socialized successively into very different kinds of sub-cultures that have different moral requirements. We tend to assign 'morality' to an individual as an aspect of his or her 'character' and may fail to note that if one is to get along

in an organization over a couple of decades, one may have to adopt different moral stances at different times. Unwillingness to do so may lead either to becoming plateaued or being forced out of the organization altogether.

The moral issues around information management surface very early in the organizational career, as can be illustrated from three cases of my original career panel (Schein, 1978). One panelist went to work in the research lab of a large consumer goods company and discovered that his boss wanted him to suppress some of his research findings pertaining to one of the company's future products. He had discovered that the product might have some harmful side effects in a few cases but was told to suppress this information because the product was about to be launched and the risks were minimal. He struggled with this issue and resolved it not by blowing the whistle but by leaving the company and that field of research.

Another panelist became a real estate developer in a large city and found that he had to make pay-offs to building inspectors, sometimes had to tolerate unsafe conditions in some of his buildings, and typically had to lie to potential customers about the condition of the buildings. He did not leave the occupation, nor did he reform it. His worst moments came later in life when he found himself having to justify much of his past behavior to his growing children.

A third panelist was hired by a large manufacturing company to introduce linear programming and other mathematical scheduling techniques into a large plant in the Midwest. When he arrived he was greeted cordially but the plant manager conveyed unambiguously that the current system of controls suited the organization very well, that the new person was welcome as long as he did not rock the boat by trying to bring in a lot of 'new fangled stuff,' and, incidentally, he was expected to keep his mouth shut, meaning he was not to tell New York headquarters that he was being underutilized and muzzled. He left the organization after six months.

A fourth case illustrates a moral dilemma a bit later in the career. One panelist was hired into the Bell system as a fast-track high-potential management trainee. This program involved being rotated through several functions such as sales, marketing, manufacturing and finance/accounting. As he acquired experience and confidence in himself as a supervisor he also realized that he could not morally accept a career system in which he would be unilaterally told what his next assignment would be. When he discovered that he really did not have a voice in his own career movement, that he was viewed essentially as 'corporate property,' that the company felt no obligation to tell him what their long-range career plans were for him, and that he was expected to keep his opinions about his career to himself, he left this organization and, with a colleague, found a small company to buy and run himself.

In many cases like these I observed that the person's value system and moral sense was initially strong enough to keep them from getting into jobs that would arouse conflict in the first place or, as in the above cases, to leave jobs that required of them behavior that they considered immoral. Clearly, there is an element of character that people carry with them and that makes them choose some careers and jobs over others. One source of such stability or strength is personal moral development within the family, school and community, but an equally important source that we have given less attention to is the occupational community with which individuals ultimately identify themselves. Early in our careers we enter a 'field' such as medicine, law, business, engineering, marketing, sales and so on. As studies of occupations showed over and over again, each of these broad fields contains within it occupational communities with strong sub-cultures, and success in that occupation demands conformity to the norms of those sub-cultures (Becker et al., 1961).

Now, consider the 'field' of business management and organizational careers from this moral point of view. In the early career the occupant is likely to encounter the communities of sales, marketing, manufacturing or finance/accounting. These communities are not professions in the sense that medicine, law, or divinity are professions because they do not deal with a specific issue that clients are concerned about – health, personal safety and security, and death and the after-life (Schein, 1972). The traditional professions are defined by their expert knowledge exercised on behalf of a specific 'client' whose interests are protected and who is expected to know less than the professional with whom he or she is dealing. Because the client is vulnerable to exploitation, most of the professions have powerful norms and moral principles around protecting the interests of the client. This works to the extent that the definition of the client is clearcut and the definition of harm is unambiguous.

Managers in organizations do not have clients in this sense (Schein, 1972). But managers have 'customers' and stakeholders, and the young career occupant soon learns what is morally appropriate in the treatment of customers. The dilemma is that one of the first crucial lessons in organizational careers is that the definition of 'customer' is itself vague. Is the customer the person who will ultimately buy the product or the career occupant's peers in a neighboring department that is dependent on the one he or she is in, or the boss, or subordinates, or the community? In other words, in organizations there is no clear overall concept of a client whose interests must be protected and the specific definition of 'customer' will vary by function and occupational community. And in each such community there are norms for how to get along, what information must be passed on or withheld, to whom one can lie, what

one can lie about, and whose interests must ultimately be protected.

For example, many college graduates are hired as research assistants by consulting companies. As one of my subjects told me, one of the first jobs he was asked to do was 'competitor analysis' which, it turns out, was to clandestinely gather intelligence information about competitors of the consulting company's client. What this meant in practice was figuring out how to call the competitor, lie about your identity and intentions, and hope to get answers to crucial questions such as how many employees they have, how they are organized and so on. When he questioned the ethics of this practice he was told that this is how business works, that this process was 'normal business practice.' The new research assistant had to compromise whatever scruples he or she might have, learn that this is how 'business' operates, or leave the field.

Another young graduate hired by a real estate investment firm found that his job was to assure potential and present investors that their investments were safe even though he knew that the market was likely to collapse. As he tried to do his job, he found that he could not keep up what were to him bald-faced lies, particularly with one very nice elderly client whom he got to know personally. He quit and looked around for another field. He had discovered that the real 'client' or 'customer' was not the investor but the investment company trying to maximize and preserve its financial gain.

Morals of information management in organizational functions

As the career occupant progresses in his or her organizational career, he or she will likely be rotated through different functions that will have different rules about information management.

Manufacturing

If we examine manufacturing as an occupational community we can ask what moral imperatives lie behind the decision of an assembly-line worker to actually sabotage a product as it goes through the line or at least to ignore some defects that he or she observes. I recall vividly one of Doug McGregor's stories of how he was standing with the foreman at the end of a truck assembly line watching finished trucks roll off the line. The foreman, comfortably puffing on his pipe, said as one truck rolled off: 'There she goes, but she'll be back.' He felt no obligation to tell anyone that he knew of defects in the product that was rolling off the line and his behavior was 'normal' in this context.

Manufacturing, depending on its particular situation, will exaggerate schedules and its ability to get things out the door, or will exaggerate the difficulty of making product changes that sales may be asking for. In the case of quality issues, as the above anecdote illustrates, the truth about actual defects will often be denied in the effort to be self-protective. Telling management 'the truth' about what is going on on the shop floor has very low priority in most organizations.

Accounting

The accounting community both in its external and internal relationships also has rules for information management. Externally, it is clear that the figures must be presented in a way that supports the desired image of the organization. And it is clear that financial data can be massaged and presented to make different points. External audits would not be necessary if accounting were a pure 'truth'-telling function. So the jokes about accountants 'juggling figures' have their roots in reality.

Looking at internal relationships, what do we make of the following scenario, as viewed from the point of view of a CEO? Two engineering groups were each vying for development resources. The CEO favored project A, but his engineering manager privately favored project B and convinced the accounting manager to charge project A for costs that were, in fact, incurred by project B. This undermined project A to an unknown degree and distorted what project B actually cost. Project B eventually turned into a salable product, but the development expense had been so great that it never made enough profit to justify its original development. When the CEO discovered all of this, he was, of course, outraged at the 'immorality' of accounting, and was doubly outraged when he was told that accounting 'does this all the time,' that it is 'normal' business practice from the accounting point of view to 'lie' about where certain moneys came from.

Do we now conclude that accounting lacks morals while engineering is morally pure with respect to truth and information management? In the above scenario the engineering project leaders of both groups flatly accused each other of lying, by which they meant that not only had promises been made about what the product would deliver, but that the schedule for completion was wildly distorted and some of the negative performance numbers of early tests were suppressed or changed. Each group concealed concerns that were surfacing about failure to meet targets, about whether the machine would actually work or not, and how much money would still be needed. Inside each group this was not viewed as lying. Rather, it was viewed as a normal by-product of making risky choices for potentially great

gains, using technologies that had not been proven, guessing at market responses, and assuming that levels of support would be forthcoming that did not materialize. The CEO came from a strong Christian tradition that viewed lying in any form as totally immoral, but he was himself an engineer, so he found it easier to see the accountants as immoral in shifting costs than to see the engineers as immoral in promising something that they should have known they could not deliver.

Marketing

And that brings us to marketing. A young marketer soon learns that withholding information or positioning information in such a way that it makes the product look good is the way the game is played. If that borders on lying, so be it, because the system is set up for the customer to beware (*caveat emptor*). Marketing is not a profession like medicine in which you have to be responsible for your client's welfare. If the customer is dumb enough to fall for the ad or fails to read the fine print on the label, that is the customer's problem. The degree of distortion or withholding is not monitored by internal standards but by government regulation and a legal process that defines from time to time when a claim has gone too far or when some product information cannot be withheld, for example the health implications of alcohol or cigarettes.

The set of norms that marketing lives by is viewed by engineering as 'lying' and marketing therefore is given little respect. Customers should be told the truth about products and good products should sell themselves anyway. If the product is good enough, the engineer believes, it will be recognized and 'will sell itself.' I have heard many an engineering executive say that they would never hire an MBA or a marketing specialist because they 'lie' and 'are useless.'

I work with one electrical utility that delivers excellent service but, because they have had some accidents that besmirch their name in the community and with the local environmental agencies, they need to build a strong public relations program to sell themselves. Throughout all the levels of management, mostly engineers by training and by occupational identity, there are strong levels of resistance to these 'public relations' activities. It makes them feel uncomfortable in some fundamental way. Good engineers delivering good service should not have to sell themselves. The good work should speak for itself. The unspoken assumption is that 'public relations' like 'marketing' is unnecessary embellishment or actually lying.

A similar problem arose in an organization that decided to centralize all engineering into a single service group. Engineers would now have to sell

their services to business units at set rates. Needless to say this encountered enormous resistance because it violated the basic identity of the engineer as someone who should not have to sell his or her services, with the sub-text being, of course, that this might require some lying.

What I am trying to argue here is that moral imperatives are very much tied to particular occupational communities and that some of these communities are entirely located within an organization like the marketing department, whereas some are embedded in a wider 'professional' network, such as engineering. I am suggesting that the client in these communities is the occupation itself, that the moral behavior and sense of responsibility that career occupants display is primarily geared to protecting their image of the occupation. If an individual cannot accept those norms he or she tends to leave that occupation or be forced out. So the ethics that develop in each occupational community are governed by that occupational community not necessarily society at large or even the larger organization in which the occupation is embedded. In fact, these communities often deplore each others' morals and ethics.

Some vivid examples come from Thomas's study of the introduction of automated equipment into a number of large companies (Thomas, 1994). Engineers would go to a professional meeting where they would learn about new technologies that would be useful to introduce into their organizations. When they proposed these projects they were told that middle management would not push them forward unless a complete financial analysis showed the costs and benefits. The engineers did not have a clue as how this would work out so they made up a bunch of numbers that were then passed up for approval to senior levels. Those senior levels were only interested in how much costs would be reduced through replacing people so further estimates were made, but it was clear that the force driving this process of communication was the engineers' desire to do 'real engineering' by bringing this cool new equipment into the organization. Most senior executives automatically distrust the figures that are presented in budgets and project proposals, assuming that they are inflated or based on unreliable data. One of their key skills is how to unearth the 'truth' before they approve budgets.

Research and development

In most organizations research and development (R&D) is a separate unit working by more traditional standards of science and academia, hence one might assume that this occupation is more likely to be truthful in some absolute moral sense. Consider not only the case of my panelist quoted earlier who was asked to suppress negative information, but the consistent observation that product development groups are absolutely incapable of

stopping their own projects even in the face of overwhelming negative marketing data. When the results don't fit, the tendency is to say that the survey was not well designed or the wrong market was investigated.

Are the more pure scientists less likely to distort information? When data are actually falsified the profession acts very strongly to excommunicate the perpetrator, but we all know that in the process of conducting research there are many false starts, experiments that produce undesirable outcomes, and ambiguous results that are never reported. The report that ends up in a journal is carefully crafted to the reporting requirements of that journal, the statistics are presented to maximize the desired results, claims are made in the discussion section that go beyond the data and all of this falls in the range of 'normality.' The need to replicate experimental results, the need to do double-blind studies, and the elaborate training that is given to researchers to insure that they do not distort findings testifies to how vulnerable 'science' is to information distortion of all kinds.

The executive suite

What of the CEO and their senior colleagues who deal with the banks, the investors, the analysts, the share-holders, the community, and the employees? Do they tell the 'truth' or do they have to be the biggest spin artists of all since their pronouncements have such immediate impacts on the attitudes of the finance community, shareholders, employees, customers and market analysts? Recently the CEO of United Airlines was fired, allegedly for saying that with the 9/11 crisis and other economic problems the airline might 'perish' next year. Maintaining an image of economic health is seen as essential even if that means withholding negative information and embellishing positive information. The recent accounting scandals reflect both illegal behavior and 'normal spin' in the effort to preserve a certain image of the organization.

Some worrisome implications – Learned moral relativism

In all of the earlier scenarios, if a novice employee questioned the practice, he or she would be told in a friendly but firm way that this is 'just the way business works.' One hypothesis that might be put forward about these sub-culture norms is that each group and community views itself as its primary stakeholder, as the group that it must ultimately protect and enhance, not the larger organization or the wider social community. What this hypothesis implies is that within any given organization there are multiple moral

realities, that even the overall rationalization that it is 'just business,' has very different meanings in different functions and departments.

This variation in norms and the degree to which sub-cultures tend to protect themselves has potentially major implications for organizational careers. As the career occupant moves from one occupational community to another, he or she must learn new definitions of what is moral and what is not. 'Climbing the ladder' might then turn out to be tantamount to having to become morally relativistic. The larger general norm of 'that's just business' begins to justify unexpected new moral demands that may be placed on the career occupant as he or she moves through different functional groups.

If we now consider the careers of general managers who are 'climbing the ladder to the top,' we can infer that they cannot be the kind of people who have a strong inner sense of right and wrong because they would not be able to adapt to the various sub-cultures on their way to the top. More likely, they are efficient learners who are able to adapt to what their current job situation requires and they accept that each occupational community has its 'idioms.' The wisdom and judgment that such leaders acquire is based on their moral relativism. They can perceive the complexity of the moral space because they have experienced it. And when they arrive in top executive positions they will learn the norms of that occupational community, what it is appropriate to tell Wall Street, how to put the right spin on whatever is happening in the company, how to manage the information that goes to and comes from the Board, how extensively and truthfully to communicate with employees, and how much to embellish the truth in their marketing campaigns.

The point is that these are not now immoral people, but that they have learned through successive socialization experiences how variable norms actually are and that 'business is business' even if one is, at times, personally conflicted over what one has to do. On the one hand, this is a depressing scenario because we want to assume that the occupational community that *we* are in is morally more responsible than others we observe. *They* lie, *we* don't. On the other hand, consider how every young academic and scientist learns early in their career how to present findings, how to write things for particular journals, how to suppress information about all the false starts and negative findings that early research efforts produced, and how to present 'science' in the best possible light.

Rather than being depressed about this kind of moral relativism and punishing the moral relativist, I think we should recognize in our own search for understanding that 'truth' is not an absolute thing, that 'truth' is defined by cultural and sub-cultural norms, and that one of the most important

aspects of any career viewed from the insider perspective is the changes in moral imperatives that are involved as one moves through sub-cultures. In a way, it takes us back to one of Howard Becker's most important findings in the medical profession that the idealism of the medical students gradually evolves into realism and possibly cynicism as the realities of various career stages impinge upon the career occupant (Becker et al., 1961). Once we achieve such understanding we might also examine the implications of some of what we expect of different occupational communities. For example, is it realistic to expect large corporations run by CEOs who have achieved their level through climbing the ladder to have a clear sense of the social responsibility of their business?

In my observation, it is only the entrepreneurial company still dominated by its founder owners, or the family company that has retained ownership that is able to maintain values that go beyond 'it's just business.' In these instances, one sees in second- or third-generation family members who have moved into key executive positions that the family as a community is a stronger socializing force than the communities experienced in the stages of the career. At the same time, clinging to a more general community-oriented morality, i.e. refusing to see that business is business, has cost some of these companies their economic well-being, as the case of Digital Equipment clearly shows (Schein, 2003). The commitment to engineering values and innovation was so strong, and success for 30 years was so consistent, that giving more attention to efficiency, marketing, and commodity-type manufacturing could not prevail in time to save the company.

Conclusion

The work of Everett Hughes and his students highlights for career researchers the aesthetic and moral dimensions of the internal career. If one looks at how careers, especially organizational careers, are experienced internally, one sees that career movement subjects the occupant to multiple socialization pressures as he or she moves through different occupational communities. Especially for general managers who tolerate such repeated socialization as a necessary aspect of 'climbing the ladder' it appears inevitable that they would become moral relativists. They would honor the norms of the senior executive community and would be guided by what boards, Wall Street, the investor community and the government dictate as being 'moral' and 'legal.' The notion that members of this community would hold social responsibility values seems improbable. If an individual executive felt strongly about such

values he or she would experience dissonance and socialization pressures to get back into line with the needs of business. Only founders and family members who maintain an 'owner' mentality can be expected to resist such socialization pressures.

For future researchers it would seem to be imperative to study more occupational communities from this moral standpoint, in particular, the norms around information exchange. What does one pass on, what does one withhold, what can be distorted, and what kind of lying is acceptable? A better understanding of the variability of these norms would keep any one occupational group from assuming that it has the moral high ground while all the others lie and cheat. We would discover that truth is not an absolute, but is something that every group searches for and manipulates to its advantage in its attempt to survive and grow.

Acknowledgement

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Edgar H. Schein was educated at the University of Chicago, at Stanford University where he received a masters degree in Psychology in 1949, and at Harvard University where he received his PhD in social psychology in 1952. He has taught at the MIT Sloan School of Management since 1956 and was named the Sloan Fellows Professor of Management in 1978. He is currently Professor Emeritus and Senior Lecturer. He is the author of many articles and books, most recently *Process consultation revisited* (1999), *The corporate culture survival guide* (1999) and *DEC is dead: Long live DEC* (2003). He has consulted with many organizations in the USA and overseas on organizational culture, organization development, process consultation, and career dynamics.
[E-mail: scheine@mit.edu]