

TRANSCRIPT¹

“CONSCIOUSNESS IS IN THE ACT”

by Iván Labra - Limache, Chile, 2012

Introduction

The present text is based on the transcript of a presentation delivered in a seminar on the Organization Workshop (OW), March 2012, Seriti Institute, South Africa (<http://seriti.org.za/>)

Interestingly, the venue of the seminar is in the area referred to as ‘The Cradle of Humankind’ The Place Where We All Come From. (Gauteng re: <http://www.savenues.com/attractionsga/cradle-of-humankind.htm>). Later, the same presentation, this time in Spanish and English, was delivered in Limache, Chile.

The aim of the OW has been stated as “the acceleration of the evolution of Organizational Consciousness”². This paper looks at the consciousness development process during an OW, and therefore, goes to the very core of the Organization Workshop Approach, and indeed to the very core of Psychology itself. This is to the extent that it deals with Consciousness, a concept which is central to psychological science. The motto of this paper is “*Consciousness is in the Act*”, a statement which marks the difference between the OW approach and other conceptions about consciousness.

Commonly held ideas about Consciousness:

- i) Consciousness is about knowledge

When we talk about ‘consciousness’ we frequently assume that it is about knowledge and information. Programs aimed to ‘conscientizing’ people about eg HIV, Aids, alcohol, drugs abuse or domestic violence often consist of talks including statistics, graphics, pictures and the like, always presuming that delivering information and knowledge equates to raising consciousness. The result is that people attending the talks are certainly more informed about the subjects concerned, but they may continue to indulge in alcohol, drugs or unprotected sex, meaning that information did not make an impact on their consciousness.

- ii) Consciousness is a “voice” inside our head, telling us what is right and what is wrong.

Another way of thinking about consciousness is that it is a ‘voice’ inside of our head telling us what to do and what not to do, what is right and what is wrong... a ‘voice’ that prompts us to

¹ Re: Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn05XK8McEM> Ivan Labra: *Consciousness Is in the Act La conciencia está en el acto* Video, created in Howard Richards' "Centro para el Desarrollo Alternativo, Limache," Chile, 26th April 2012. Ivan Labra gave the presentation. (Transcript Dr R.Carmen 2012 revised by I Labra 2017)

² Clodomir Santos de Morais, Theory of Organization. See also (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clodomir_Santos_de_Morais) as well as p 10 of this transcript.

drink yet another one and go after that girl or after that man: ‘*Just do it... go on!, have a good time!*’. At the same time, another ‘voice’ is telling us not to do it, that this is wrong.

iii) “The Unconscious”

Another commonly held idea is that “The Unconscious” is a sort of ‘place’, a sort of ‘black box’ inside our mind where we store bad experiences (traumas) of childhood which are not only stored there, but which keep influencing our daily actions. You all recognize here, of course, the shibboleths of Psychoanalysis. This is perhaps the most widespread idea about consciousness, on the one hand, and its antipode, the so-called ‘The Unconscious’.

The point of view that we are committed to, here, differs from both these conceptualizations of consciousness – which is why we say: *Consciousness is in the Act.*

“Consciousness” does not, repeat, not, dwell in big books, difficult to understand, written by Psychologists. But it is in the act, in the way we perform, here and now. We will explain our view by referring to three different kinds of acts.



In Sumbe, Angola, during the Maria Julia Organization Workshop a group of women are scooping buckets of water and passing them along the row stretching to the shore, where (mud) bricks are being made. The purpose of this activity is the improvement of a school. It shows that they have a clear consciousness about the importance of the education of their children, and their consciousness shows up in the act of organizing themselves to do work and improve the school.

Brick making



The kind of consciousness expressed in the collection of water and bricks-making processes center around collective work and cooperation. We call it '*Organizational Consciousness*', because it is about being organized to change their conditions of life and those of their children for the better. This is one kind of consciousness. Later we will come back to it.

Below we take a look at a different kind of activity which expresses itself in a different consciousness set-up

Carpenter making a door.



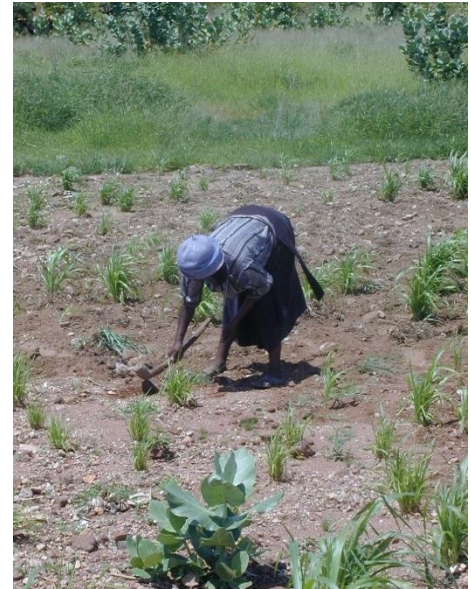
Consciousness animating this activity is all about individual work. The culture associated with it is expressed in the sentence '*it is everyone for himself, and god for us all*', which is the basis of individualism. Why does this carpenter have this kind of consciousness? Precisely because his activity is individual – he does not depend on anyone else to make this door. Another expression about the same individual work culture is '*if you want something done, do it yourself*'.

The daily activity of all carpenters that share the same technological level is, to a large extent, the same. Therefore carpenters' minds share the same psychological characteristics



□

The image on the right depicts a woman who practices subsistence agriculture in Mozambique. She still has an individual type of mentality, but simpler than that of the carpenter. Carpentry involves controlling more variables, tools and skills that are more complex than the skills and the tools characterizing the intervention of the pictured woman in the production process: she is at the mercy of the seasons, without control over rains or drought. No rains mean no crops and hunger. Her vision of the order of things, which we call 'naïve consciousness' leaves her with no option but to pray to god to send the rain. People with this consciousness tend to believe that everything comes from the Almighty, and the only thing that can be done is to pray to the Lord to alleviate the pain and stop the suffering. That is why we say that DIFFERENT KINDS OF ACTIVITIES CREATE DIFFERENT KINDS OF CONSCIOUSNESS



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At the **naïve level of consciousness**, the responsibility for everything rests with Fate, Destiny, God. All we can do is to hope & pray.

and are powerless to intervene to change this situation. Therefore, their only hope is that government, entrepreneurs or somebody else could eventually do something, to create jobs for them.

As mentioned before, in naïve consciousness, reality is perceived as the product of God's Will, Destiny, Fate, good or bad luck, the influence of the stars under which the individual was born, the influence of the moon, the machinations of the spirits, the cards in the Tarot, or, in general, the decision of a Superior Will which it is pointless to oppose.

We distinguish different types of activity as the source of consciousness and psychological traits. One of those is the ARTESAN or Individual Worker, defined as the person who starts and finishes a product, on individual basis, from beginning to end.

In the following illustrations, we see two different sculptors busy making their statues. According to our approach, in both cases the same activity shapes their minds along the same

parameters.



The artisan is subject to constant criticism of and by the thing they are doing: the wood or the clay are, so to say, ‘criticising’ the artisan. The tool, when wrongly used, ‘communicates’ to the operator that they are using it the wrong way. For example, de Moraes, the author of this approach, says that if you do it wrong, the electric saw will hit your finger straight away, even cut it off. It will not use words to ‘talk’ to you, but it will ‘teach’ you anyhow, by cutting off your finger. As if, indeed, it was telling you off: “you stupid, you see now?” “Why were you not more careful? If you do it again, I will cut off the other finger”. It is in that way that the activity shapes the mind.



Above an illustration of a shoemaker in southern Africa and another one elsewhere. Again, apart from the obvious differences in the workshop set-up we posit that the mind of either of them is shaped exactly in the same way, because it is the activity that is shaping their minds. Both are subjected to the criticism by their very own activity. If they are not doing their work carefully, the needle will pierce their hand and wound them.

They are criticized by their customers as well, which will make the difference between a successful shoemaker and another which is not so. Therefore, they must be critical about the quality of their work as well as the quality of the work of their colleagues. The quality they can achieve ensures that they can earn their lives and sustain themselves.

Thus, the artisan form of labor leads to the development of **CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS**



Today **critical consciousness** is the order of the day. In many capitals and cities of the world we have, for example the ‘indignados’, and other protesters against the evils of ‘the system’ And what underlies all this is critical consciousness: *this is wrong, I won’t accept that, I don’t want that.*

Critical consciousness was fostered by Liberation Theology, in the sixties and seventies, and the Roman Catholic church was, in those days, deeply involved in it. Adult educators such as Paulo Freire, developed a method to raise critical consciousness. Participants to Freire's seminars would be presented with a poster depicting a social situation, often poverty and exploitation. Participants were then invited to elaborate and reflect on the theme of the poster, called a 'generative theme'.

Dom Helder Camara was well known as a protagonist of liberation theology. He said: *"When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. But when I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a Communist"*. And we know of other priests in other countries, El Salvador for example. some of them got killed, such as Martin Baro,— He was very active in Community Psychology.

Critical consciousness, enhanced by reflection exercises may drive individuals to figure out the 'root causes' of social situations, i.e. the 'what?' and the 'why?' but does not give any indication as to 'how?' to go about tackling those root causes. It apparently stops at the shouting and the stone throwing. But it does not proceed to the next step: how do we organize ourselves to, for example, overcome poverty.

We are very good at saying we are anti-system, we are anti-capitalist, but we are pro what? Critical consciousness, therefore, is good at pointing the finger to 'the problem(s)', but does not give any clue as to what to do about these problems. In short: there is no Organizational Consciousness'.

Psychological traits created by different kinds of activity.

Traditional Psychology ignores the link between the activity of the person and their personality traits. And there are so many of those traits: consciousness of reality, self-consciousness, immediatism, and so on. They constitute an entire array of personality traits which I will not be able to go into now, but I present them here for further reference by those who are interested.

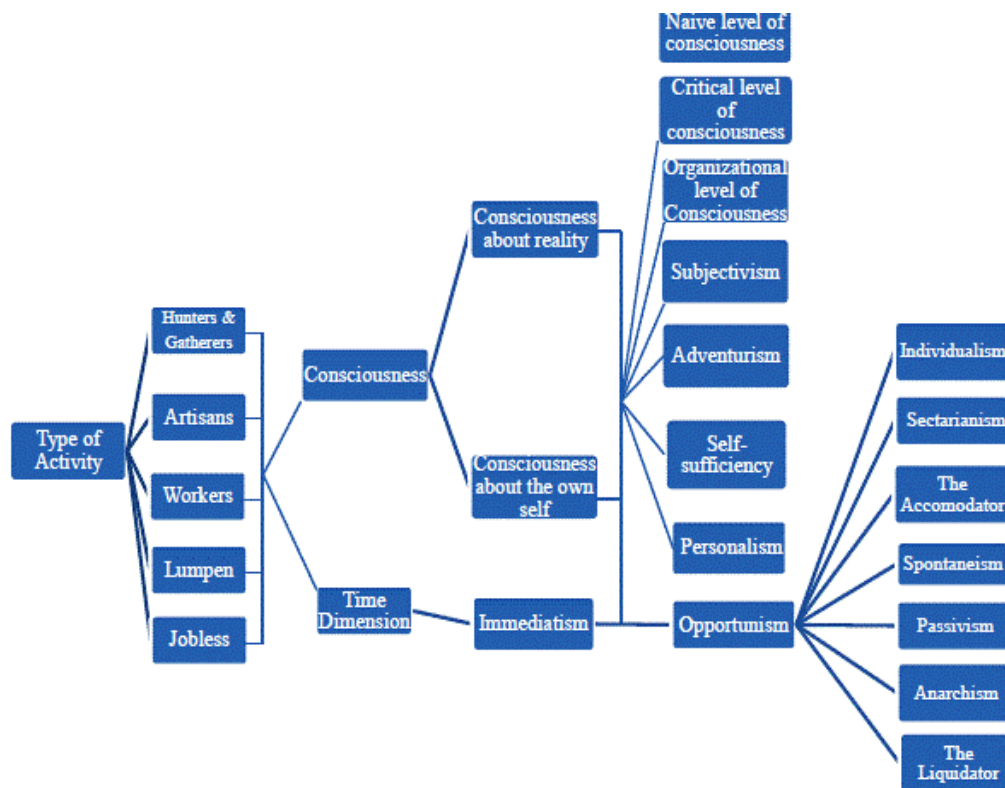


Fig 1

The above represents a psychological system where different psychological traits are listed in the two right hand side columns. Going leftwards we have different forms of consciousness, which in turn are determined by each one of five broad categories of activity. As said before, this is not the place to explain each one of the traits and their dependency links, which we have explained elsewhere. Here we will offer only two examples

Immediatism –

Immediatism is the psychological reflection of the pressing daily need to get something to put on the table. People must get something to, first, eat, and then, perhaps, to get a roof over one's head. Day after day the poor, the jobless, the long term unemployed must sort out something for the current day.

Immediatism, as a psychological trait, renders us unable to plan. The situation of poverty, of destitution, puts one in a problem-situation where long-term problems are out of what can be perceived by the individual, making them impossible to understand. When people are trapped in it, environment protection, for example, will fall out of their focus, beyond the capacity of the individual to pay attention and try to understand it. Problems with values, with human dignity, with cultural change often may be beyond one's grasp.

Opportunism –

In our approach Opportunism is *the use of interpersonal relationships to obtain immediate and personal gain.* Immediatism gives rise to opportunism, since the individual may be forced to sort out their pressing needs using others, government institutions, political parties,

the enterprise where the person may belong, social groups, friends or family to get an immediate gain or benefit(s). Therefore, when they look at the others, they may tend to look at institutions as if they were a cow ready for milking.

Cooperation/collective work are all about organizational consciousness.

Organizational consciousness emerges in complex set-ups. Not only in modern production factory set-ups, but it operates as well in situations shown in one of the first photographs in this presentation, that of the women working together drawing water from the river. And in the brick-making process. The Army would be an example of where organizational consciousness is in operation: thousands of people doing the same at exactly the same moment.

How to go about changing the psychological traits created by artesan forms of labor? How to go about developing Organizational Consciousness?

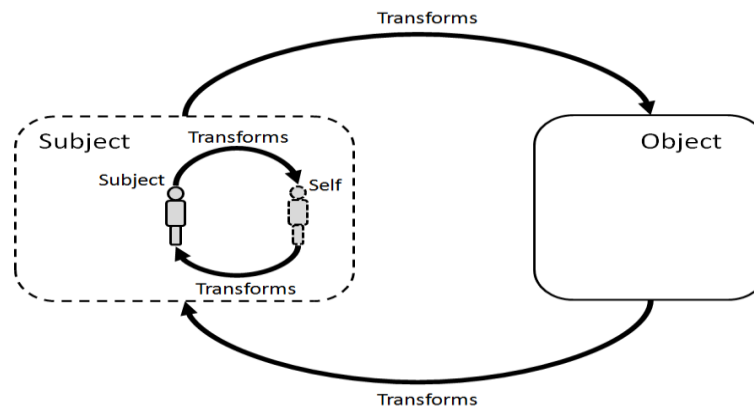


Fig 2

As can be seen in the graph above³, *in the activity* the subject changes the environment (object) and in the same process the environment changes the mind of the person executing the activity. This constitutes a continuous loop, which we share with animals. And in this model, humans, just as animals, in the process, change the strength of their bodies. For example, muscle power, even bones, changes in the keenness of our eye sight, and so many more physical and psychological characteristics.

But in human beings there is something different from the way things are in animals.

We not only change our bodily structure, but we also change our cognition and experience. Knowledge, ideas, books, art, any other forms of representation only started happening after social interaction came into being. So, in the case of human beings, when we are born, we can only be candidates to humankind. But it is only after we link up with other human beings that the human condition will start growing and will be fostered in us. From the day we

³ This graph (fig 2) was developed to explain the *Objectivized Activity* concept presented by A. N. Leontiev in his book *Actividad, Conciencia, Personalidad*, Ed Ciencias del Hombre, 1978 (Spanish) The concept 'objectivized' follows the Spanish word 'objetivada', meaning that human activity performed upon an object gets embodied in the object. English translations, talk about 'objective activity', which, to our understanding, carries a different meaning

are born (and eventually from the moment when human interaction starts to take place) we are in the process of becoming a human being. So, in the absence of the others, we are not quite human beings yet. And without it we will never be.



Participants in the Kwanda Organization Workshop, Seriti Institute, South Africa

The Objectivized Activity concept gives us the key to entering the mind of the subject, and foster psychological change. This means that we can ‘craft’ our own ‘self’ as if it were a lump of clay

To do that we place our own ‘self’ before our eyes, as it were, get to know how this ‘self’ looks like and improve it through activity and reflection exercises.

Kwanda asks: What do WE do to improve our communities? To create Jobs; reduce Alcohol abuse & violence; take care of children; stop the spread of HIV.



Participants in the Kwanda OW (South Africa) realized that unless they could constantly improve their organizational consciousness they could only rely on their previous experience. In their case, some of it was still useful, like when they organized a march to demand government action. Some of it was not useful anymore, like the burning of government property as happened in Sakhile and Malmesbury, which were expressions of their critical consciousness. Overcoming the critical consciousness level and moving on to organizational consciousness, led participants to ask themselves what could be done to improve their living conditions, coming up with ideas like organizing a Community Police Forum, stokvels (a form of community credit), home creches, burial societies, makgotla, political organizations, unions, church organizations.

Several Organization Workshops that took place in Southern Africa confirmed the participants’ transit from Naïve and Critical consciousness to Organizational Consciousness. From this experience, we coined the following definition:

***Consciousness** is the richness, complexity, depth and scope of the psychological reflection associated with every action performed by the person during an activity. It includes the identity, angle or viewpoint from where the person faces not only themselves but also the different sets of objects and relationships they come across in the actions they want to take, the actions they do*

not want to take and the expected results of both on the person's initial identity, angle or viewpoint

The Unconscious

In line with the previous concept, we define “*The Unconscious*” as *the part of the existing psychological reflection that knowingly or unknowingly we ignore when doing something. Unconscious may also be something the person is not aware of. A relationship between phenomena or facts that people simply ignore because it has not been part of their experience so far, or not enough reflection has gone into it. For example, if I go to the shop and I find a shirt being sold for \$1.00, I might happily buy it, not being aware that the reason it is so cheap is because it was produced by slave labor.*

If I buy that shirt, though, even though I know that it was made by slave labor, it means that I simply do not mind about slavery, or my values go in another direction, or that I am changing my values out of opportunism.

That it is why it is so important to affirm: CONSCIOUSNESS IS IN THE ACT.

And the same applies when in Chile I buy meat from Australia, for example, and I have no concept of the importance of the ecological footprint, I may choose to ignore it, but if I know it, and I still buy it, it means that I do not care about the environment, about Climate change and all the rest.

That is why we say, and I repeat: CONSCIOUSNESS IS IN THE ACT. And that is the importance of differentiating “the unconscious” as a ‘thing’ which we hold somewhere there, in our heads, and the way we propose this concept. Another definition which goes along the same concept of consciousness is the concept of *Organizational Consciousness*, which, as we said before, goes to the core of the Organization Workshop:

ORGANIZATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Organizational Consciousness is the capacity of the individual to break down a task into its component parts; to imagine the level of organization needed to accomplish each task; to spell out the steps needed to carry it out; to allocate required operations among team members taking into account their individual abilities; to coordinate and assess the execution of these operations and the performance of the whole team as well as being able, on that basis, to suggest the introduction of corrective measures aimed to continuously improving the results of the activity of the organization.

How the acceleration of the development of the organizational consciousness takes place?

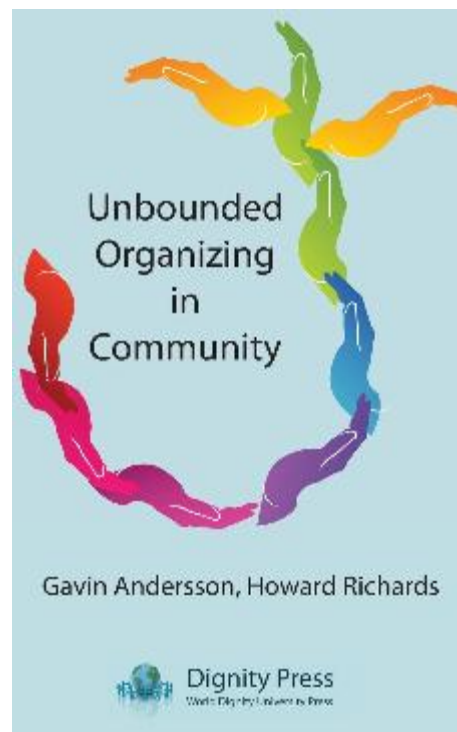
In the Organization Workshop a large group in possession of a common pool of resources organize themselves the way they see fit, without external intervention, to perform previously defined activities. They attend daily sessions on Theory of Organization, which makes available

the history and evolution of organization of labor. They are, therefore, equipped in material and intellectual terms, to face their tasks, asking from facilitators all the technical assistance and instruction if and when the need arises.

Tools to further enhance the development of organizational consciousness.

The OW set up trigger the development of the organizational consciousness, in a process enhanced by periodical reflection exercises to critically look at the level reached by the group in the performance of the activities. These Critical Analysis exercises improve perceptual skills and objective judgment, as well as capacities of thought, like analysis-synthesis, generalization-abstraction and creative, imaginative thought. Vigilance exercised by all members of the group is expressed through the right use of criticism, improving the human relations climate in the group. It also improves human relations through the right use of criticism.

Critical Analysis, also called Critical Balance, is done through vigilance in which all participants look at each other's performance so that we can tell the others when and where things are wrong (and the things we do right). Through criticism, again, analysis and synthesis, abstraction and generalization are improved. The Unity keeps the system in place and the meeting is 'the container' where new social relations emerge.



"Unbounded Organizing in Community" is a guidebook to Organization Workshops, inspired by Clodomir Santos de Morais. The theory of Organization Workshops and Unbounded Organizing is presented in condensed form. Emphasis is on practical examples and guidelines for organizers and participants. Others say about this book:

"Packed into this small book are truly big things, big ideas, examples of big practices which speak clearly and intelligently into the challenge of living and building a world together in ways that sustain us as individuals and as groups." Crain Soudien, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Education and African Studies, University of Cape Town

"An inspiring theory of social change and a roadmap for putting it into practice." Alicia Cabezudo, Rosario, Argentina, VP International Peace Bureau, Geneva

"With this new, delightful, down to earth guide we can see the operationalization of the authors' theories and the social experiments they nurtured. Practical field exercises abound." Deborah Lagutaris, Oakland, California