FINDING TRUTH IN OUTLIARS
Exploring Assumptions and Methods for Handling Rogue Data

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JOHN MILBURN

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Sara Tickler, Psy.D., First Reader

Judith Noel, M.Ed., Second Reader

Gisela Wendling Ph.D., Organization Development Program Coordinator

Rohnert Park, 2008
Abstract

The overall purpose of this paper is to explore assumptions and methods of how Organization Development (OD) practitioners handle and process rogue data including confidential, sensitive, and inflammatory information that surfaces in most OD consultations.

This phenomenological study explores whether or not examining outlying data leads OD consultants to important perspectives that can contribute to improved organizational performance. The secondary focus is to explore how practitioners work with anomalies and outliers and how this influences their work. Finally, this paper identifies what implications exist for OD consultants and the OD field, in general. Because we live in a time of rapid change and discovery in our society, connections with chaos and complexity theories are also explored as a means of finding truth in outliers.
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Introduction

One of the main goals of Organization Development (OD) is to assist the organization in uncovering the deeper issues which are holding it back from attaining “relationship sanity and task effectiveness” (Eisen, 2005), and these issues may come to the consultant in a variety of ways. The ability to ascertain and communicate the issues that provide the opportunity for growth and development are central to the role of OD practitioner. As pointed out by Eisen, Cherbeneau, and Worley (2005) in their chapter A Future-Responsive Perspective for Competent Practice in OD:

“…OD practitioners should maintain sufficient self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity, and behavioral flexibility to be able to perceive accurately and respond appropriately…a rich array of subtle cues must be perceived, processed, understood, and responded to in-the-moment, one should draw on a capacity for judgment, and even for intuitive understanding, to respond adequately or even masterfully. If we have unfinished psychological homework, it can block that capacity or lead us to be inappropriately reactive” (p. 24).

It is clear that our ability to understand the messages we receive in our consulting practices is central to our effectiveness with organizations and groups. We cannot expect to be successful at helping an organization understand its own issues if we cannot understand them first. We must then be able to communicate these issues to our clients in an effective manner that includes satisfying many additional requirements such as maintaining anonymity, professionalism, integrity, and credibility. At times, this can be difficult to do because of our life experience, filters, biases, and professional inadequacies. We must be diligent in our individual personal development by identifying our own learning opportunities and consciously exploring those areas. If we ignore our own developmental needs, we risk repeating behaviors and mistakes that can be costly to our clients, our field, and ourselves.

John Milburn, May 2008
The purpose of this research is to investigate how OD consultants deal with outlying and anomaly data that surface during the course of client work. For the purposes of this research outlier data is defined as any information that comes to the consultant from a single source, or very few sources, and could include information that was off-the-record or confidential, during the course of a consulting engagement. This also includes outlying data that is deleted from action research projects. This data is referred to throughout this paper as outlier data, anomaly data, rogue data, and single-source data.

This paper investigates what OD practitioners have done when they have a hunch about pursuing something that is outside of the common themes in a data set—and includes exploring how consultants use their own cognitive and emotional intelligence when deciphering and understanding information.

This research answers the question:

*How do OD consultants deal with confidential statements or information that is shared with them from a single-source, or from relatively few sources, that does not fall into common themes, or that conventional theory says you should not pursue, that surface during the course of client work?*

The lessons from this research are personally meaningful to me. In the beginning of this process, I was not aware of my own preferences and behaviors when confronted with anomaly data. As I explored this subject through interviews and data analysis, I have become increasingly aware of my choices when engaged in a consulting project and receiving emotionally charged or otherwise inflammatory information from relatively few sources. This learning opportunity is critical to my personal growth and useful in creating and delivering meaningful and effective organizational interventions.

*John Milburn, May 2008*
Literature Review

Complex Systems

The scientific discovery that chaotic systems actually contain deep organized structures within them has implications so wide-ranging that it has attracted interest across a variety of disciplines in addition to the sciences, including psychology, philosophy, medicine, and the humanities. A notable example is *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, edited by N. Katherine Hayles (1991) where fourteen theorists explore new models of chaotics, finding correlations between contemporary literature and the science of chaos. The Washington Center for Complexity and Public Policy (2003), in a report to the US Department of Education entitled, *The Uses of Complexity* said:

“From health care to city planning to economics and international politics, the new science of complex systems is moving us away from a linear, mechanistic view of the world to one based on nonlinear dynamics, evolutionary development and systems thinking. It is laying the foundation for a fundamental shift in how we view the world, and with it the need for a shift in how we think about, organize, plan for, and lead 21st century organizations (p. 5).

The definition and implications of Chaos Theory are still widely debated and will continue to be examined and unraveled in the future. It is necessary to explore this subject in spite of the fact that it does not present itself in a tidy, easy-to-understand package.

Complex systems are at the heart of knowing ourselves and the world within which we live. The complexity of life has been apparent to us for centuries, but our understanding of the nature of life has taken on new meaning as Chaos Theory explains the behavior of atomic and subatomic particles. This glimpse into the workings of our
universe is taking decades to unfold and longer to comprehend, however, we must persist to understand and correlate this new framing of the world into our everyday lives and as we practice OD. Peter Senge (1990) uses this analogy in *The Fifth Discipline*:

“A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward, and we know that it will rain. We also know that after the storm, the runoff will feed into the groundwater miles away, and the sky will grow clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space and yet they are all connected within the same pattern. Each has an influence on the rest, an influence that is hidden from view. You can only understand the rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern” (pp. 6-7).

Only by continually reminding ourselves to look at the bigger picture can we begin to fathom the ramifications of the connectedness within our complex systems. Fritjof Capra (2002) points out that, “At all levels of life—from the metabolic networks inside cells to the food webs of ecosystems and the networks of communications in human societies—the components of living systems are interlinked in network fashion” (p. 261). Capra makes a persuasive argument that our biology is connected to our cognitive and social selves and this relationship is integral to our work in managing human organizations. Chaos Theory is a way of explaining the behavior of complex systems and the correlation to our work in OD is just beginning to emerge. Buckminster Fuller (1981) gives a great example of one aspect of the human system:

“We now find that every human being generates a self-surrounding, ultra-ultra-ultra-high-frequency electromagnetic field…Each individual’s field alternates between positive and negative. When an individual is feeling predominately negative mentally, the field is negative, and vice versa…satellites…can take continual readings of the sum-total proportions of positive and negative electromagnetic field reactions of all humanity…” (p. 341).

We each have a positive/negative electromagnetic field and together we emit a human system positive/negative electromagnetic field. Each one of us is inextricably connected
and part of our larger human system and each individual contributor helps shape that larger human system.

This inter-reliance of one with the whole is sometimes confusing to contemplate. In his article, Redesigning Human and Global Systems, Saul Eisen (1995) describes eight levels of human systems ranging from the person to the society of all human beings, and how these levels interact with and affect one another. In his model for Human Systems Redesign (HSR), Eisen explains the core premise of the HSR perspective, “…there is a complex interdependence among these levels; one cannot work on one without affecting and being affected by the others” (p. 2). The fact that change on any given level of human systems has an effect on all the other levels of the system creates a very complex structure, yet there seems to be relatively simple principles governing all systems. Eisen goes on to describe, “Each of the eight human system levels…has structural elements that provide continuity and stability” (p. 6).

The Butterfly Effect

In 1972, Edward Lorenz gave a talk entitled: “Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?” (NY Times, 2008). A recent New York Times article entitled “Edward N. Lorenz, a Meteorologist and a Father of Chaos Theory, Dies at 90,” by Kenneth Change, acknowledges Lorenz’s contribution:

“In discovering “deterministic chaos,” Dr. Lorenz established a principle that profoundly influenced a wide range of basic sciences and brought about one of the most dramatic changes in mankind’s view of nature since Sir Isaac Newton,” said a committee that awarded him the 1991 Kyoto Prize for basic sciences” (NY Times, [electronic version] April 17, 2008).

The Butterfly Effect is at the core of Chaos Theory. The term Butterfly Effect refers to the fact relatively small events can have systemic consequences. Edward Lorenz
discovered the Butterfly Effect in a weather simulation run on a computer that he conducted in the 1960’s and this was the beginning of modern Chaos Theory (Gleick, 1987). He realized that small variations had large consequences and this idea is illustrated by the suggestion that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil creates a tornado in Texas—that the air displacement created by butterfly’s wings could ultimately cause a large-scale atmospheric disturbance such as a tornado or hurricane. This connection between such small-scale seemingly unrelated variations and the behavior of a larger scale event is at the heart of the complexity of our natural world.

Until recently, science, in general, has ignored small variations in large systems, justifying them by the belief that these small influences did not have a significant effect on the larger system. Yet, in Lorenz’s (1963) experiment small errors proved catastrophic and he realized that there existed “…critical points where a small push can have large consequences, as with a ball balanced at the top of a hill” (Gleick, 1987, pp. 18-19). To illustrate this further consider the example of a navigator of a ship setting the course for a particular destination. If the navigator is only a fraction of a degree off in calculating the heading, the ship’s trajectory will increasingly sail off course as it travels, potentially missing its destination altogether. Another example of this effect is an archer shooting an arrow. Small variations in the archer’s aim determine whether the arrow hits the mark or misses the target completely.

This is true for human systems as Peter Senge (1990) points out:

“Small changes can produce big results—but the areas of highest leverage are often the least obvious…The only problem is that high-leverage changes are usually highly nonobvious to most participants in the system. They are not ‘close in time and space’ to obvious problem symptoms” (pp. 63 - 64).
The implications of these emerging scientific theories for OD professionals are being explored in books such as Margaret Wheatley’s (2006) *Leadership and the New Science, Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, where she states:

“In a nonlinear world, very slight variances, things so small as to be indiscernible, can amplify into completely unexpected results. When a system is nonlinear and webbed with feedback loops, repetition feeds the change back on itself, causing it to amplify and grow. After several iterations, a variance that was too small to notice can cause enormous impact, far beyond anything predicted. The system suddenly takes off in unexpected directions or responds in surprising ways…In a nonlinear system, the slightest variation can lead to catastrophic results…A casual comment at a meeting flies through the organization, growing and mutating into a huge misunderstanding that requires enormous time and energy to resolve” (pp. 120-122)

Wheatley makes a clear case for a single comment being the impetus of huge misunderstandings. This explicitly supports the fact that a single-source can have system-wide impact. If this is what can occur within an organization, what happens within a consultant when he has a conversation with a single-source that leaves him with new information that he has promised not to share, or for some reason hesitates to share with his client? What if he has outlying data in an action research project and does not know if or how he should include it? Is it possible that the new and different information cascades through the consultant ultimately coloring the way he sees the project? Does the anomaly data contribute to creating larger system awareness within the consultant? These are the aspects of consultant experience explored within this paper.

Reviewing internal biases forming while learning more about the organization and identifying how those biases might hinder one’s ability to see where the real trouble lies, is important work for any consultant. If we assume that grouping data in common themes and ignoring or treating outlying data differently is the preferred way to process that data,
we may be missing something important to not only the short-term goals of the project, but also to the long-term viability of the organization.

Many sources of research practices suggest grouping the data by common themes. For example, *The Handbook of Social Work Research Methods*, edited by Bruce Thyer (2001) states, “…reliability is the extent to which a data collection procedure and analysis yield the same answer for multiple participants in the research process (Kirk & Miller, 1986)” (p. 274). Chris Argyris (1970) makes the case for grouping data by theme:

“…valid and useful information is the foundation for effective intervention…There are several tests for checking for validity of the information…The first is having several independent diagnoses suggest the same picture. Second is generating predictions from the diagnosis that are subsequently confirmed (they occurred under the conditions that were specified)” (p. 110).

If we are viewing reliability through the traditional linear lens, then this makes sense. If we believe that general predictions can be made from common data, then this line of thinking holds up. However, when we view this type of reliability through the nonlinear lens, we see that it might be missing valuable data that was not acknowledged by multiple participants, but is the small variance that might amplify into a larger problem or series of problems if not addressed early in the project. In a recent *Harvard Business Review* (July 12, 2007) podcast, the interviewer talks with Paul Saffo, a veteran Silicon Valley-based technology forecaster, about his article in the July-August 2007 edition of *Harvard Business Review* entitled, *Six Rules for Effective Forecasting*. The interviewer asks Saffo about rule number three in his book, ‘Embrace the things that don’t fit’ and what he meant by that:

“Well, as a forecaster what I have developed is a finely honed instinct for things that are strange; they don’t fit, they seem a little weird or they’re intriguing but you don’t know why they matter. It turns out those are often like little Doppler
whistles coming in from the future and they are very subtle indicators of something that may be a profound change around the corner. And so good forecasting, often times is a bit like bad research, you want to look for those subtle things and say, ‘Why does that bother me?’” (Saffo, July 12, 2007).

Peter Block (1999) does address the fact that information does not always come to us in nice packages:

“When sticky issues come up during the data collection phase, we need to pursue them and not worry about contaminating the data or biasing the study. Too often we see our role in the data collection phase as a passive one” (p. 43)

He goes on to state, “Withholding data on the interpersonal or process dimensions of a problem is to collude with the organization in not dealing with them” (p. 43). Yet he does insist that we “Condense the data into a limited number of issues” (p. 187), and this means we are entrusted with the task or deciding what the client will hear in the course of the consultation. Block (1999) continues with,

“You may have devised a rational, logical process to sort out and categorize the data, but the selection of what is important is essentially a judgment on your part. This is what they are paying you for. Trust your intuition; don’t treat it as a bias” (p. 218).

By contrast, he also states, “The client has a right to all of the information you have collected” (p. 219). There seems to emerge some confusion, then, on just what information should populate your data set.

In my literature review, I have not found a sufficient or adequate answer to the dilemma of processing outlying data. One source stated, “Another issue likely to develop is participants sharing information ‘off the record.’ Although in most instances this information is deleted from analysis by the researcher, the issue becomes problematic when the information, if reported, harms individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 142). In this
case, the information is most likely deleted and the concern is that when reported it may cause harm, ignoring the possible costs of not reporting it.

Paying close attention to single-source data could be useful in the process described in Frohman, Sashkin, and Kavanagh’s (1976) “Action Research as Applied to Organization Development” description of the *scouting* phase of action-research:

“…the OD practitioner develops an initial ‘fix’ on the significant characteristics and problems of the client system…Such data will play a major role in the client and consultant mutually deciding whether they will enter into a formal relationship and, if so, at what point in the organization the entry will be made” (p. 155).

Another source suggests attending to outlying data:

“Researchers should take a good look at the exceptions, or the ends of a distribution, because they can test and strengthen the basic findings. Researchers need to find outliers and then verify whether what is present in them is absent or different in other, more mainstream examples. Extreme cases can be useful in verifying and confirming conclusions” (Thyer, 2001, p. 287).

It is clear that *all* information gathered during this phase is important and significant to understanding the client system. All too often, consultants ignore information because it poses a threat to the project success, or that a confrontation will be necessary to resolve the issue, or any number of other uncomfortable implications. Yet, if it is true that small, seemingly, unrelated variations many times are connected to large outcomes, such as illustrated by the Butterfly Effect, then it follows that confidential information that comes from a single-source, or an informal conversation, may indeed hold clues for what the project should *really* be about. Not attending to it could have larger consequences to the consultant and to the client organization.
Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the participants’ professional and personal experiences with consulting projects where information that was not corroborated by other data, did not fall into a theme, or was inflammatory or confidential in nature, emerged and the consultant felt was important in some way. The interviews conducted provide the primary data for analysis and interpretation. The respondents are all practicing OD consultants, four women and two men, with experience ranging from 15 – 38 years in the field of OD. All but one has been in both internal and external capacities in OD. They have worked with organizations including small businesses, international corporations, non-profits, and government institutions. Several of the respondents have worked for and with Fortune 500 companies. Their combined experience represents a rich depth of knowledge and is shared in this paper through the researcher’s interpretation of their stories and reflections.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed in a traditional linear method, by identifying common themes. In addition, special attention was paid to information that did not fall into a theme, yet still held significant interest for the researcher. All of the respondents were asked the same questions (see Appendix B) but were asked several follow-up questions that varied from interview to interview.

Assumptions

The basic assumptions of this study follow:

- The use of self is at the core of OD competency
• OD consultants are people and therefore have biases, filters, fears, and opinions that may interfere with and/or influence the collection, interpretation, and reporting of important data to their clients
• Most OD practitioners use common linear techniques to theme data
• Most OD practitioners do not violate confidentiality agreements

Limitations

This research paper is limited by several factors including my own biases as an OD practitioner. I am a male in my forties with a strong preference toward logical arguments. I am intentionally exploring a subject that is a learning opportunity for me and this may influence the way I interpret the results. I may see personal value in certain responses and choose to pursue those responses further and possibly not pursue other responses that do not resonate with me.

This is a pilot study and the number of interviews conducted represents a small sample and cannot be generalized to all OD consultants. Additionally, this study focuses on a particular type of data and ignores many other aspects of OD practice. There are many more examples of successful OD interventions that are not reviewed in this study.

Data Presentation

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed resulting in the themes presented below. The interviewees were each asked the same general question at the beginning of the interview that was, “What is your experience in receiving anomaly data in a consulting project?” The interviews each took a different course from there, exploring the various aspects of personal and professional experience. All interviewees were asked
all of the same questions (see Appendix B), and additionally, were asked separate follow-up and contextual questions. This has somewhat changed the original intent of this paper (to explore anomaly data) to include a substantial discussion about the function of OD and what we are there to do and provide to our clients as OD consultants. It seems that how we handle data, especially sensitive data, is determined by what we think we are there to do—and there seems to be some agreement and disagreement about that. The major themes that emerged are: 1) The Function of OD, 2) Confidentiality and the Obligation to Share Data, and 3) Finding Truth in Outliers.

The Function of OD

All six respondents spoke about the function of OD as being part of how they decide to approach outlier data and confidentiality. One interviewee framed his entire answer to my interview questions on what he believed the function of OD is and how that influences his decisions and approach to this sensitive and important subject. He spoke of “heightening consciousness of the client” and “keeping your eye on the prize” or increasing organizational performance systemically. All other respondents spoke of this in terms of “the right thing,” and “purpose and importance,” which gave meaningful context to why they were there interviewing and consulting in the first place.

All respondents stated that their purpose was to “help the organization improve.” Not all interviewees agreed on how to do that, though. Each consultant works in his or her own way and can be illustrated by such terms as “systems,” “stop harm,” “great breadth and depth,” “split in our field,” “sounding board,” and “private investigator.” This highlights the multiple roles and functions that OD consultants provide.
Confidentiality and the Obligation to Share Data

This theme has two dimensions that seem to contradict each other, but in fact can compliment one another. All respondents reported being concerned about confidentiality in terms such as “building trust and rapport,” “safe sounding board,” and “boundaries.” However, the obligation to share data is also at the very heart of effective consulting. It is interesting to note that while most interviewees have developed a method for maintaining confidentiality and still being able to share data; their methods differ substantially. One respondent relayed that he asks his clients not to share anything with him that they would not be willing to share with their colleagues (with a few exceptions); thereby helping his clients explore their own boundaries around confidentiality. Another respondent stated that she worked with “confidentiality at the boundaries of the organization” and she willingly shares information that she believes helps the organization improve or stops harm to the organization. “Obligation to share data,” “the right thing to do,” and other similar reasons validated the need to share data with the parties that could benefit from knowing it, and most of these consultants have found ways to not breach confidentiality, and still get important information communicated to the necessary parties. Those that could not find a way at the time learned from that experience and when reflecting on those experiences, report that they would have done some things differently including being “more inclusive, less exclusive”, and “upfront” about sharing information.

Finding Truth in Outliers

All interviewees agreed, “All data is important.” Most said those exact words. It seemed almost a foregone conclusion that all data is important, as if they were saying,
“No one would dispute that.” Outlier data is just as important as themed data and is generally incorporated or represented in one of the existing themes. “It always fits,” “I can usually integrate it,” “it will come up again later,” and “attached thematically” are some of the responses. An interesting aspect of the importance of data was relayed in one interviewee’s statement, “It is almost like the data is my client.”

All interviewees reported receiving anomaly data in various forms including “confidential,” “off-the-record,” “you just need to know,” and “outliers.” All interviewees reported valuing outlier data reflected in comments such as “different experience,” “isn’t ordinarily shared,” “back of my mind,” “critical information,” and “why is he telling me this?” Anomaly data was generally viewed as holding important insight into real problems that were holding the organization back. When considered with themed or collective data, outlier data has proven significant in discovering the root cause of why people are not working together and therefore tasks are not completed satisfactorily. Most respondents reported that while the actual content of anomaly data may not tell them everything they need to know, it could lead them to the root cause as they investigate further with follow-up questions and suggestions for “getting it out in the light.”

Not all interviewees value all forms of outlier data. One interviewee said that he does not consider “he said, she said” data important or useful and he “puts it in the closet,” and another said that if it is really an outlier he, “drops it.”

### Data Analysis and Discussion

The following section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered during this study. Quotations from the interviews are italicized and are followed by the
The Function of OD

All six respondents spoke of this theme in various ways. One thing they have in common is that the purpose of their work drives their decisions. *First of all, I want to be working in great breadth and depth in an organization, not just one little piece here and one little piece there, and the reason for that is what you will find in systems logic... you need to place systems logic onto the action research idea and you kind of get where I am going* (P6). *What we are ultimately trying to do is to get to the learning edge of the organization... in part we are private investigators and all of these little pieces inform the bigger picture and that's really our job, to bring in the big picture* (P2). *...I think that often people are not at their best because of systems issues, and when you solve systems issues people bounce back... That is generally my rule of thumb* (P4). *I am really more of a systems guy* (P5).

While most agree that working at the systems level is critical to OD, they do not all agree on what the function of OD is. *There has been a split in our field because Edgar Schein wrote a beautiful book on process consultation... that was important but unfortunately, it got split in the field so that people ended up just on human dynamics and not on the context and content of the work* (P6). Several interviewees stressed the importance of working on the human dynamics in an organization while others stressed the importance of working on processes and tasks. *One of the things I stand for as an...*
organization development person is to stop harm wherever I see it (P4). What is our first obligation? Just to listen and to really understand it, and let them know that you’ve heard them—active listening: 1) Verifying that you understand what they are saying 2) Show some empathy and 3) Ask what they want done with it (P1). I am much more in the goals, roles and process domain (P5). What I want our conversation to be about is the purpose and performance of the organization and its parts and its people (P6).

The challenge is in having the capacity to do systems and task analysis and interpersonal and group development work simultaneously. Overall, this illuminates the importance for OD consultants to approach the handling and processing of data with an informed and well thought-out plan. We must keep our focus on what we are there to do, and this will guide our decisions on how we respond to the data that we gather. ‘You have to keep your eye on the prize,’ the prize being organizational performance and really trying to reach that in breadth and depth... (P6).

Confidentiality and the Obligation to Share Data

All respondents addressed confidentiality and the obligation to share data and their comments illuminate the paradox this creates: maintaining confidentiality and the obligation to share relevant information with the client. All of the respondents spoke of the importance of confidentiality. Potential risks to the people that are sharing the information...this is the real reason we don’t share it (P1). I have a boundary in terms of what I feel comfortable outing somebody about (P5). I really take seriously my role as steward of data as people share with me and I will not ever give up my credibility with my interviewees to make my clients feel better (P2).
Not all respondents approach confidentiality in the same way, though. *I actually work with the concept of confidentiality at the boundaries of the institution, rather than confidentiality between the people I interview. I don’t have the same kind of qualms that most people have about making sure the information gets where it needs to in the system. Sometimes I get shocking news, but I don’t get news that I am not sure of what to do with* (P4). This illuminates the challenge of maintaining confidentiality while enhancing communication between individuals and within organizations.

Many times consultants are given important information while at the same time asked not to communicate it. *...he told us all this stuff and says ‘don’t pass this on, don’t pass this on, but you need to know this is what is going on here’...* (P1).

Peter Block (1999) states, “Withholding data on the interpersonal or process dimensions of a problem is to collude with the organization in not dealing with them” (p. 187). While all of the interviewees agree with Block, there are differing methods for communicating the interpersonal information. *Initially when I started, I was very dogmatic and I would insist that they only tell me things they would be willing to share and discuss with their colleagues, the other players. Because I wanted them to consider very, very seriously, how far they could go in building trust and good communications...I tell them I will listen to them if they have something they would like to have off-the-record, but I won’t go far with it and that it puts me in a bind* (P6). This approach helps the client members explore their own boundaries of confidentiality with each other and the consultant avoids carrying messages between client members. However, client members may not be ready or willing to communicate this information to colleagues, and
consequently the consultant may not hear it. This may not be a big problem, though, if the consultant is working with the client for an extended period.

_The way I am always setting up my consulting contract...is that we are not just going to be sitting down one time and working together...I don’t worry too much about setting things aside, because they can come up again later...People don’t open up to each other all at once, they don’t figure out all the themes all at once. It takes time, it takes digging, it takes hard work (P6)._

The consulting project duration is always an important consideration. If the consultant and the client can identify and commit to the appropriate amount of time necessary to achieve the desired results, it is likely that all important and relevant issues will surface in the course of the consultation. Many times, though, the client will resist committing the necessary time and resources to the project. _Sometimes we have to ‘back in’ to these projects...the client will hire us for one thing and once we have gained their trust, they will ask us to do more (P1)._ 

The obligation to share data is equally important as maintaining confidentiality. _...in part we are private investigators and all of these little pieces inform the bigger picture...sometimes what we hear isn’t required to paint the big picture and some of those pieces are, and those are the ones I am not willing to negotiate on... (P2)._ As consultants, we hold data that no one else has. _...we are holding something there that no one else has and how we handle that from both sides, from both the client and interviewee side, is really critical and that doesn’t mean I follow any rules... (P2)._ 

Part of our obligation is to tell the truth to our clients even when it puts pressure on us personally.

_...one of things they are paying us to do is to tell them the truth...and at some point it comes down to that I am going to be telling the truth about you and the people you care about, too, and it’s not always going to be pleasant or fit your idea of what you thought was supposed to come out of this (P2)._
Another aspect of our obligation is to be explicit and clear about what we stand for. *It is a combination of two things: the system is at the edge of the company, rather than around each interview, and no harm, meaning you never take anything that you think is human foible or unnecessary negativity and carry it forward* (P4).

**Finding Truth in Outliers**

All respondents agreed that all data is important data. *Information is living and it’s alive and once that person throws out that information, it changes things, it can’t not change things* (P1). When asked how often they receive outlier data, they unanimously agreed that it happens all the time. *I receive that kind of information in almost every gig I do* (P4). *...it shows up for me all the time* (P2). *It seems that there is always some data that doesn’t end up on the wall* (P5). (This last comment refers to the flip charts that consultants typically post on the wall in the client work sessions).

Following are some examples of the types of sensitive, outlier data that my interviewees have received. In each case, the interviewee was working with a client either an external or an internal consultant, and the example of outlier data received was either related to or not related to their project.

**Abbreviation Key:**
- Consultant Role: E = External I = Internal
- Current Project: R = Related NR = Not related

*The company had been experiencing a lot of theft, they were working with the police department...one of the girls in the office told me that she knew who was doing it and asked me not to tell; she said, “You can’t tell, promise you won’t tell”* (P1-E-NR).

*I was doing a strategic plan for an organization that has traditionally had some serious trust issues between management and staff...and when I was doing the interviews...I would say that 10 of the 12 people as a joke asked “Where is the tape recorder?” Some bent under the desk to look, and so it was funny – but not.*
Because it was so pervasive....you know, this is an important piece of data that doesn’t fit anywhere within strategic planning, right, so then what do you do with it? (P2-E-NR)

The disconcerting data that I kept getting was about the past social relationships everybody had with everyone else in that agency, such as one of the directors in the agency was married to the former husband of a woman who was clerical staff. Also, the affairs and relationships that the former ED had with the people inside the organization and that employees were getting surgical operations on their bodies to lose weight (P3-I-NR).

There is one assessment that stood out in my mind where I got some of illegal, unethical information about a vice president that turned out to be related to a coaching analysis consultation I had been brought in for (P4-E-R).

...he started telling me... “He knows you’re not going to fry him like this other consultant, and he wants to skate, he wants to get by easy with the board” (P5-E-NR).

“...Lorenz saw more than randomness embedded in his weather model. He saw a fine geometrical structure, order masquerading as randomness” (Gleick, 1987, p. 22). Outlier data can appear random when received without context or before a consultant can add context from other information, and then later on it can become the piece of the puzzle that makes other things fit. This is one reason to pay special attention to outliers. I always have this type of data and it always fits, you just have to give it time. I never ignore data, particularly when it is unusual (P4). ...those are the ones I am not willing to negotiate on, which might have been a little field mouse in the original question (P2). ...and this information is more indicative of what they really need to happen...we hear enough remarks to give us a clue of what is really needed (P1). It started to paint a picture for me...It also helped to explain some of the subtle, non-verbal things that were occurring at meetings...I can’t use it at the moment, but later on it may become very important to understanding and working with my client system (P3).
Peter Senge (1990) put it this way, “The only problem is that high-leverage changes are usually highly nonobvious to most participants in the system. They are not ‘close in time and space’ to obvious problem symptoms” (p. 64).

So if high-leverage change opportunities are nonobvious, it makes sense to pay attention to data that we may think of as not related to our consulting project. At the core of understanding complex human systems, is this idea of thinking in new and different ways. It is truly exploring new territory without attempting to categorize or label everything. **Pulling that stuff out of the dark is important and it doesn’t come out in mainstream conversations with the organization** (P2).

Not all anomaly data is negative. Many times outliers include positive traits and strengths of an organization. **The themeing rules keep us from identifying some strengths of the organization that may not get communicated either, around positive attributes, so I might break the rules when it comes to these attributes** (P2).

Another aspect of this is paying close attention to our own emotional responses. **Very important information...so we have to pay attention to it. We may not express it, but we had better pay lots of attention to it** (P6). A concern arises that has to do with the consultant’s own ability to cope with the anxiety that can come from pursuing anomaly data. **When you are not willing to go along with things people are not happy with you, there is a certain level of anxiety you feel...Eventually, much to my surprise most of the time, I find that the anxiety I am carrying, or the concerns I am carrying, is really a reflection of the unconscious of that organization** (P4). Anxiety can arise from our own perceptions of the roles and relationships. **The relationship I had with the organization at the time did not allow me to do anything about it, or I felt that I could not do anything**
about it... (P1). ...you can literally just get rid of your anxiety by aligning with the forces that are there. If you can do that, then you are in trouble. On the other hand, you can save yourself a lot of anxiety (P4).

In order to cope successfully, most respondents have developed the capacity to clarify and reframe their role. *I am not against aligning with your client; I am not a paranoid consultant, only in the fact that I am ever alert* (P4). *I am becoming more comfortable responding in the moment now, moving towards the heat, finding that there is not that much to lose by doing that* (P5). ...the marginalized people and those who would tend towards the anomaly data, are often the last creative thinkers in the place or the last ones who have their own opinion still because they haven’t given in to that party line...so if everyone is saying X and one person says Y, I want to dig around...this one person--what is different about that experience? (P2). *We’re not therapists, and clients don’t want us to be therapists...but sometimes that’s what is really gumming up the works, really quite unconscious material...what I am also always working on...is building consciousness, both individual and collective* (P6).

The role and function of the OD consultant can be quite challenging. *We need to swing back in forth between “colluding” and “being paranoid,” We are colluding when we are building the relationship in the beginning. Then later we can become paranoid when we start to feel the anxiety. It is the capacity to live with that level of anxiety, the fortitude to live with it* (P4). *There are infinite possibilities for short-circuiting our projects. Not just on my part, on the whole damn system... (P6). Moving towards it rather than avoiding it* (P5). *I had succumbed to the dark side of the organization, and I became part of the problem* (P3). ...*I really felt pressed and pushed and in the hot seat*
around that (P2). How we respond in these moments can have the same Butterfly Effect on the consultant as the data we are pursuing can have within the organization. *It becomes this rouge thing that goes through you...it cascades through us and it will affect how we see the subsequent data* (P1).

In the course of conducting and analyzing the data from these interviews, I have gathered some outlier data as well. There are two sources of outlier, anomaly data that have captured my attention. I am including them in this study as a way to exemplify the nature of outlier data and where exploring it can lead:

*I am not against aligning with your client; I am not a paranoid consultant, only in the fact that I am ever alert. I once asked Peter Block...how could anyone who wrote Stewardship, put out such a paranoid book as Flawless Consulting? He said to me that it [Flawless Consulting] was just a satire* (P4).

*There has been a split in our field because Edgar Schein wrote a beautiful book on process consultation...it used to be called participant-observer. You could be in both frames...that was important but unfortunately it got split in the field so that people ended up just on human dynamics and not on the context and content of the work. I am always about the context and purpose of the organization, but then it’s to get the players to be straight with one another* (P6).

Both of these comments include information that does relate to my study in that they mention integral texts in the field of OD. However, there are several indirect connections such as Peter Block’s meaning when he said *Flawless Consulting* “was just a satire” and how Edgar Schein’s book, *Process Consultation*, resulted in the splitting of the field of OD.

Investigating this outlier data could lead me to a new understanding of the field of OD and my place in it, which is one of the reasons I am doing this research, but this is not what I expected to find, which makes it even more interesting.

Because of conducting this research, I have constructed a cycle (see Figure 1) that includes specific statements from these interviews.

*John Milburn, May 2008*
I. Systems View

…“You have to keep your eye on prize,’ the prize being organizational performance and really trying to reach that in breadth and depth…” (P6)

II. The Data is My Client…Explore Alternatives

“It is almost like that data is my client… we are holding something there that no one else has…and that doesn’t mean I follow any rules…” (P2)

III. Process for Rogue Data

“It is at the heart of being a consultant, the way you deal with shocking or rogue data” (P1)

IV. Growth in Consciousness of Individuals and Organizations

 “…I am working on building consciousness, both individual and collective” (P6)

A. Include Informal Information

“We cannot ignore the informal side of the organization, or we become a part of that shadow structure.” (P3)

B. Move towards Anxiety

“Moving towards it rather than avoiding it.” (P5)

C. Acknowledge Unfolding Awareness

“I find that the anxiety I am carrying…is really a reflection of the unconscious of that organization.” (P4)
Implications

“Some of the best berries are tucked in behind a mass of leaves and vine stems”

Saul Eisen (1997).

The implications of this research begin with the idea that we must re-evaluate the way we view the world. To be beneficial it requires us to open our mind to new ways of experiencing what people are telling us.

While this study is limited in scope and not designed to be comprehensive, it does illuminate several alternatives for reframing the way we approach consulting and extract meaning from information gathered during the consultation.

Implications for the Consultant

Some of the implications of this research for OD consultants are clear while others are less clear, or murky. One implication is that consultants must be clear about the reason they are engaging in the consultation in the first place, and this needs to be made explicit with the client. Consultants need to be clear about this because it influences the way the data is viewed and what can be done with the information. Another implication is that outliers often give glimpses of what might be the bigger, broader issues that are affecting organizations. The chaotic essence of the real problem presents particular challenges in identifying these issues, so these outliers could be of great importance and value. It gave me an opportunity to open the door and have an honest discussion with my client...It became useable information (P5).

Another implication is that practitioners must plan for the receiving and processing of anomalies, and even go so far as to be explicit with the client about this
decision. This is important because anomalies may be difficult to process effectively, and may require explicit conversations between members of organizations. …but it has limited utility until it can be dealt with more openly. I can learn like crazy from it about the situation, but will we improve matters? Probably not, until it can be dealt with more openly (P6).

Consultants must build the internal strength needed to cope with the anxiety that may appear as a result of holding collective information about the “shadow side” of the organization. Additionally, the consultant may experience emotional responses to confidential, sensitive, and inflammatory information and must be prepared to respond in a manner that generates positive, productive actions that result in the solving of real problems in organizations. Because what I try to do is take the emotional content and make it workable to join it together with our more cognitive capacities (P6). … shocked the hell out of me and I have not repeated that to anybody, but I would love him to tell everyone (P5).

There are also risks for the consultant in being explicit and transparent when dealing with this type of information. The HR person called me and said, “We didn’t expect that you would tell them, and we won’t be able to invite you back.” I was surprised that they thought they needed to tell me that I wasn’t going to be asked back, I already knew that! I wouldn’t work for them again anyway (P4). This told me that she was colluding with this same issue…that is probably only one of two clients I can’t get a reference on…what I really feel good about is that I didn’t roll over…I don’t want that kind of business…it’s not a big deal and I don’t need the reference…one of things they are paying us to do is to tell them the truth… (P2).
Our clients can expect to benefit greatly from the effective handling of information during the course of a consultation. Those benefits include solving real problems at systemic levels and increasing organizational performance. Outlier data can lead consultants to perspectives that may be scattered and unorganized, but provide clues to solutions for challenges plaguing organizations we might otherwise miss or ignore.

Implications for the Field

The implications of nonlinearity and human systems, in many ways, are beyond our reach as human beings. The true nature of complexity is such a vast terrain that it may take us several decades just to map small sections. Eventually, we may understand enough pieces to put together a framework of predictability, but for now at the edge of our human understanding is only a glimpse of possibilities emanating from understanding our world through the lens of complexity.

Conventional assumptions about balance, predictability, and control are being re-examined and re-evaluated, and in some cases replaced. However, letting go of entrenched beliefs and methods can be painstakingly slow. Human systems are more complex than non-human systems given greater capacity for self-change through self-reflection, creativity, choice, and technology, and this further complicates our situation. As Peter Senge (1990) points out, “There is a fundamental mismatch between the nature of reality in complex systems and our predominant ways of thinking about that reality” (p. 63).

The field of OD is at a crossroad (Bradford, Burke, 2005) and has the opportunity to reinvent itself in ways that are more relevant to our clients. This ideal time to consider
new viewpoints and alternative perspectives may enhance our ability to provide productive insights into organizational performance.

**Conclusion**


“Lorenz’s discovery was an accident, one more in a line stretching back to Archimedes and his bathtub” (Gleick, 1987, p. 21).

This paper has a *nonlinear* connection to Edward Lorenz in that I have explored links between the Butterfly Effect and outlier/anomaly data, but I am not a mathematician and my field is not meteorology. Chaos theory gives us an exceptional opportunity to explore hidden possibilities, and that is what this paper has attempted to do.

Outlier data is usually an indicator of something deeper within individuals and organizations and our ability to understand it and handle it effectively is critical to successful interventions. However, our own and our clients personal limitations can be one of the greatest challenges in accomplishing this. *What we are ultimately trying to do is to get to the learning edge of the organization, which would make some people uncomfortable*... (P2). Exploring rogue data is one way to improve the quality of the service we provide to individuals and organizations.
References


Appendices

A: Research Participants

B: Interview Questions

C: Release Form
Appendix A: Research Participants

P1 – 20 years in the field, Internal/External, Master’s Degree in Education

P2 – 15 years in the field, External, Doctoral Degree in Organizational Psychology

P3 – 15 years in the field, Internal/External, Certificate in Organization Development

P4 – 25 years in the field, Internal/External, Master’s Degree in Health Services Admin.

P5 – 23 years in the field, Internal/External, Master’s Degree in Organization Development

P6 – 38 years in the field, Internal/External, Master’s Degree in Industrial Relations
Appendix B: Interview Questions

The list of potential questions is:

1. What is your background in OD?
   a. Name, Number of years in OD, Types of organizations worked with

2. Have you ever been working with a client and received unusual information from just one person?
   a. How did you process that data?
   b. What did you do that worked?
   c. What did not work?

3. Have you ever been told information that is ‘off the record’?
   a. How did you process that data?
   b. What happened?

4. Have you ever been told sensitive information that you were not sure whether to investigate or not?
   a. How did you process that data?
   b. What happened?

5. In conducting action-research how do you process interview data that does not fit into an identifiable theme?
   a. How do you process outlying data?
   b. Do you have any exceptions to “your rule”?
   c. When only one person says something, how do you process that?

6. When consulting, have you ever surfaced data that you did not know how to process?
   a. What did you do?
   b. How did it work out?

7. When reflecting on any of these experiences:
   a. Is there anything you would do differently now?
      i. If yes, what would it be?
      ii. If no, why not?

8. Are there any questions I did not ask you that I should have?
Appendix C: Release Form

Dear Research Participant,

Your participation in this project is greatly appreciated. The purpose of this study is to explore how OD consultants handle and process anomaly and outlying data, including confidential and off-the-record comments received during a client consultation project. I am very interested in this important topic and hope you will find our conversation useful, thought provoking and enjoyable.

With your permission, I will audiotape and transcribe our interview. I may also take notes. I assure you that I will maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of you and your client organizations. No names or other identifiable information will be revealed in this study.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may ask any questions regarding the research and they will be answered fully. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you agree to participate, please complete the following:

I, (print your name legibly) ________________________________________________________________________________, have heard and read the purpose of this study. Any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand my right to withdraw my consent to participate at any time.

I hereby freely give my consent to participate in these aspects of the research project:
☐ Yes ☐ No: Recorded interview

NAME (Signature): _______________________________ DATE: _______________

Please feel free to contact me if you have any further ideas or concerns about the project.

If you would like me to send you a copy of my final paper, please indicate your request in the box below and provide an address or email for me to do so.

☐ Yes ☐ No: I wish to receive a copy of the final paper
Please send to the following address:

________________________________________________________________________

Thank you again for your participation,

John Milburn
Sonoma State University, Organization Development MA Candidate
Email: john.milburn@yahoo.com
Fax: 707-586-7843   Phone: 661-808-4592

John Milburn, May 2008