

# **A CONSIDERATION OF ISSUES IN THE APPLICATION OF THEORETICAL TOOLS AND MODELS IN EXPERIENTIAL HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES: A VIEW FROM THE FIELD.**

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## **Résumé:**

The paper undertakes an investigation into the models and tools commonly engaged in experiential human resource development and in particular outdoor management development (OMD). In spite of extensive theoretical developments in recent years in wider human resources domains, the study identifies that practitioners working in experiential settings tend to engage a predominantly positivistic, well-rehearsed and well-used, and indeed ageing, collection of models [Maslow, 1954; Kolb, 1976; Adair, 1983]. The paper points up a number of recent historical and contemporary reasons why this situation may have developed, analyses the tenets underpinning such models and identifies that they are conditioned by a particular set of linear and modernistic assumptions. In addition, the research concludes that programme facilitators and trainers frequently lack theoretical awareness to be able to apply the models in a rich or complex manner. This has important implications for potential participant learning particularly in relation to being able to move beyond simplistic understandings and representations of their experiences. Given that the situation examined is one rooted largely in United Kingdom, the data is derived primarily from that national context. However, the opportunity is taken to make comparative comments with regard to French national settings and experiences. In tandem, the paper suggests that the status quo is unsatisfactory, even untenable for the long-term sustainability of experiential approaches. By way of an alternative the paper develops a range of critical ideas, which may be valuable in countering the current trend [Linstead, Fulop and Lilley, 2004; Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis, 2005].

**Key words:** OMD tools & methods; positivism, effectiveness

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## 1. Introduction

This paper discusses popular and mainstream tools, models and conceptualisations of outdoor management development; a management development approach within HRM-HRD (human resource management-human resource development). It explores the positivistic and modernistic conceptualisation of OMD linked to a pre-occupation with demonstrable ‘effectiveness’ of the approach. This, in turn, provides the opportunity to illustrate how this atmosphere produces the *modern (-istic)* tools and methods of OMD programmes. Having identified this situation, the paper elaborates an ethnographic methodology. This allows the argument to utilise field data to understand how the literature commentary plays out in operational terms. The paper considers some of the consequences and introduces possibilities for a reappraisal and reconfiguration of the OMD’s tools and models.

## 2. Outdoor Management Development (OMD) - An Overview.

OMD as an activity has developed primarily during the last seventy years in the United Kingdom. The popular image of the tools and models it engages has played an important role in creating the tone of the commentary: managers struggling up hills under heavy sacks, surmounting obstacles, building rafts and undertaking other physical tasks are the prevailing pictures for many people.

“These [OMD programmes] are known by a variety of names, but all hold in common the use of *physical, open-air activities*. Nearly all are *residential* and most *emphasise group work*. There is rarely any obvious resemblance between the task and life back at the workplace. Raft construction, canoeing, climbing, abseiling and orienteering are common. Trainers give instruction on the *goals* of each activity, the *safe use* of any equipment, and generally observe that safety guidelines are being adhered to. *Review sessions* with *facilitators* may take place after each activity, either back in the classroom or partly on site immediately afterwards. *The sessions are crucial* in both drawing out learning experiences and in constructing parallels with work life. Some trainers advocate that 50% of course time be devoted to reviews.

There is a wide variation in the demands that courses place on participants. Most progress from short, relatively simple activities to longer, more demanding ones. Most aim to convey an *atmosphere of challenge* and *apparent risk* so that participants treat the experience seriously, and retain a *vivid memory*. At one extreme, a course may be largely classroom-based with only one or two short outdoor exercises at low level and on dry land. At the other, lies the survival-type programme where participants spend several days and nights in the open, camping, trekking and undertaking a variety of challenges en route.”(*Industrial Relations Review and Report-Employee Development Bulletin*, 1992a:16)[Emphasis added]

Much of the debate around OMD has considered how much, or how little, “evidence” exists to confirm that the *effectiveness* of the approach in achieving desired *training and development*

*outcomes* is superior, or at least equivalent, to purported alternatives [Clifford and Clifford, 1967; Hopkins, 1982, 1985; Hogg, 1988; Lucas, 1992, Bank, 1994; Krouwel and Goodwill, 1994; Beard, 2004; Burke and Collins, 2005]. Within this concern, some commentators identify, or claim, benefits for particular aspects of development. For example, Bronson, Gibson, Kichar and Priest [1992] have cited a range of commentators who claim and examine OMD's impact on teamwork including Krouwel [1980], Long [1984], Van Zwieten [1984], Wagel [1986], Galagan [1987], Gall [1987] and Malcomson [1988], Burletson and Grint [1996], Beard [2004]. In addition, Jones and Oswick [1993:10] cite more than 200 benefits that are claimed by various writers to be associated with OMD.

However, Bronson *et al.* [1992] equally identify something of a credibility crisis relating to the approach. Whilst, there are many advocates in the form of convinced OMD practitioners and writers, elsewhere, others indicate that such "benefits" have not been "proven". In this light, appeals for additional research (almost always positivistic) started at a relatively early date, *inter alia*: Hogg [1988], Crawford [1988] and Bank [1994]. Herein we can consider positivism as a methodological paradigm employed in the social sciences yet inspired and derived from its application in the natural sciences. Its epistemological and ontological stances are concerned with notions of objectivity, linearity (step-by step method process) and a belief in the possibility of determining through deductive reasoning and approach an 'answer' which will be 'correct' or 'incorrect'. This can, for example, be contrasted with interpretivism whose inductive method makes sense of the research process through a subjective and descriptive approach to the research setting [Bryman and Bell, 2003, pp.13-15; Quinton and Smallbone, pp.17-18]. Positivism is closely aligned with the wider ethos of modernism. Modernism seeks to apply scientific and empirical thought to all aspects of human life (*inter alia* architecture, art, urban planning, poetry, design) in the pursuit of a notional 'progress' [Lyotard, 1984; Clegg, Kornberger, and Pitsis, 2005].

Many writers on OMD are critical of approaches they see as 'anecdotal' and are reluctant to acknowledge value in non-positivistic methodological approaches. Ironically, this occurs even where such anecdotal research findings are already self-evidently replete with positivism. For example, Cole [1993:12] has expressed concern over the "anecdotal" nature and the "paucity of research data [used] in attempts to evaluate the outdoors". Moreover, Irvine and Wilson [1994:25] note: "the evidence in support of managerial and management learning through OMD regrettably is little more than anecdotal accounts." There is, thus, the clear implication that positivistic research is frequently considered the only really valuable work carried out in relation to OMD.

The push to achieve validation of the usefulness and effectiveness of OMD approaches through positivism stances has taken place hand-in-hand with an attempt to talk about OMD as an 'industry'. It can be suggested that this is more concerned with an attempt to legitimate and gain authority for OMD as a training tool. Moreover, in young or emerging "industries" (sic:OMD) Aldrich and Fiol (1994:645) underline a "relative lack of cognitive and socio-political legitimacy". OMD is a case in point. These concerns have persuaded OMD to seek approbation (i.e. "socio-political legitimacy") from the broader management development community through adherence to a perceived "business-like" normative modernistic and positivistic paradigm. Whatever idealism or altruism can be identified in personal development it is very hard to "get away from the need for a return" [i.e. see a positive impact on results and

profit on the money invested in the training] [Campbell, 1990; Bratton and Gold, 2007, p.529] and this is yet a further reminder that places OMD increasingly in a market-related or industry arena. Even the few organizations originally founded as not-for-profit trusts (Brathay, Outward Bound, Leadership Trust) need to market and build turnover. This profit motive is, *prima facie*, an unavoidable feature of the modernistic-capitalistic paradigm [Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis, 2005]. Consequently, the implication also seems to be that any such “benefit” needs to be measurable and positivistically validated. In particular, this positivistic quest manifests itself as a search for optimised performance in the form of maximised profit, added-value or competitive advantage through the medium of a preoccupation with efficiency, effectiveness, outcomes and results. This, then, is seen by many as representing a corporate “imperative” for the contemporary organization. In an attempt to align itself with industry’s needs OMD has brought the conceptualisation of the outdoors for the purposes of development very much under the aegis of the HRM-HRD domain (often to the exclusion of the experience of using the outdoors in other spheres, for example Outdoor Pursuits, Outdoor Education). OMD is generally seen as part of a company’s HRD overall provision. Therein, OMD forms part of the training and development suite of approaches. For HRD/HRM functions key contemporary issues with OMD revolve around resources. Due to time pressures, managers can no longer be expected to attend week or two-week long programmes. Commensurately, OMD extended programmes can be costly.

HRM-HRD practice and literature appears to have followed a seemingly ever-cyclical exploration of new models and ideas susceptible to fad and fashion [Swan, Newell and Robertson, 2001; Legge, 2005]. Within that literature it is possible to underline a strongly repetitive positivist trend in the key arguments of large tracts of the epistemology [Storey, 1989a, b]. It has been argued that this predilection marries well with a general historical disposition in British thinking that tends to welcome pragmatic, experiential and empirical approaches akin to OMD [Stokes and McCulloch, 2007].

In other national contexts, overarching Anglo-Saxon/American influences have had varying degrees of impact on different national cultures [Engwall and Zamagni, 1998]. France provides an illustration of a context that has experienced Anglo-Saxon/American influence to a lesser extent, In contrast French training and development has tended to engage an alternative national range of management commentators in attempts to make sense of organizations and management [Crozier, 1964; Boltanski, 1982; Bouffartique and Gadea, 2000; Bouffartique, 2001]. In relation to OMD in the United Kingdom it is possible to talk about a relatively fledgling and late adolescent industry, however, in France, it would be totally inappropriate to talk about any OMD ‘industry’ at all. OMD is completely subsumed within wider training and development activity. Although a comprehensive survey on the usage rates of OMD by companies is not available in the United Kingdom or France, it is clear that from initial empirical work that adoption rates in France are negligible compared to Britain. Complementary research to the present paper indicates that that this is driven by the presence and influence of differing philosophical and intellectual traditions and perspectives.

### **3. OMD Courses: Tools and Methods.**

The discussion now considers the focal context of the discussion which embraces course types and processes and the tools and methods they engage. Some commentators have argued that there are essentially only three kinds of programme. These are: “endurance training”,

“outdoor training” and “development training” [Krouwel and Goodwill, 1994, pp.35-51]. For Krouwel and Goodwill, “endurance training” – “is about pushing people to the *limit of their physical, psychological and emotional stamina*.” In the case of their “outdoor education” model they suggest that the activities are more complex than “mere survival” (*ibid.*:40), trainers are less confrontational and more “nurturing”, “there is an attempt to review the activities and there is a body of non-military theoretical work underpinning the approach”. Finally, “Development Training” consists of: “The application of outdoor solutions to personal and group development needs, ensuring that the major focus of the programmes is on meeting particular and stated aims”[*ibid.*:44]. These forms of course typology are echoed in other writings, for example, Beeby and Rathborn [1983:174] also identify an alternative typology for OMD programmes. They categorise programmes as *Outward Bound*, *Adventure Education* and *Development Training*. The latter (*Development Training* sic:OMD) they declare as exhibiting three key characteristics: “(i) use of the outdoors; (ii) incorporation of process reviews; (iii) application of experiential learning methods”.

Many OMD suppliers offer both standard courses and programmes tailored to a given company’s development needs. Additional constructs for programmes have involved the juxtapositions suggested by Cacioppe and Adamson [1988, p.82], namely: *individual* versus *group*, *physical* versus *emotional* and *outdoor* versus *indoor*. Alternatively Calder [1991, p.21] citing Wagner, Baldwin and Roland [1991, p.53] suggests a span of courses covering *wilderness*, *outdoor centered* and *high/low rope course* programmes. Within, these programme “types” it is possible to witness a range of activities. Krouwel and Goodwill [1994, p.54], following the route of a populist set of writings on OMD, provide what they consider to be an illustrative (and neutral) range of available “outdoor media”. The categories they employ, and examples within each, are:

Rock-Face Activities

Climbing, Abseiling, Mountain “Rescue” Tasks

Underground Activities

Caving, Mine Exploration

Water-Based Activities

Raft Building, Open Canoeing

Navigational Tasks

Expeditions - Wild Country, Expeditions - Low Level, Orienteering

Grounds Activities

Interactive but ‘exposing’ (e.g. ‘high ropes’ tasks)

Medium-Complex Tasks - ‘Across the Gap’ type tasks.

[Krouwel and Goodwill, 1994, p.54].

The list is basic in that it provides an impression of what might be considered the core, typical, physical elements of an outdoor experiential approach. Within individual programmes any range of scenarios can be set to problem-solving situations. For example

participants might have to recover a canister of “lethal gas” on the slopes of the Brecon Beacons (Arkin, 1991:49). Alternatively, Blashford-Snell elaborates setting participants the task of capturing pythons in darkened rooms! (Blashford-Snell, 1991). In this vein, Peckham (1993a) categorises three types of programme experience. He cites these as “Mountain Top Experience”, “Now Get Out of That” and “Games and Simulation”. He suggests that the best programmes are those that combine “the best” elements from each. Interestingly, this might be argued as constituting a positivistic approach in that it seeks a *one best way* with which to optimise performance. Alternatively, many programmes describe more generally the use of “multi-layered problems” to develop participants [Wagner and Campbell, 1994:4].

So far, the argument has illustrated, in a descriptive manner, a range of possible programme typologies and activities. Within the commentary on OMD there has also been a range of attempts to distil the “essential characteristics” and *process* of the approach irrespective of programme “style”. It might be proposed that all the above definitions and categorisations offer bland or generic descriptions of what might present a meaningful beginning to a richer conceptualisation of OMD.

The next stage of the discussion will seek to illustrate the ways in which the “process” (the dynamics and flow of OMD experience) has been discussed and constructed in literature and practice. Importantly, virtually all models and discussions of process in OMD literature are associated with a modernistic construct. Extensively commented models subscribe themselves into the representational forms of *cyclical*, *linear* and *dualistic*. This positivistically-related categorisation is common in OMD writing but is not explicitly acknowledged in the literature.

The first category of models that seek to fulfil that particular remit is a range of *cyclical* models. Kolb’s [1976] *Experiential Learning Model* is clearly the most heavily cited model in the OMD literature [*inter alia*: Alder, 1990; Krouwel and Goodwill, 1994; Bank 1994; Hopkins, 1985; Lowe, 1991; Peckham, 1993a, b; Tuson, 1994; Campbell, 1990; Ibbetson and Newell, 1996; Beard, 2005, p.344].

There are a number of models employed that are similar to Kolb experiential learning cycle. Perhaps one of the most frequently witnessed is the *Do-Review-Apply* framework [Arkin, 1991, 1995]. Similarly, Alder, (1990, p.18) provides a cycle proposing that managers go through a process of Adhering - Adapting - Relating - Experiencing - Experimenting - Connecting - Integrating.

OMD “process” is alternatively presented as *linear* experience. The *Comfort-Stretch-Panic* [Arkin, 1995] model is one that seeks to chart individual self-control during experiences. A person is considered as normally residing in *Comfort* but can be *Stretched* in certain situations and circumstances. A key point of the model is not to push or pull the person into *Panic* as this would be perceived as being unproductive. The model can be seen as driving people towards some form of *optimum* position accepting that all three stages in the model will be completely relative and dependent on the individual. Moreover, a common pattern in the linear structures is a “before, during and after experience” temporal aspect. As already illustrated above, the adaptation of “mainstream” management commentary is common. One such instance is the “Skill pre-assessment, Skill learning, Skill analysis, Skill Practice and

Skill Application” originally from Whetton and Cameron [1991]. This is cited in Buller, Cragun and McEvoy [1991, p.58] and adapted to: “Needs analysis, Pre-Outdoor, Outdoor, Post-Outdoor and Evaluation”. Again, this embodies certain assumptions concerning the perception of time and the flow of experience in relation to it. Calder [1991, p.24] provides further examples. Linearity is strongly associated with a modernistic perspective [Burrell, 1997, p.8].

Conversely, *Dualistic models* (i.e. 2x2 box/grid form) are also popular in the OMD literature. Examples constitute, for example, Burnett and James [1994] “Loosely/ Tightly Defined Activities” versus “Low/ High Intensity”. In this model, the authors suggest that “Loose” Activities involve less technical activities with less risk. Alternatively, “Tight” activities involve technical input and some risk (for example, rock-climbing requiring instructors and “safety experts”). Activities are stated as “less intense” and tend to deal with “general issues” whereas “high intensity” activities are often confrontational. Snell and James [1994, p.324] advocate a Hard/Soft Teaching versus Tangible/Intangible Subject. Here, examples of “Hard” teaching on a “Tangible Subject” are given as dealing with and mastering “specific techniques.” This is as opposed to, for example “Soft Teaching” on an “Intangible Subject” which is “Helping People to Learn to Think for Themselves... Self Awareness, Discovery Learning.” Again, dualisms are widely employed to represent theorisations cast in a modernist perspective.

The argument up to this point has sought to demonstrate various ways in which the broad OMD literature conceptualises the *experiences* of the approach. Perhaps a key point to make regarding the models used is that they are reductionist and exhibit positivist, deductive characteristics. While they are tools that enable one or two factors to be analysed, *ceteris paribus*, they simultaneously exclude a richer shifting picture that may be available. It should also be recognised that while many of the models appear to consider the development of individual or individuals from an altruistic view the submerged ethos (and not far below the surface) is one of corporate effectiveness. Most of the models, therefore, reside more comfortably within the modernist, positivistic and deterministic perspective. Statements that suggest that OMD should be based on “*sound learning theory*” [Buller, Cragun and McEvoy, 1991:58] seem only to serve to confirm this conclusion.

A few notable exceptions have come forward to challenge this hegemony [Burlington and Grint, 1996; Bell and Taylor, 2004]. Other, existing models seem to underline that certain aspects (which they provide as “intangibles”) of the OMD experience may be difficult to present as neatly packaged conceptualisations [Snell and James, 1994]. An idea that emerges as a consequence of such an examination is that other forms of representing and presenting OMD and its processes may be possible. Of particular interest is the function of narrative and *stories to set the scene, portray events and analyse and relate understanding* [Long, 1987, Teire, 1994]. This is a very interesting strand of thought through which to pursue a re-evaluation of OMD tools and methods.

A comparable discussion of models reveals a less extensive range of models in operation in French OMD settings. Certainly, not from the Anglo-Saxon/North American stable of tools or models is in evidence. French OMD is much more likely to use unaltered outdoor pursuits

activities, for example, canoeing, hiking, climbing or sailing. In this way, it is reminiscent of British OMD in the 1960s and 1970s where programme content was still very close to its outdoor activities and outdoor adventure origins [Clifford and Clifford, 1967; Beeby and Rathborn, 1983].

#### **4. Methodological Approach**

Data collection took place in France and the United Kingdom in a series of episodes (1993 to 1996 and 2002 to 2005 and 2006 with further field observations planned for 2007/2008.). In France, the twenty-seven field visits centred on academic networks (universities, *grande écoles*), training providers, business consultants and practitioners (aerospace, construction, finance and automotive). In the United Kingdom 13 training providers were visited and field observations were undertaken. A total of 4 providers have been visited in France.

##### **United Kingdom Interview / (Participant) Observation Sample**

<b>UK-Based OMD Providers</b>	<b>13</b>	
<i>UK Client Base</i>		11
<i>With French Clients</i>		2

##### **French Interview/Observation Sample**

<b>French-Based OMD Providers</b>	<b>4</b>	
<b>French Business Consultancy Firms</b>	<b>3</b>	
<b>French Corporations Composed of:</b>	<b>20</b>	
<i>Aerospace sector</i>		11
<i>Construction sector</i>		3
<i>Finance</i>		4
<i>Automotive</i>		2

In conjunction with a review of the literature the research process adopted an ethnographic approach [Waddington, 1994; Silvermann, 2001, pp.37-39; Bryman and Bell 2003, pp.315-339]. This approach used was rooted in an interpretive evaluation of the data. With regard to methods employed these were semi-structured interviews and complete participant observation with the data being analysed using an inductive sense-making approach [Weick, 1995]. This was governed by the conditions for access determined by the training provider. Ethical care for the course participants and respondents was a delicately managed and ensured often in the face of difficult physical and weather conditions and circumstances. The approach to analysis was emergent and thematic. Data analysis is still in progress at this stage of the research and this paper provides the initiation of a discussion.

## 5. Observations from the Field and Discussion.

Data analysis is ongoing and the argument below constitutes tentative findings. The literature analysis pointed up a positivistic conceptualisation of OMD's models and tools. In one sense this conceptual proximity between theoretical writings and practice is not surprising because many commentators tend also to be practitioners. However, in spite of this particular conceptual nexus, the research identified that a limited number of tools and models continue to be used in the field. Typically, the types of physical tools engaged included, for example, the pumper pole. This involves roping participants up for safety and inviting them to climb a large pole (10 metres in height) and jump for a trapeze. Equally commonly observed were problem-solving activities employing barrels, ropes and planks to surmount obstacles. This was often allied with a comparable use of these materials in assault type courses. A further common device used in OMD programmes in the field was the 'spider's web'. This is constituted of a series of elastic ropes strung between two poles or trees. The challenge is for a team of people to manhandle each other horizontally through the gaps in the web without touching it. Each team member has to be passed from sub-group of the team to another sub-group of the team. In general, it would be possible to categorise the programmes using these models as 'development programmes' [Krouwel and Goodwill, 1994, pp.35-51]. These types of OMD 'technology' are available to most providers. However, large installations such as the pumper pole require a permanent site and costs and therefore typically it would be used by the larger provider.

Attempts by course facilitators to introduce theory into the field invariably involved the use of a number of repeatedly engaged models. These are nearly always discussed during review sessions taking place in the form of pre-briefing or debriefing sessions. Typically, three or four models were commonly invoked. These included Belbin's "Team Roles" model, Adair's "Team, Task, Individual" Model and Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" Model and the "Comfort-Stretch-Panic" Model. Discussions with staff indicated that they generally take such models at face-value only:

'I find the model (sic: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs) to show participants how they can move from one state to a different state in the programme' [OMD programme facilitator, 2005]

There was little evidence of any deeper questioning or exploration of the epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning the models. Given this tendency there is a clear danger of calcification and growing staleness of programmes. It can be argued that the novelty of programmes survives because participants are new to the OMD approach. Where participants have already attended OMD-type programmes many providers are engaging the same dated tools and methods engaged elsewhere. The approach and experience risks becoming less useful for development and is more likely to cause participants to disengage and even become bored. While it can be argued that the dynamic between course participants will always vary and thereby produce a unique experience there are evidently limitations to such repeat experiences. However, comments from interviews with a range of staff at centres were not encouraging:

'I'm not sure that it [theory] would have great value for us – our clients look for real results, not theory' [OMD, Course Director, 2006].

'We have a lot of experience in what we do. I think we what we do is right for clients' [OMD programme facilitator, 2007]

Clearly, there is a need to recognise this situation and the emergence of a desire to address it. However, the repeated observations do not bode well as similar tools and methods and weak exploration of them both for trainers and the experiences of participants continues. There could, for example, be a useful role here for an industry body to take a lead in this situation however such a body does not, to all intents and purposes, exist.

There is value, therefore firstly, in expanding the repertoire of the practical tools actually engaged in the field. Secondly, there is scope to introduce greater theoretical analysis into the field. One source through which this may develop is through graduates from a small number of United Kingdom university OMD-related programmes.<sup>1</sup> As was discussed above, the OMD literature also provides a number of possibilities and insights to this end but this corpus seems slightly disconnected from the field on which it comments. The hegemonic positivism of the literature also constrains the commentary to turning always towards simple categorisations, boxes and hence simplistic understandings of processes.

When OMD is transported to other national contexts the challenges take on a different complexion. In the case of a French context, observations indicated that French managers and employee participants consider many of the tools and methods engaged in United Kingdom contexts as simply inappropriate or of very limited value for the job of managing [Stokes, 2007]. This is compounded or added to by an almost total absence of a French-originated body of literature on OMD theory and practice. Consequently there has been little space for conceptual development or commentary on the approach. The United Kingdom and French national contexts both point up the repertoire of tools and methods employed as problematic albeit for differing reasons.

One suggestion to develop the current status quo may be possible in the application of more critical management approaches to OMD. Although positivism still maintains a significant influence over OMD conceptualisation, there is some evidence that this is a strand already fermenting over recent years. A characteristic approach of more critical thinking is the increasing use of narrative and story methods and tools on OMD courses [Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004]. The research identified some use of stories within programmes. In the case of one provider, a highly elaborate narrative was created for a programme involving spies, clues, handovers, black-coated and sun-glassed double agents and so on and so forth. The facilitator suggested the beginnings of deeper questioning:

‘We find participants tend to handle task-driven behaviour excellently however we find we need to make them appreciate the theoretical and practical aspects of managing process which they tend to neglect’ [OMD, Course Director, 2006].

Based on this particular programme, the paper now offers a ‘story’ as an illustration and exploration of a possibility for an alternative kind of OMD programme.

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<sup>1</sup> A number of OMD university level programmes exist in the United Kingdom. These include a Foundation Degree in Outdoor Education at the University of Central Lancashire, MA in Development Training at Lancaster University and an MSc in Outdoor Management Development at Sheffield Hallam University.

## **Making a Deal with a Spy.**

This was an unusual experience in that I arrived on a Sunday morning to observe a course that had already been running for two days. I pulled into the car park of the hotel where the programme was based. The mountain scenery surrounding the village was stunning and it was clearly going to be a beautiful day. I entered the hotel through the rear entrance and very quickly found myself in a large open-plan seminar room. In it were a number of people who looked conspicuously like course participants. Nobody was talking. They were all reading the Sunday morning newspapers. The atmosphere seemed strange. Did these people like being with each other or did they communicate only when they had to? A brief enquiry confirmed that this was the group I was planning to meet.

The course director, Damien, arrived. He was a bald, bearded man in his mid to late- thirties. In a relaxed manner Damien called the group to draw up a circle of comfortable low-angled chairs. He made some remarks about the programme and that a message would arrive for them soon and this would begin to suggest a structure for the day's activities. Then he introduced me to the group. He allowed me to explain briefly to the group what I was attempting to do. I explained that I was a researcher and that I was interested in seeing such a programme in action.

“Are you going to join in with us?” asked one team member in a provocative way.

I hesitated and Damien interjected saying that we would see.

“Maybe he's a plant or a spy. We'd best keep an eye on him” said another.

This seemed all very light-hearted but I was questioned further at various points throughout the day by people seeking to confirm my “real” intentions and role.

A waiter brought in a briefcase. All eyes followed it across the room. There were humorous quips and remarks made as the case was placed on a desk in front of the group. Allegedly it had just been delivered by person(s) unknown at the reception. Damien, the facilitator, neither moved nor said a word. One member of the group finally decided to move forward and took the case, opened it and began to read out aloud the instructions. Ironically, given the earlier quips, it seemed that the whole day would lead to the possibility of meeting a spy and making a deal with him or her. A number of people in the room were now convinced that I *was* that “spy”. With humour, I sought to deny this and deflect the attention.

In an atmosphere full of indifference and lacking momentum the group discussed the tasks. According to the instructions they had to complete a range of tasks in order to gather enough money to buy a final clue from a person(s) to be met in a location that they needed to identify during the course of the day. Money could be earned in two ways. These were by performing tasks in the seminar room or also by collecting clues in the surrounding countryside and in the grounds of the hotel. I decided to split my time spending some in the seminar room and then travelling in the van that was at the disposal of the group. After some rapid planning the group had to plan and allocate within time constraints who would, or could, do what. They agreed to meet at a time just before lunch in order to take stock of progress.

A section of the group had elected to do as many brief hotel-based tasks as they could from a sheet containing many possibilities. These included activities ranging from: dressing up as authentically as possible as an ancient Roman; two male group members acting out the fake orgasm scene performed by Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal in a busy restaurant in the film *When Harry met Sally*; polishing Damien's bald head and reading a short message backwards from the reflection; getting the whole team to graze like sheep (ultimately carried out on the rear lawns of the hotel). Damien had to approve and "tick" off each of the group's activities. He rejected the group's first attempt to dress up a group member as a Roman using only items from the seminar room.

"Romans didn't wear converse boots." said Damien disparagingly to the first attempt.

The "Roman" was withdrawn for a major makeover!

"More commitment than that", Damien muttered as he moved to another part of the room.

The activities away from the hotel involved physical aspects. The entire group had to do one of two activities. They either had to travel to a nearby lake and conduct a canoeing exercise under the guidance of an instructor. Alternatively, they had to climb the "pamper pole".

Damien, the director/facilitator was staying noticeably calm and somewhat aloof. He was being very careful with information about the activities and played a form of "cat and mouse" game with information releases. He was very much in control and feigning indifference to the group's indifference. He had quietly briefed me in on some of the background and rationale for the day's activities. Apparently, they had seemed to be running out of momentum and interest and he was determined to force them to dig themselves out of that mind-set.

"They find task very easy, no challenge at all but they virtually ignore the processes", said Damien.

They had, he claimed, very little awareness of the processes of relating to each other. Many group members seemed totally insensitive to how their actions and comments would affect or impact on other team members. Damien's stock remark to questions from group members seemed to be a reciprocally nonchalant:

"It's up to you".

Finally, towards four o'clock in the afternoon the group had collected, as a result of the various activities, most but not quite enough money with which to rendezvous with the "spy". Nevertheless, we all set off in the van to see what sort of deal might be arranged. As we pulled off the road into the old quarry that now served as a National Park car park there she was: black fish-net stockings, black stilettos, a black thigh-length leather coat, sunglasses. She was leaning, with one foot crooked, against a red sports saloon car reading a copy of the *Sud-Deutscher Zeitung*. She would have not looked out of place in a cold-war Berlin bar but we were in a car park in the Lake District surrounded by day-trippers on what was now a rather grey day.

"What do we do now?" said Dominic, one of the group members.

These fateful words seemed to nominate him to approach the spy and negotiate the information. This took place at a distance from the rest of the group.

Having cautiously approached the “Contact” or “Spy” she turned and snapped:

“Get in the car!”

He did so and the wheels of the car skidded on the gravel as the car roared out of the car park and down the road.

“What now?” was the question on everyone’s lips.

“How would James Bond, or Michael Caine handle this one” a voice laughed.

It was not long before the car returned. A deal had been struck. The “Spy” demanded that all the team take off their trousers in the car park in order to make up the “monetary shortfall” and complete the deal. This done, the “Spy” turned to look at me. I had been standing apart from the group with Damien, the Facilitator. I didn’t hear what was actually said but it was obvious that my trousers were part of the deal too. I laughed nervously in a hopeless attempt to diffuse the situation. The group members walked slowly towards me across the car park.

One of the group members said “They [the trousers] come off “voluntarily” or....”.

“Now hang on a moment folks...” I pleaded.

The trousers came off quite readily, the deal was concluded and the final clue was identified as being located in the garden of the hotel.

Back at the hotel, a quick search revealed a detonation device under a bush in a rockery and a set of instructions. The attached cable was unwound and a loud detonation of a charge revealed a sword bearing an inscription that provided the final answer to the challenge. A bottle of sparkling wine was also found at the site. This was not drunk but poured over the facilitator’s head after a short chase. Back inside a toast to the experience was drunk with “real” champagne. Only the end of course dinner and review was to come.

### **Thinking About the Story**

One of the aspects that seems salient in this account is the role of imagination. It seems apparent that that this group (of engineers and technicians) were unconvinced and unprepared to be engaged by many of the “games” and simulations they had experienced up to the point I arrived. Because of the mystery or nature of the day some of them seemed more motivated. Damien’s acted nonchalance seemed to make them concerned. He was playing the upset school teacher with whom the “pupils” had to win back favour. Maybe some members of the group put more into the day because it was the last one of the course. It is hard to say the extent to which the course participants were fired up by the fantasy world that had been created. As an observer, my mind was in full play as we entered the car park. Here was a role-play being played as completely “real” by the staff member dressed up as the spy. This included a gravel-showering wheel spin out of the car park. Humour and jokes alluding to spy films and books were plentiful. It seemed like each reference was weaving the “shared” narrative and the atmosphere in an ever more enriched fashion.

The image of the spy in the car park had surreal qualities. It provided such a disjointed image in the context of the mountain scenery and other visitors that it verged on the postmodern. “Normality” seemed to have been dispensed with. Any construct was admissible and possible.

It was unpredictable and exiting. This creative and fun aspect of the experience seemed to reinvigorate the response and spirits of all the team. It was akin to being in a theme park - a place where the boundary between fact and fiction blurred. The presence of the “Spy” was a recognised image but dislocated into another context. The images of the national park where the course was taking place and the usual office work context of the OMD participants seemed utterly disconnected and disjointed. This experience seemed to offer a completely fresh kind of uncertainty. The team were quite thrown by the twist of novelty being introduced not only in the task but a very different context.

Finally, linked to the penultimate point above, the degree to which narrative transfer was in operation in these experiences was intriguing. It is difficult to imagine that immediate lessons on how to deal with leather-clad spies or climbing telegraph poles would be useful back in the company. Perhaps, the emergence of a novel *lingua franca* would be a potential new and ongoing creation and secondary socialisation. Such consequences seem a long way from the OMD outcome-competency skills lists purported by Hogg (1988:90).

In summary, a further way forward to resolve the current challenges and increase the dissemination of new critical ideas would be for the establishment of an increased number of joint research projects between theoretical commentators and field practitioners. This would work to ensure that the situation that has occurred to present, whereby theoretical developments have little impact on practice in the field, does not continue.

## 6. Conclusion

The conceptualisation of tools and models in OMD borrows heavily from the modernistic convention of generic and homogenous experience couched within a positivistic style effectiveness corporate imperative. As Storey rightly points out, it has long been felt that management development cannot, perhaps, be seen as an end in itself [Storey, 1989a:5]. This means that for many writers, development cannot be exploratory wanderings of self-discovery - it must always be a journey for a purpose – a corporate purpose. Within the modernist paradigm of management development this purpose is represented as modifying individual or group behaviour with a view to creating more *effective* and *efficient* managers.

“Some of these programs will be effective in developing management skills: others will not. As with many management development ‘fads’ - such as sensitivity training or management by objectives - outdoor training may be short-lived due to *poor application of otherwise good concepts and practices.*”(ibid.:58)[Emphasis added]

Concern with proof of effectiveness means that potentially rich data concerning the experience of OMD is configured into a template of preconceived rationale and this is reflected in methodological predilections. Many criticisms of “anecdotal”, “testimony” [sic: narrative] approaches for their lack of “rigour” are, however, themselves prone to using rhetorical or vague language associated with debatable “certainties”, “proofs” and mechanistic methodologies [Lucas, 1992; Irvine and Wilson, 1994; and Wagner and Campbell, 1994]. In such “input-output” “before-and-after the black box” approaches it is possible to witness many of the flaws of quantitative approaches accompanied by few of the benefits.

“Validation seems to be the major problem which may be as much an indication of unclear aims and objectives of methodology as it is the validation process itself” [Beeby and Rathborn, 1983:177].

“[OMD possibly] ... allows the inclusion of activities as bizarre or extreme as ‘knitting in the woods’ in that the activity and/or environment are likely to be novel. But will knitting in the woods increase managerial performance? Common sense suggests that the obvious answer would appear to be no” [Irvine and Wilson, 1994:28].

“Those involved in the outdoor development training industry know that behind the *uniform face* that we inadvertently present are *a wide variety* of products, styles and standards. We also know that we could achieve much more if there was clarity about what it is we are offering and what it is our clients wanted. Perhaps we are clear in some instances but fear our ‘*conservative*’ clients would be inhibited by some of the more ‘*off the wall*’ processes and outcomes...” [Doughty, 1990:7][Emphasis added].

In summary, OMD faces a serious set of issues in relation to the contemporary range of tools and methods it engages. Traditionally, it has not made timely and insightful use of theoretical commentaries on its process and activities. Positivistic structuring of theory and field, with its associated preoccupation on the corporate imperative of effectiveness, has not necessarily served OMD in a useful way. It is time to embrace a more eclectic and more critical approach. This may be particularly important as OMD attempts to be used in different national contexts to the United Kingdom. In the case of France it may provide greater scope to develop OMD approaches more successfully than is currently the case.

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