

Can the Concept "Social Space" Reveal a Deep Structure Essential to the Theory and Practice of Organizational Learning?

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This paper revisits the concept of "social space" in order to consider whether it reflects a "deep structure" whose understanding can inform the theory and practice of organizational learning. By deep structure we mean a related set of constructs that are not directly observable, but can be used to explain surface phenomenon. Deep structures cut across disciplinary boundaries and present the possibility of a conceptual framework that might unify the social sciences. At least two prominent theoretical approaches to organizational learning employ deep structures. Argyris and Schon conceived of organizational learning as changes in the causal "theories of action" underlying organizational behavior. Senge conceived of organizational learning as changes in the structure of the causal loops that govern systemic behavior. As deep structures, both these sets of concepts posit the existence of circular, causal links that connect individual reasoning and behavior with the behavior of large systems. We independently discovered the concept of social space in the work of the psychologist Kurt Lewin, who used it as the cornerstone of his "field theory" of social relations. We found it intuitively satisfying in describing two very different sets of relationships: individuals as agents of organizational learning and the family dynamics of individuals with bi-polar disorder. Nevertheless, while Lewin's work had a powerful impact on contemporary psychology, the concept of social space was almost totally abandoned. A generation later, Pierre Bourdieu developed his own field theory, using the concept of social space as the basis for what he called a "reflexive sociology". While there are differences in their field theories, the use of social space by both Lewin and Bourdieu was influenced by Ernst Cassirer, the philosopher of science. In this paper we wish to revisit the concept of social space in order to explore how it might be used as a tool for conceptualizing organizational learning. In doing so we will address the following kinds of questions: What is the meaning of social space and how does it relate to physical space? How can different conceptions of social space be applied to specific cases of organizational learning? What new things can we see, explain, or do using the concept of social space as analytical framework for organizational learning? In what ways can the concept of social space guide action in promoting organizational learning? How does the concept of social space compare to theories of action and systemic dynamics as deep structures of organizational learning?