Who was Elliott Jaques?

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ABSTRACT

Douglas Kirsner traces his own collaboration with Elliott Jaques to explain the trajectory of Elliott's life and work, in particular his overall goals of understanding individuals and their social and biological contexts. He describes Elliott's approach as ranging across many disciplines and explores why, given its value, his work has been taken up relatively little by others. Kirsner describes who Elliott was and how he approached his stratified systems theory, requisite organization, work.

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I first met Elliott Jaques when we were both speaking at the International Society for Political Psychology conference in Washington DC in 1990. Mutual friends suggested that we would get along very well, and I called him and expressed my deep gratitude for his theories on the nature of social institutions as defenses against persecutory anxiety, which I used as the lynchpin for a manuscript I was completing at the time about American psychoanalytic institutes. Elliott said very politely, “Well, that was my earlier work. I have changed my ideas quite a bit since then. Why don’t we talk after my presentation tomorrow?”

The next day I attended his short lunchtime presentation on political leaders, capability, and time horizons. In the course of 45 minutes, I must have heard more new, relevant, and exciting ideas than I had heard in the last decade or two – and I read widely and have met some impressive people in my trade. Leadership, Elliott said, was not a quality like charisma but was instead the ability to move an organization or country in an intended direction.

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Capability could be measured in terms of how far in advance someone could think, and there were four, and only four, types of mental processes that could be involved: declarative (just a statement like something is true because the Bible says so); cumulative (where truth is derived by simply adding things together); serial (“if . . . then” deduction like Sherlock Holmes); and parallel processing (“if . . . then” and “if not . . . then”). Task complexity could also be measured. My head was spinning. Here was a person of uncommonly high capability with extraordinary creativity and relevance to understanding and bettering the social world.

Elliott and I talked for a couple of hours about his and my ideas, and I realized after hearing his objections that many of the new ideas which I had just written for my book were just plumb wrong. That was not easy, but Elliott’s new ideas were so exciting that I recognized that here was somebody I really had to get to know well and whose ideas I had to study closely. As a philosopher, I sensed the revolutionary impact of his ideas across a wide spectrum. Elliott and I had many long discussions after that meeting but that first encounter was very special.

When I returned to Australia a month later, I wrote Elliott a letter exploring the possibility of his coming out to the Deakin University Freud Conference that I directed, and I also canvassed the idea that perhaps we could talk about my writing a book about the development of his ideas. To my amazement, Elliott replied by return mail that we ought to discuss it over dinner at the Hilton Hotel when he was in Melbourne the next month. Despite my long term habitation of some of the inner circles of Dante’s intellectual inferno in Melbourne (those circles, I regret to remind you, are of simple and complex fraud with treachery of the worst kinds!), I had never heard that Elliott had even visited Australia. I had no idea that he had been coming out to Australia every two or three months for seven years to work with Sir Roderick Carnegie and CRA.

Why, I have often wondered, has there been such a deafening silence around Elliott’s invaluable ideas? Why have so relatively few taken up or even argued with Elliott’s fruitful constructs? There have been a number of demonstrable accomplishments that have added and continued to add considerable value to corporations. Why wasn’t Requisite Organization (Jaques, 1988, 1996) on the best-seller list? In sociology, why were his ideas about bureaucracy, mutual trust, and alienation not explored? Why is a book that is arguably the most comprehensive survey of time ever written, The Form of Time (Jaques, 1982), long out of print, and why are his conceptions of the five-dimensional model of the universe never discussed? Why don’t at least one or two of the startling new and formidable researched constructs of Elliott Jaques’ (2002) magnum opus, The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms: A General Theory, not even on the intellectual radar screen?

It cannot be because these concepts are not true because they are not even discussed. This is in stark contrast to the airplay given to the prevalence of half-
baked and deeply flawed concepts that form central parts of the syllabi of many schools from management, cultural studies, and literature through to psychology and sociology.

The development of Elliott’s ideas was, as Kathryn Cason recently put it to me, “internally driven.” Elliott was his own sternest critic. Like other great thinkers, such as Plato, Freud, and Sartre, he constantly revised and updated his ideas on his own account. Perhaps he went too far since, to a fault, he never dwelt on the past and was focused on the present and future. While this is not exactly helpful for a historian of ideas such as myself when trying to chronicle and understand the development of Elliott’s concepts, it meant he had no investment in keeping concepts as they were. His ideas could not even be vintaged into years – they would often develop and be transformed in weeks. This did not mean that it was “one damn thing after another.” Elliott’s ideas grew incrementally as he thought knowledge did, but he was as prepared to give up an idea that was flawed as he was to defend one that deserved to be. There is a line of development in Elliott’s thought as can be readily seen in the Timeline in this issue of IJAPS.

But the last thing Elliott wanted was a school that would freeze the continuing flow of his ideas. He once told me that somebody had just come up to him after a meeting where he had explained his ideas and told him, “Now, I’m a believer.” “It almost made me sick,” Elliott told me. The excitement of the hunt kept his center of attention fixed on the validity of constructs. He took Karl Popper’s necessary condition for a concept being scientifically true that it could be falsified very seriously. He liked nothing better than a fulsome argument, especially when he realized he was wrong because the possibility of finding that something was false allowed for the possibility of finding something true. Elliott relished finding a relevant testable hypothesis because the results could lead to new knowledge. I can still hear Elliott getting ready for a passionate discussion of a new idea with the words: “Now, Douglas, let’s test the hypothesis!”

Just as Heraclitis said you could not step into the same river, so with Elliott you could never have the same conversation twice. As with Heraclitis, change and flow were central to his being. As I suggested above, Elliott never wanted a school for any of his ideas that would authorize a specific technique or approach as “Jaquesian.” He firmly believed that schools led to leaders and followers, to ossification, and were the death of science. Often, schools would start with high-capability initiators then would descend to be controlled by lower-order thinkers who would freeze the concepts in time and from further development. I suspect that had Elliott franchised and licenced a school of “Jaquesian” believers and followers instead of forbidding them, he might have been more influential as disciples gathered to him or his anointed followers like moths around a flame. A body of knowledge or template would have been formed, a social institution created, and licencing would have attracted more of a crowd with an investment in the preservation of an ideology. Elliott was clearly aware
that the fate of so many bright ideas was that their very “success” brought about their end and consciously took the view that any “movement” around his constructs would stymie their development. The development of the psychoanalytic movement originated by a high-capability thinker, Sigmund Freud, then became ossified through the emphasis on the spread of the movement, which Freud himself feared would destroy the science. Psychoanalysts generally eschewed the path through the universities to form their own institutions that controlled their own qualifications. Elliott was very supportive and helpful with my own research into the political histories of psychoanalytic institutes in the USA, and he sympathized entirely with my critique (Kirsner, 2000). Elliott’s view was that he would leave the further development of his ideas to the slow evolution through universities. Perhaps Elliott went too far here, if only because universities, as he often sadly acknowledged, scarcely lacked entrenched fads. Universities, Elliott rightly lamented, were becoming managerial accountability hierarchies instead of associations of scholars; tertiary teaching institutions instead of universities in their essential sense. Of course, if that is the case, the place for Elliott’s ideas to be critiqued and developed may not be universities at all. Elliott often lamented how few understood his work and carried it further. This was so given the conceptual complexity and its range across so many areas. Some people understood Elliott’s work in certain areas but not in others, but a tiny number understood the whole of it. The role of Elliott’s wife and co-worker, Kathryn Cason, who collaborated with him especially on human capability but really in ongoing critical discussions and drafts was crucial (see, for example, Jaques and Cason, 1994). However, although only a few understood the whole, many more understood particular aspects in depth and were able to help develop the ideas. Elliott was able to find critical information and have discussions with a wide range of people, but the challenge now is how to continue this now without his physical presence.

Elliott’s approach challenged the idea that human behavior cannot be measured without somehow defiling it. Elliott saw himself as an important part of the attempt to establish a science of human behavior which understood ourselves as social, species beings. This meant that the starting point was never the individual but the way the individual was always working together with others in a social context. Thus, mutual trust became the major underpinning for a viable society. Freedom depended on mutual trust: your trusting others and, in turn, their being able to trust you. Similarly, lack of mutual mistrust would lead to paranoia, suspicion, and divisiveness. It was the unkindest cut of all since we are intrinsically involved in object relations from birth onward.

Assumptions about human nature and systems are at the heart of Elliott’s thought. People do the best they can within the context of the systems they necessarily live in. These assumptions involve the history of the survival of the human species. As we developed beyond instinct, we became freer to determine the parameters within which we made the decisions we made 24 hours a day.
We developed conceptual frameworks or theories on which many of our decisions were based so as to better work with reality. But, in wending our way through the thickets, we often took wrong turnings and made false assumptions about the nature of ourselves and reality. Elliott called this “alchemy.” Three hundred years ago, the alchemical view of the world predominated in the West, and was the pre-eminent approach to understanding the world by the cognoscenti. Alchemy was the prism through which the world was viewed, and it had its panoply of learned treatises and other markers of putative knowledge. We should recall that, for some decades of the nineteenth century, craniology ruled the halls of academia and was a reputable method of treatment; again, with scholarly journals, academic courses, and other accoutrements of a learned discipline. In Elliott’s view, much of social science and “management science” – to him an oxymoron – are alchemical in nature: they are based on illusory premises which vitiate the search for truth. So entrenched is alchemy today, Elliott believed, that it is extremely difficult to undermine its influence across so many areas of investigation and practice. This provides a clue as to some of the reasons behind the relative lack of influence of Elliott’s ideas. Elliott’s ideas are systemic and require a preparedness to give up widely received and disseminated intellectual baggage even as a thought experiment. Much is invested in not seeing and thinking about Elliott’s perspective in a knowledge industry which often takes on simple alchemical answers to complex basic questions. Jerry Harvey has posited that one major reason for not taking Elliott’s theories seriously is that they often provoke the reaction of “anaclitic depression,” that is, depression that occurs “when an individual, organizational structure, or idea that we lean on for emotional support is taken away from us” (Harvey, 2002).

But who was Elliott Jaques? I want now to sketch the development of his approach biographically and in terms of the themes of his major works. (See the Timeline in this issue and also Kirsner, 2004.)

Elliott Jaques was born in Canada in 1917, completed a BA at the University of Toronto, and then was accepted to medical school at Johns Hopkins – unusual for a Canadian at that time. He studied psychiatry and completed a PhD in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University. Through the War Officer Selection Boards, Elliott went to London during World War II and there met with like-minded colleagues in the British Army who were formulating new theories about the individual, groups, and organizations – largely influenced by psychoanalytic theory and practice. These colleagues included the Director of the Tavistock Clinic, JR Rees, as well as Wilfred Bion, John Rickman, Jock Sutherland and John Bowlby, Eric Trist and Harold Bridger. In 1946 Elliott, together with a number of his colleagues, founded the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which remains to this day; he also trained as a psychoanalyst with the British Psychoanalytic Society, with Melanie Klein as his psychoanalyst.

From his intellectual beginnings through to his death in March 2003, Elliott, in effect, undertook a rich and detailed project that encompassed fields as varied as psychology, psychoanalysis, management, economics, biology,
psychiatry, philosophy, language, art, and anthropology. His major ongoing project was to understand individual and society. Elliott was the author of some 20 books and scores of articles of note. His major works include *The Changing Culture of the Factory* (1951); “Social systems as defence against persecutory anxiety” (1955); “Death and the mid-life crisis” (1965a); his very widely read *A General Theory of Bureaucracy*; the collection of essays, *Creativity and Work; Executive Leadership; Requisite Organization 1* (1988) and *Requisite Organization 2* (1996); and two books published during the year before his death – the immensely accessible and comprehensive *Social Power and the CEO* (2002a); and the book that I believe is his crowning achievement across so many areas, *The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms: A General Theory* (2002b).

Much of Elliott’s work can be seen as taking place in a social laboratory. There was constant interlinking and feedback in the development of concepts and testing them in the field. For Elliott, management was his fieldwork, where he could explore concepts in vivo, whereas clinical psychoanalysis helped him to refine concepts about the life and experience of individuals. The organizations Elliott consulted demonstrated major differences in types of social institutions, across different cultures, in different parts of the world. Some of the most important of these were as diverse as the UK Board of Trade, the UK Civil Service in relation to political organization, the Church of England, the major mining company, Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia (CRA), the US Army, Brunel University, UK health services and social services, the Argentine Department of Customs and Excise, Ontario Hydroelectric, and Oakland Police Department.

Elliott received the Joint Staff Certificate of Appreciation, presented by General Colin Powell on behalf of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US Armed Forces, for what Powell called “outstanding contributions in the field of military leadership theory and instruction to all of the service departments of the United States,” as well as the Harry Levinson Award of the Consulting Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association for “a distinguished career and impressive accomplishments.”

The overall project that Elliott undertook, from the beginning of his intellectual journey at university and as a reason for his going to medical school at Johns Hopkins, was to come to grips with the individual across contexts from social to biological. Going to medical school was part of this grappling with the individual. As Elliott summarized his project to me, his life-long interest was to understand human behavior, that is to say, the nature of human behavior in its focus of social interaction. There is no other human behavior except within social institutions. That gradually clarified in terms of the decision to try and understand the nature of intrapsychic processes as deeply as possible. Hence, Elliott studied psychoanalysis and then child analysis, which he maintained took one about as deeply inside the individual as anything could. The emphasis on the intrapsychic and relational life of the individual, on the one hand, went along with the attempt to get hold of the nature of social institutions in an appropriately teased-out understandable way, on the other. Elliott argued that this method...
was akin to specifics in biology, where one talked not just about organisms and the environment but about foxes and the environment, amoebae and the environment, paramnesia and the environment, coral colonies and the environment, and so on. In order to understand these one needed to start out by understanding their structure, that is, the nature of the living entity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the processes that that entity uses in living in society, whether it is an individual or a social organism or social institution. Elliott told me: “So that meant an approach to an understanding of social institutions in depth, by a teased-out understanding of every kind of institution each in its own right as an individual identifiable institution, family, or club, or managerial hierarchy, or church clergy, or university tenured teaching staff, or whatever.” (Transcript of discussion between Elliott Jaques and Douglas Kirsner, 1991, Melbourne.)

Elliott’s project was an attempt to get into both individual and social institutions in depth and specificity in order to understand their interworking. His objective was to try to understand the foundation for understanding and providing the conditions, both psychological and social, to enhance the possibilities in society of individuals behaving constructively, both internally and externally. This means internally having the opportunity to exercise constructive impulses to the full. In Melanie Klein’s terms it is to provide settings in which the social setting and internal understanding enhances the individual’s capability for mitigating hate by love. That kind of behavior then is going to contribute to the possibilities of individuals’ functioning in relation to each other on the basis of trust and confidence, and enhancing trust and confidence in their working relationships (“philogenic” processes). This is as against “paranoiagenic” processes, that is, circumstances in which hate is not mitigated by love but hate and everything that follows from it – primal envy, destructiveness, scapegoating, and mistrust. These are enhanced by the living social and psychological circumstances where people function in relation to each other with undercurrents of suspicion and mistrust, all of which pull organizations and even societies down.

Elliott’s attention to specificity and detail at the same time as the generalities and context of authority, hierarchy, and structure are exceptional strengths in his approach. Elliott distinguished empty from full language. Empty language moved horizontally, substituting one vacuous concept for another. Full language constantly moved vertically between the general and its exemplification in the particular, which in turn extended and fleshed out the generalization. Clearly, full language demands far higher capability in the complexity of mental processing than the use of empty language. Elliott himself always moved up and down between example and theory which had living relationships with each other. The complexity of the organic and inorganic world needs to be understood from fundamental scientific rather than alchemical principles. The possession of a high mode of mental processing alone is not sufficient since a theorist can be a bright, even very bright,
alchemist. One can be intellectually brilliant with a very long time horizon, yet be fundamentally mistaken in one’s assumptions. One can be less intelligent but far more effective if one works on the basis of a scientific template.

It is imperative therefore, Elliott argued, that organizations should be structured requisitely, that is, as required by their nature. Structure is primary, with symptoms that are the secondary sequela many mistake for reality. Red tape, rigidity, alienation, corruption, ineffectiveness are for Elliott not problems in themselves but are all symptoms of a dysfunctional structure.

“Nothing endures but change.” This statement by Heraclitus is not a bad motto for Elliott. Everything changes continuously as it flows through time. Elliott might have added that humans are change: we make decisions all day, all the days of our lives. We are intrinsically continuously flowing towards ever-changing goals because all organisms work (engage in goal-directed activity) all the time. For Elliott, the past has no priority except insofar as it is not a dead weight but helps us spring toward the future. We change ourselves and each other by inescapably working together.

But how and why do we work together? Certainly, the challenges ahead involve the further development of the scientific basis of stratified systems theory and knowledge about and access to capability. However, towards the end of his life, especially in the wake of September 11, 2001, Elliott was vitally concerned to develop a universal set of secular values that would provide an explicit basis for individual, organizational, and social action that would enhance rather than harm the survival of our species. The criteria for species-survival and enrichment are the optimal development of mutual trust within scientifically structured associations and accountability hierarchies. Elliott’s work was intrinsically interdisciplinary, spanning a breadth, depth, and innovation few have achieved. At the same time, it would be difficult to find anybody more extraordinarily focused on the present argument and detail. Paradoxically, the more excited and seemingly angry (meaning really engaged) Elliott became when canvassing an issue, the more he listened and the greater the reality of dialog. At the very least, this demonstrated taking his ideas seriously! Elliott had the opposite of Jerry Harvey’s anaclitic depression. He would be dissatisfied with any discussion that simply confirmed his ideas. That was not interesting to him. As I have suggested, Elliott valued nothing better than a good argument where tried assumptions were put up for critical testing and falsification so that new, more inclusive constructs would emerge. The contributions of Elliott’s last, most inclusive, and far-ranging work, *The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms: A General Theory* (Jaques, 2002b), in trying to understand orders of information complexity from unicellular organisms through animals to humans were the culmination of the overarching breadth and depth of his life-long endeavor to understand the nature of human nature in context in as inclusive a way as possible without sacrificing detail. Elliott’s hypotheses about the continuities in the organic world, where the behavior of all organisms is intentional, challenge some of our most deeply held assump-
tions in a profoundly lateral way. Elliott himself is the best example of his own theories of the maturation of capability – where the higher the capability, the larger the gradient of increase with age. True to his theories, at the age of 85, Elliott produced his most far-reaching, inclusive and groundbreaking work (Jaques, 2002b). Taken together, The Life and Behavior of Living Organisms (Jaques, 2002b) and Social Power and the CEO (Jaques, 2002a) provide an important summation of the questions and hypotheses that need to be further explored by others.

REFERENCES


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