Revisiting the Creating of Settings

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I begin by briefly indicating the personal experiences that stimulated me to write the book. I do so because I have come to believe that crucial to the creation of a setting is the range and substance of the leaders’ personal and cognitive past experiences in and with complicated settings, and I would also include the length of time of past experience. The shorter the time span of past experience, the more difficult the process will appear, independent of outcome judged by criteria of success or failure. If I had to bet, I would have to say that the shorter that time span, the quicker the criteria for failure will be recognized and the higher the frequency of the death of the setting. I say that not because a longer time span of past experience necessarily indicates that appropriate conclusions have been drawn or that increased age means increased wisdom. What it does mean is that the chances that conclusions appropriate to the creation of a setting have been learned are somewhat higher. Overall, however, the rate of failure is very high. The setting may remain in existence, but its initial purpose may have been long discarded or drastically changed. One could argue that there are instances when these changed purposes should have been discarded. The fact is that we do not know and probably will never know because, as I later indicate, the creation of settings is not likely to be an area of investigation.

1. In the late 1930s I was a member of the Social Workers Party, which was a Trotskyist sect that was, to say the least, anti-Stalinist. Why did the creation of the revolutionary Soviet Union become a tyranny, a human disaster, a mockery of all that the Bolsheviks initially proclaimed?

2. My first professional job was as a psychologist in a brand new state institution for the mentally retarded. The Southbury Training School was revolutionary in educational rationale and architecture, as different from all other residential institutions as one could imagine. By the time I left 4 years later, it was apparent that Southbury was failing in its purposes. How to explain it? The philosopher Pogo once said, “We are faced with insurmountable opportunities.” Southbury proved his point.

3. I came to Yale in 1945 in the Department of Psychology in the Institute of Human Relations (IHR). IHR had been in existence for about 12 years; it was the first and most ambitious attempt to create a context supportive of integrative thinking and research in the social sciences. By the time I came to Yale there was unanimous agreement that IHR had fallen, unretrievably so, far short of its purposes. It was IHR together with my political and institutional experiences that were the beginning of my interest in the creation of settings, but in a very inchoate way.

4. The end of World War II was accompanied by, and indeed produced, people’s conviction that a “new world” had to be created. That conviction was embodied in the creation of The United

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Nations to replace the failed, defunct League of Nations. Why should The United Nations succeed? What had been learned? Again (and vaguely), the concept of the creation of settings began to take some form. But it was the Cuban revolution in the 1950s and reading the proclamations and speeches of Castro—reminding me as it did of the Russian Revolution—that was a kind of catalyzing agent for what I was trying to conceptualize.

5. The previous points were about my perception of macro events. I do not know when or why, but one day I was thinking about the escalating divorce rate among my colleagues and friends in relation to students who used me as a confidant in regard to their marital hopes, plans, and problems. It hit me—that is the way I experienced it—that marriage was the smallest instance of the creation of a setting and revolution was the biggest instance, and in between was God knows what. The phrase the creation of settings popped into my head and set me to serious thinking and reading. In typical style, I began to look at everything in terms of the creation of settings. At the same time that my interests narrowed (obsessively so), my view and knowledge of the world broadened. I know that sounds somewhat oxymoronic, but so be it.

6. From the time I came to Yale my research required that I spend a lot of time in public schools. This was at a time when the rate of the creation of new schools was dizzyingly escalating to accommodate the baby boom created by World War II. That was grist for my mill as I saw that, without exception in my direct experience, each new school became other than what its planners had envisioned. It was also at a time when federal support for public education mightily increased, and it took the form of support for new programs, each of which meant the creation of a new setting in the context of an existing setting.

7. Then came the legendary 1960s. I have discussed that decade in chapters in two recent books (Sarason, 1994, 1996), and I only comment on two features most relevant to my conceptualization of the creation of settings. The first feature was a replay of what I said in Point 4: The “old world” was obsolete; a “new world” had to be created. This was most clearly expressed by young people but by no means without agreement by some in the older generations. The second feature was the creation of communes explicitly to demonstrate a new way of social living; this was primarily a phenomenon of younger people. I had read about communes of the past, especially those in America in the 19th century. I took advantage of whatever opportunity I had to talk with individuals who had been in a commune or who were planning to create one. Indeed, long before the 1960s, Skinner’s (1962) Walden Two had become a topic of great interest to some graduate students at Yale and elsewhere, some of whom met to discuss and even to create their version of Skinner’s utopia. Suffice it to say, the planning for and implementation of these communes almost totally ignored (and I really should say totally) all those pot holes that doom the creation of settings, large or small. However dispiriting it was for me to see efforts founder on the consequences of the belief that good intentions are a universal solvent for the problems of contemporary social living, they nevertheless helped to deepen and broaden my understanding of the creation of settings.

Of all that I thought I learned before writing the book, there was one fact about which I had no doubt whatsoever. That had to do with leadership, and by that I mean more than personality or personal style, but the degree to which the leader took into account—had it clearly in his or her head—what the predictable problems would be, given the purposes the leader has for the setting. When someone is designing a bridge, that person knows what problems have to be expected and solved. Indeed, that person has at some point to adopt the “what if” stance. What if this or that
material turns out to be less durable than the supplier says? What if the traffic over the bridge will be much larger than projections indicated? It is those “what if” questions that cause designers to include backup or fail-safe mechanisms “just in case.” They know what the predictable problems may be, but they also know that some of these problems may turn out to be unpredictably thorny and dangerous. What I learned from my experience and observations, and from reading, was that leaders rarely seriously and systematically list and think through the predictable problems. Enamored as they are with visions of what the setting should and will be, and secure in the feeling (it is usually no more than that) that they will surmount whatever problems will arise, they hardly pay attention to the predictable problems. For them the creation of the setting is not a very complicated cognitive planning—“what if” process, but rather a personal—motivational one in which clarity of and adherence to ends are far more salient than means. I discuss this in different parts of the book, especially in the chapter “The Socialization of the Leader.”

The point is that what I learned caused me to think about this question: Is it not necessary, and crucially so, that I should experience the process of creating a setting? A more phenomenologically appropriate way of posing the question goes this way: “Because I no longer believe that it is productive for the field of clinical psychology to be tied to the medical setting, to the repair orientation, should I not put my money where my mouth is and create a setting that will demonstrate how psychologists can play a more productive, preventive role in a community?” In brief, my theoretical interest in the creation of settings got connected to some very practical professional issues. That connection led me to create the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic.

Revisiting the book for the purposes of this article produced a reaction of surprise. More specifically, I found I was guilty of an omission, a lack, that characterized everything I had read in creating and directing the clinic—that is, my goals, concrete plans, fears, anticipations, insecurities, and the positive and negative consequences of my semineurotic “what if” stance in regard to the future. The “what if” stance is a bedrock feature of my phenomenology. So, for example, if I am driving on an interstate and a road sign says that the next exit is 10 miles away, I am very likely to assume that I will have a flat tire midway. What will I do? That stance pervaded my approach to creating and directing the clinic at the same time that the strength of my self-confidence, chutzpah, and arrogance was (and is) by no means weak. That has an oxymoronic flavor, I know, but it is a flavor I have concluded is too often missing in those who create settings, especially the “what if” dynamic, because it is that dynamic that can increase one’s sensitivity to predictable problems.

That omission I partially remedied in a chapter (“The Camelot Years: The Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic”) in my autobiography The Making of an American Psychologist (Sarason, 1988). As the title of the chapter suggests, in the years of its existence the clinic was for everyone in it a personal, intellectual, and professional joyride, and it was so regarded by others in the nascent field of community psychology. That has the sound of a self-serving statement so let me hasten to add that although I indisputably played the major role in creating and shaping the clinic, the success of the venture is incomprehensible apart from the role of others, the particular time the clinic was created and existed (the legendary 1960s), the department and university in which the clinic was embedded, and luck in the form of coincidences. If it was even half the success I think it was, why, then, did it go out of existence 2 years after I gave up the directorship? That is a crucial question in the conceptualization of the creation of settings, the answer to which only became clear to me after I left the clinic. And by clear I mean that I had to modify the degrees of distinctions I made between creating a setting and changing an existing one. I come back to this later. Let me first
briefly discuss why the creation of settings never became a focus of theory and research, despite the very positive reviews and six printings of the book.

One of my doctoral students, Cary Cherniss (1972), did his thesis on this question: Why is it that at Yale the graduate department of education (created in the early 1930s) was abolished and the school of forestry (created earlier in the century) flourished, while at Harvard the reverse was the case? If it was the first intensive study of the creation of settings, it was the first historical thesis permitted in the department. I use the word permitted advisedly because historical theses were for all practical purposes off limits. My "what if" stance was largely responsible for approval of his proposal. Knowing as I did how such a proposal would be viewed by the department generally, I "stacked" his committee. On it was Wendell Garner (a dear friend) whose scientific credentials were impeccable, and he was the most respected member of the department. Then there was Robert Clark from sociology, one of the most renowned researchers on higher education. It has to be said that besides having an outstanding academic record at Yale, Cary had long had a serious interest in history, a fact he made clear in his application for admission to the department. It was a superb thesis, and the members of the department who read it were unanimous in saying that his thesis explained Yale in ways they had not previously comprehended. That assessment was about the absorbing, detailed story the thesis contained. It was not about the possible significance of the creation of settings as a theoretical problem. In any event, Cary could find no publisher, academic or commercial, who would publish it. All of them said it would make a splendid book, but its scope was too narrow, the projected scale too puny. (Harvard and Yale graduates might find it interesting, they said, but even so the book required a subsidy.) The brute fact was (and is) that that kind of study cannot be condensed or broken up into journal articles. The thesis was never published. From my standpoint, of course, that thesis confirmed in spades what I had intuited, experienced, and wrote about. It is relevant to add here that my book had previously been summarily turned down by the Harvard University Press. When I submitted it to Jossey-Bass, Allan Jossey-Bass—a book salesman turned publisher—immediately accepted it "because it was so damned theoretical, practical, and interesting" (personal communication). (No one will ever do it, but in light of its history and status a study of the creation of that publishing company would be important and revealing.)

A second example: Somewhere in the mid-1970s Jerry Mohatt sent me the thesis he had done at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, in which he related, in Cherniss-like detail, the creation in South Dakota (or was it North?) of a junior college for and by Native Americans. Unlike Cary's thesis, his was based on involvement in and observations of the process. If it was a creation of settings study, it was also, and in explicit ways, about contemporary America. That thesis was longer than Cary's. It could not be published.

I could give other, less ambitious examples. They had one thing in common: They were writing me to say that they had created a setting that had failed, and it was not until they had read my book that they realized why their efforts were doomed. That was no source of satisfaction to me. For one thing, when I wrote the book I had been unable to come up with anything in the literature relevant to the creation of settings. I was quite familiar with the voluminous literature of dysfunctional settings and how to repair them. But there was next to nothing about how to create a setting that would achieve its stated purpose. Not even clichés and vague generalizations were frequent in that literature. That is why when I started to write the book it was with a subdued but sustained anxiety, because I found it hard to believe that I had stumbled on a problem that was important but had never been formulated. Why was this so? Briefly, here are some of the reasons.
1. People who create settings are very future oriented, to such an extent that what they do—especially in what I called the "before the beginning phase"—becomes unusable or uninnstruc-
tive or suppressed. When things start to go wrong, they resort to explanations based on the present
and the immediate past. So, when they describe or, more commonly, when they are asked to
describe the history of the setting, the initial process of creating the setting is at best superficially
implicated, and if that history gets written up, the early phases of creating the setting get, again at
best, short shrift and do not enter into the conceptualization of the process and experience.

2. The study of the creation of a setting is longitudinal in nature and that means an investment
of time and resources that, to say the least, is considerable. Unlike the bulk of research, the payoff
is a delayed one; besides, that payoff may be neither clear nor robust. In any event, in publish-or-
perish academia, no nontenured faculty member will stake his or her chances for promotion on the
outcome of a longitudinal study, the results of which may not be available when he or she comes
up for a promotion. That is why longitudinal studies in the social sciences are rare—that is, any
problem that requires longitudinal methods is personally—professionally dangerous. So, even
though my book has been influential (I assume), most readers have not been disposed to pursue,
test, and contest my way of conceptualizing the problem. I well understand their reluctance. They
are being pragmatic and realistic.

3. American psychology has always been a psychology of the individual. I have long main-
tained that if Thorndike had put more than one rat in the maze, we would have had a more productive
and realistic basis for understanding social behavior. Riveting on the individual organism has had
the effect of blunting the study of contexts—that is, ecology. The major exception has been Barker’s
ecological studies of behavior settings and how they shape individual behavior regardless of
personality factors. But Barker’s lifetime of work in two communities (one in the United States
and one in England) has had little impact. Although his work had, on the surface at least, no
relevance to the creation of settings, I have come to see that his analyses demonstrate that any one
behavior setting inevitably is interconnected with other behavior settings, a fact that those who
create a setting—which is to say that they are creating a new behavior setting—rarely recognize
or take seriously. The ecology of a new setting is embedded in a larger ecology of behavior settings,
and to proceed as if that is not the case is to ignore the obvious, which, my experience indicates,
has been easy to do.

4. There is a voluminous literature on problem solving. There is, for all practical purposes, no
literature on how the problem of creating a setting that will be consistent with its purposes can be
"solved." Let us set aside the obvious fact that one cannot solve a problem one has not formulated.
The less obvious fact is that the creation of a setting is not a problem that can be "solved" in the
usual sense of solution (i.e., 4 divided by 2 is a solution). That is not the kind of problem researchers
take to kindly. It is messy; the problem is always changing; everything and everyone are in flux;
there is no endpoint; and problems of observation, recording, and "measuring" are thorny, to
indulge understatement.

5. The creation of settings has as one of its major "variables" the phenomenology of power. I
say "phenomenology" because leaders are quite aware that they seek power, that they think they
know how to use and allocate power, and that they must convey to others how and why they regard
power in the ways that they do. Leaders know one other thing: They cannot articulate other than
a highly selected sample of their phenomenology. Leaders, like the rest of humanity, reveal but a
part of their phenomenology. In our society, it is regarded as unseemly to talk passionately and
openly about one's desire to have and exercise power, for fear that it will be regarded as irrational
or as reflective of self-aggrandizing tendencies. The phenomenology has to be cloaked in the garments of reason and pragmatism. What leaders have difficulty recognizing or remembering is that others are very sensitive to any disjunction between what leaders say and what they do. If in the earliest phases of the setting that disjunction is apparent and large, albeit that disjunction is not articulated by others, the seeds of future trouble have been planted. I think I have said enough about leaders and power to make the point that not only is power a crucial variable in the creation and development of a setting, but also it is one that presents very thorny problems to someone studying the creating of a setting. The larger point is that even if you, the reader, think that my conceptualization of the process is only partially correct, you will probably conclude that to study the creation of a setting requires a degree of time, resources, and masochism that will elicit a “No thank you” response. It in no way surprises me that the creation of settings has received such little attention and study.

Let me illustrate some of these points by a very brief “case.” The Yale Corporation (Board of Trustees) voted to create a School of Organization and Management. I was a member of the group responsible for the planning and beginning to implement that decision. A majority of the group was organizational theorists and researchers. Everyone was acutely aware that a new setting was to come into existence. No one, except me, conceptualized the task as one that would encounter predictable problems in the process of planning, in implementation, and in relating to the rest of the university, which was largely critical of creating such a school. Furthermore, no one, including me, was at all knowledgeable about what led up to the decision and what concrete expectations were envisioned. In addition, no one (again except me) saw any problem in the fact that the group was to come up with a plan that a future leader would have to implement; at least he or she could not ignore those plans. I confess that I agreed to participate because I would be in a position to observe the creation of a setting. Any tendency I had to try to influence the group I quickly inhibited for two reasons. I had no intention of playing other than a minor role in the school if only because I was a member of the Department of Psychology, where my primary responsibilities were. Furthermore, it became almost immediately apparent that (a) the group had one overarching goal: hammering out a curriculum, and (b) the group contained individuals whose professional, ideological, and power-status concerns were, to say the least, sources of conflict. For me to represent my views of the creation of a setting would have been an exercise in futility and a possible disruption of my relationships with the other members.

It would take many pages just to list and briefly describe those early phases of planning for the new setting. It was a glimpse of the obvious that no one in the group—which included some very accomplished organizational theorists and researchers—saw any value in keeping a record of the group’s deliberations, conflicting points of view, and visions of the future. (I once suggested that we get somebody “to keep track of us” but that went over like a lead balloon.) The history of that setting has been and still is stormy. Stormy is too weak a word. With two exceptions, the storminess was of a nature and degree that caused many in the group to leave Yale, and the storminess derived not only from conflicts within the school, but also between the school and other departments at Yale. The point is that all of the disruptive sturm and drang that soon became public knowledge had its origins in that planning group. It was not that warfare was in any way a feature of that group, but rather that the obvious conflicting views represented in that group surfaced in a more virulent form as soon as the school “began”—that is, admitted its first class. Today, no one in that troubled
setting is at all aware of the “before the beginning” phase. No one implicates how it got started in explanation of its troubled history. They simply do not have a rubric, a concept, that would lead them to study the “before the beginning” and the formal planning phases. The ahistorical stance flourishes.

Finally, let me return to a question I raised earlier: If the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic was half as successful as I think it was, why did it go out of existence 2 years after I gave up directing it? The fact is that when I started the clinic, I knew that there would come a time when I felt I had learned what I wanted to learn and that I intellectually had to move on. I also knew that from the standpoint of the culture and ethos of the department of Psychology (and of Yale generally), it was my clinic, not theirs. By virtue of being a full professor, I could and was expected to explore—to research whatever problems interested me. “You have a clinic? Okay, Seymour, we will give you some resources but you have to assume responsibility to get whatever additional resources you need to do what you want to do.” In short, as long as I was willing to assume and discharge that responsibility, there would be a clinic. Of course, I initially hoped that if we were successful by conventional academic criteria (e.g., publications), the department would come to have a sense of ownership. But it soon became apparent that either the core, nontenured academic individuals I attracted to the clinic were not esteemed as highly as I was or that there would be no additional slots for them in the departmental table of organization. From the standpoint of the department, the clinic was an interesting, puzzling anomaly given the department’s longstanding tradition of rigorous, highly designed, (preferably) experimental research.

By the 6th year of the clinic the dispersal of the core clinic group began. I had to face the fact that the clinic could only continue as long as I stayed. It would be academic suicide for any nontenured person to direct the clinic and all that was implied and required: meet departmental teaching requirements, have time to think and write, and expect to be tenured. When I finally bowed out, one of the nontenured people said that he would carry on. After 1 year he faced and accepted reality. After the following year, the clinic went out of existence. For the point I wish to make I need not give more of a complicated story.

I wish to make the point that I made in the book, which I should have discussed in more detail. The creation of a setting inevitably, always, impacts on and is impacted upon by existing settings. In my book I stressed that in the earliest phases in the creation of settings, those kinds of transactional impacts are rarely given the attention they deserve, the usual result being that they receive attention only when problems occur between the new setting and external ones. I also stressed that creating a new setting is not the same as trying to change an existing one. But what if the new setting is created with the goal of getting existing settings to change in some way? My hope was that the clinic would change the prevailing attitudes and customs of the department in which it was embedded. Given that hope, it is correct to say that I not only created a setting but I wanted to change an existing one. Creating and changing were interrelated goals. I was concerned with the former far more than the latter. Would it have been a different story if I gave as much attention to one as to the other? Over the years I have given a great deal of thought to that question. I cannot deny that the story might have been different. I also cannot deny that I concluded that it would not have been all that different. It is obvious, however, that I am not an unbiased person. Nevertheless, and speaking generally, there are times when creating a setting involves in some ways trying to change existing ones. That was the case in Cherniss’s studies and in the history of Yale’s Institute of Human Relations. It was the failure of the creators of those two settings not taking “creating and changing” seriously that contributed to failure, partial or complete. If I took
that point seriously on a conceptual level, I did not take it as seriously as I should have in regard to the clinic. That is the bad news. The good news is, I am still trying to learn.

REFERENCES


