Reflections on ‘My Career’

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Sometime ago University of Minnesota Duluth’s Chancellor Martin’s Office called and requested an interview to talk about my career. The request for an interview and the question caught me off guard, as I realized that I had not given ‘my career’ a great deal of thought, nor was I prepared to describe in any coherent way the various paths down which I have traveled. I also have to admit that I found myself wondering why I was being asked this question – Was the inquirer anticipating that I was at some significant milestone? Was the Chancellor thinking or suggesting that it (me and my career) was near its end? Since then, I have on occasion reflected on ‘my career,’ and have now attempted to put my thoughts into some organized perspective.

My career has quite simply been an ‘academic one’ – student by the age of 6 and still a student. Born in the 1940’s, raised in the country, almost a farm boy, I did not start school until the first grade – no pre-school, no kindergarten. More time to be a boy growing up around horses, in the woods, on a lake and near many streams and rivers. Burdened by ‘young boy chores,’ and simply free to live a splendid childhood in rural, northern Wisconsin.

Since grade one, however, I have been a student. While I stopped receiving grades and started handing them out more than a quarter of century ago, I remain a student. Studying and learning from lectures, textbooks, academic journals, my students, and my own research. At first trying to satisfy my own need to understand the answer to the question ‘why,’ still struggling with that question my goal and career has been focused on encouraging others to ask the same question and to search for its answer.

What follows is the result of my reflections on ‘my career.’ They are primarily organized around three identifiable time periods (i.e., the formative years, the University of Wisconsin years, and the years at the University of Minnesota Duluth). In addition, to covering key events and their respective time periods, I will also highlight some very significant people, individuals who have played a major role in my personal and academic development – the two are intimately interwoven.

The Formative Years

Two key actors from my childhood played a significant role in launching what has become my career. First, my parents, Eileen and Arthur Pierce. They encouraged me to go to school and to be a good student. They instilled in me the importance of work and career as an important context within which to invest and express oneself, from which to
grow and develop, and out of which to derive a healthy sense of self. They gave me a strong need to achieve, and a value system that says once you start something it is important you ‘stick to it’ ‘until it is done and done well.’ On my father’s side of the family there is a long string of farmers-politicians and farmer-educators. Both groups were progressives, grounded what many know today as the Wisconsin LaFollette Progressive Party’s traditions and in particular its advocacy for a strong educational system --the valuing of educators and the valuing of education for all of Wisconsin’s citizens. On a myriad of occasions as a child and teenager, my father would remind me of the importance of a good education and good educators, frequently suggesting that being an educator is a career worthy of my serious consideration –he would emphasize that in addition to making an important contribution to society, it would provide a good quality of life, much better than his as a factory worker.

My father’s blue collar labor also had a profound effect upon me. I came to witness and failed to understand men and women who built products, and yet purchased similar ones made by a competitor. Why? Where was the pride in their work? What were the forces at work within them and within the organization that they worked for that spawned this disconnect? I did not understand, but found myself interested in what today I call individual-organizational fit and the psychological processes that are associated with work and organization. Honestly, I don’t know what I called it at that earlier age, yet I knew something was not the way that it should be.

I believe that my father had a strong work ethic, and I sense (but don’t know for sure) that he was a good and conscientious employee. That said, it was also apparent to me that he hated his job except for the fact that it played an important instrumental role in his life. It enable him to care for his family, to live in the country and to raise horses—a passion that he and my mother shared. For me this dislike for one’s job seemed to be a tremendous ‘waste,’ especially as I thought of how much time in one’s life is devoted to work and how short life can be. This interest in the individual and his/her relationship with work and organizations manifests itself for me yet again. The seeds are sown early on, for what will become a career focused on the psychology of work and organization.

The second important actor was my best friend’s father. Bruce Pannier was a business school professor at Wisconsin State University in Eau Claire. On, what now seems to be a fairly regular basis, Jim (his son and my childhood best friend) and I would accompany Mr. Pannier to his office as he had grading to do, lectures to write and some reading that he wanted to get done. We were turned loose to roam about campus, attend plays and athletic events. I discovered that the university campus was truly a magical place. The quiet library, students conversing with one another in the student union, the majestic trees and expansive lawns, that setting and all of the activity made the university quite simply a wonderful and absorbing place.

As I grew into my high school and teen years, I was shaped by this quiet man’s influence and what appeared to be his professorial life on campus, and the overall quality of life that his career afforded him both within and outside of the university setting. What a tremendous amount of autonomy and freedom this occupation of professor seemed to
provide. Mr. Pannier had a career where even though he spent long days on campus it brought him a considerable amount of peace, intellectual stimulation and understanding, reward, contentment and happiness. I increasingly began to believe that my father was right, and Mr. Pannier became an important role-model early in my life.

The University of Wisconsin Years

For me, the University of Wisconsin years, were extremely transformative in nature. I found myself on the campus of the University of Wisconsin on three different occasions (four if you consider my living vicariously when my son Eric was a Wisconsin student). The first time was between the fall of 1966 and January of 1968. For me, this stay at Wisconsin was marked by two major events: (a) the real beginning of my intellectual interests in and understanding of management as a process, organizations and organizational differences, and (b) deep emotional scares brought on by our country’s involvement in the Viet Nam War. This involvement and the protests on Wisconsin’s campus lead to many long and intense hours of discussion, debate and reflection that pushed virtually every involved student to make some heavy, serious, gut-wrenching and personal decisions as to how they would respond to the country’s involvement in this war. My decisions did not come easy, nor have they been without consequences that have lingered throughout my life.

As a student working on my Master of Science Degree in International Management and Organizations, I had the good fortune to be exposed to several students and scholars who were intellectually passionate about comparative economics, management and organizational systems. These interests lead to a brief period of study at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies in Bologna, Italy. Most importantly their influence represents the true beginnings of my journey into the study of organizational behavior. (Or an extension of some of those childhood experiences with my father, Mr. Pannier and time on the university campus.)

It was on Bascom Hill, the Library Mall, in Der Rathskeller, the Commerce Building, and on and around State Street that the protests and ferment brought on by the Viet Nam war caused a long and difficult struggle between who I was as a person, what it means to be an American citizen, the role of protest and patriotism, and how all of this was related to my emerging intellectual interests in the individual-organization relationship and the psychological glue that connects people with their work. More than once I gave serious contemplation to giving up my US for Canadian citizenship, as our friendly neighbors to the north offered shelter to those who wanted to take that step as a part of their anti-war protest. The ‘maple leaf’ has remained attractive to me, even though she never did become my adopted home.

I returned to the University of Wisconsin during the summer of 1970, and their met through the literature, attending lectures, and registering for formal classes several individuals who were on the Wisconsin faculty. They would come to play a very
important role in my life. These individuals and their passionate interests in complex organizations and the organizational effects upon people convinced me to apply for admission to the Wisconsin Ph.D. program. It was clear to me from this summer experience, that Wisconsin had assembled on a single campus a powerhouse of organizational scholars, individual who were involved in research that was rapidly advancing our understanding of organizations and their individual effects. It became apparent to me that I wanted to be a student within this intellectual community.

It was also during the summer of 1970 that many students who were a part of this academic community and who had previously been absorbed by the war, started to focus on other things—they started to enjoy their studies, the lake, the warm summer sky, beer and causal conversations in the Rathskeller, on the Terrace, and on State Street. It was fun to be in Madison, it was fun to be a student once again absorbed by one’s studies without the distraction of protests against the war. Then and for many of us almost out of nowhere, there was a ‘loud and earth shattering explosion’ that destroyed much of Sterling Hall, the Physics Building, and a laboratory that was conducting war-related research. Tension and anger came back to the campus scene, as the naive of us were once again reminded that the war was not over, nor were the protests fully abated.

It was in the fall of 1972 that I moved back to the University of Wisconsin for the third time. It was during the next five years that I had the richest intellectual and emotional experience of my life. It was during the next five years that what becomes the most defining aspect of my academic career was shaped, honed, and launched. As an academic, the accomplishments and success that I have enjoyed is, to a very large part, due to my UW socialization and the research paradigm that emerged which has guided my research program ever since that period of time.

As I noted above, I was incredibly fortunate. The University of Wisconsin had assembled on a single campus a number of very noted scholars who were focusing on organizational issues. The first group of these individuals were doing work focused in macro-organizational behavior by exploring organizations and complex organizational design. The second group of individuals were focusing their work in micro-organizational behavior. In the Department of Sociology and Management individuals like Andre Delbecq, Andrew Van de Ven, Jerry Hage, Michael Aiken, Chuck Perrow, Ken McNeil (one of James D. Thompson’s last students), and Richard Schoenherr (a student of Peter Blau) made available the fruits of their recent scholarship and their on-going research activities for this student to study. In the Department of Management, micro-organization scholars Larry Cummings, Randall Dunham, Ramon Aldag, Alan Filley, Donald Schwab and Herbert Heneman were making significant contributions to our understanding of the individual within the work and organizational context. It was an absorbing and exciting experience to study in the midst of a group of organization scholars who were the major contributors to the discipline that I was now committed to studying—a discipline that would become the focus of my teaching and research career. It was also an intimate setting as there were only five doctoral students (Arthur Brief -Tulane University; Richard Blackburn -University of North Carolina; Kimberly Boal -Texas Tech University; Richard Gribbons -private consulting in St. Louis; and myself) in the
Management Department during my entire doctoral program, affording each of us close and frequent contact with the faculty.

As a student, my challenge was to design a program that would enable me to draw from these two groups of organizational scientists. Thus, my course work drew upon the work of the macro-organization scholars to provide me with an understanding of the organization which would come to define the independent variables in much of my research. I also drew upon the work of this group of micro-organization scholars to provide me with insight into the individual as an organizational member, that which would become the unit of analysis in most of my work.

It was Larry Cummings, Andre Delbecq, and Randall Dunham who were to take me under their wings and to carefully nurture my development. They too were intellectually interested in the interface between the organization and the individual, an interest that would subsequently be developed and would guide my research agenda during the later part of my doctoral studies and a paradigm that would guide my research agenda once I left Wisconsin and ventured to Minnesota, arriving to a wind chill of 60 degrees below zero, wondering what was I doing here?

The University of Wisconsin years (1972 - 1977) were truly formative for me. I not only grew as a person, the UW gave me the education that would come to define my academic career and the immense satisfaction and passion that that career has afforded me over the past three plus decades.

The University of Minnesota Duluth Years

I came to the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) in January of 1977, for what I envisioned to be my first academic appointment. I anticipated staying at UMD for four to six years, a time period long enough to launch my career, to establish a base upon which to move to a major research university, and to reconnect with my family. I was married and had two children at the time. Graduate school can be a difficult time for marriages and families – it was on mine. I felt that I had shut my oldest child, Tanya out of my life during the first years of her life. I simply did not have enough time to study for my comprehensive examinations, to work on my dissertation, and to be a father. Twenty-four hour days and seven day weeks were not long enough, and as a consequence my ‘holding and play time’ with Tanya was simply not enough – running off to my office in Bascom Hall to study and to avoid her consumption of my limited and valuable time had taken a personal toll. It was way past time to give her and now my son Eric more of my time and attention. This first phase in my career had to consist of long days with early starts and late stops, then time off (no work) in the evenings and over the weekends as this was (had to be) family time.

It was some time after my move to Minnesota that Larry Cummings made the following comment to me – the concepts ‘Wisconsin’ and ‘Minnesota’ are two great ideas– and I
have come to concur. While my original intentions were to make UMD a relatively short stay, I have on many subsequent occasions chosen to remain in Minnesota, close to Wisconsin, and to maintained my affiliation with the University of Minnesota—it has now been a relationship of more than three decades. The University of Minnesota Duluth has been good to me, and it has been a wonderful place to work, a wonderful platform off of which to define my career.

Why Duluth, Minnesota; Why the University of Minnesota Duluth? The simple answer is—water, the white pines, winter, no lines or traffic jams, all within minutes of home and campus. As Chancellor Martin likes to express it ‘A Great University on a Great Lake.’ She is correct, the University of Minnesota Duluth is a small jewel, located in a state strongly influenced by Scandinavian social values, a good educational system, the north woods, a beautiful city located on the north shore of ‘the big lake’—Lake Gitchi Gummi. This is a great place to raise a family, a wonderful place to teach and conduct research, and it is only a few minutes from a wilderness which cleanses my heart and soul.

I have been fortunate to be a member of a strong department. For virtually my entire career the Department of Management Studies has been able to attract and retain a number of individuals who are good colleagues, dedicated to providing a good and high quality educational experience to our students, and to good scholarship. This is reflected by a statement that my colleagues adopted to reflect their values, this statement, inscribed in stone and hanging on the departmental wall reads “The Department of Management Studies is ‘Committed to the Intellectual Growth and Development of People.’” My colleagues go on to state that “We will strive to make our value statement a reality through our commitment to the creation, interpretation, application and dissemination of knowledge, and by working to create an environment in which our students are encouraged to consume knowledge, think, question, analyze and explore problems and their solutions, and to articulate their own emerging theories of management and organizational behavior.” For this faculty member, the operationalization of this value statement has provided me with a very rich environment within which to work.

During my stay at the University of Minnesota Duluth, I have also been fortunate to have had five collegiate deans (Drs. Robert Hancock, David Vose, Tom Duff, Rod Lievano, and Kjell Knudsen) who have been supportive and encouraging of me and my career. Never have they taken steps to deny me the freedom to explore questions of interest, while working to provide me with the resources that I have needed to support my research program.

There have been five Department of Management Studies colleagues, Professors Geoffery Bell, Anne Cummings, Kjell Knudsen, John Newstrom, and Steven Rubenfeld (a relationship that dates back to our being in the doctoral program at Wisconsin together), with whom I have had the opportunity to collaborate on one or more scholarly activities. My professional relationship with John Newstrom started with my acceptance of the offer to join the University of Minnesota Duluth faculty and continues to this day. John and I were being recruited simultaneously. John had just accepted an offer from UMD and Dean Hancock used that to encourage me to accept their offer. I had the
opportunity to view John’s vitae, as he had been on the faculty at Arizona State
University for several years and in that time had developed an impressive track record.
Realizing that I would have John as a colleague prompted me to accept the Minnesota
offer. Ever since John and I collaborated on a variety of projects starting with research
focused on flexible working hours. In addition, we have written one book (Alternative
Work Schedules, Jon L. Pierce, John W. Newstrom, Randall B. Dunham, and Alison E.
Barber), and edited three others (The Manager’s Bookshelf: A Mosaic of Contemporary
Views, Leaders and the Leadership Process, and Windows into Organizations). The first
two of these have now seen several different editions. My relationship with John has
been an extremely productive, a rich and rewarding collaborative effort that has produced
a number of products that have made a meaningful contribution to the scholarly literature
and education of others. While I value our working relationship, our many conversations,
and treks into the woods to cut wood and hunt, leave me with wonderful memories. John
is a dedicated friend, a person who would be there in time of need and without hesitation
he would give you the ‘shirt off of his back’ –How is that for a colleague! While my
relationship with Bell, Cummings, Knudsen, and Rubenfeld have not been as productive
as that with Newstrom, I enjoyed and benefitted from our collaborative efforts.

Not to diminish the importance of all of my other working relationships, there are three
individuals who played a major role shaping, developing and advancing my career during
my years at Minnesota. They are Randall B. Dunham, Larry L. Cummings, and Donald
G. Gardner.

My relationship with Randall B. Dunham started shortly after he joined the faculty at
Wisconsin, following his doctoral training in I/O Psychology at the University of Illinois.
It was a mutual interest in job (work) design that brought us together. Randy had just
completed his doctoral dissertation which focused on the individual effects associated
with work and the design of people’s jobs. I was in the process of finishing a review of
the job design literature, and had started to write a paper that I intended to submit for
publication before my graduation from the doctoral program. I was also going to use this
literature review to guide a stream of research into the relationship between technology,
social system structure, job design, and their individual effects. It was because of this
common interest in job design that Randy and I decided to shared with one another our
respective literature reviews and to collaborate on a publication reviewing the job design
literature. This collaborative relationship resulted in a publication in the Academy of
Management Review in 1976 (my first publication in a scholarly journal and a ‘tier-one’
management and organizational behavior journal at that –I have to admit that this felt
very good) and the beginning of a very long and rich relationship. Randy and I became
good friends, and it was through this collaborative relationship that the publication side of
my career was launched and sustained well into the early 1990s. I have published more
work with Randy than with any other single individual. We had a very unique working
relationship –we seemed to think about and view the world through very much the same
set of lenses. We worked well together, enjoyed being together playing as well as
working. The relationship was both unique and productive. Randy could start a sentence
and paragraph and I could finish it, or vice versa, and when done we both felt it was our
own and we had difficulty deciding who had actually written what.
In addition, to publishing more than seventeen papers together, we co-authored a scholarly book focused on alternative work schedules, and we co-authored two textbooks – *Management* and *Managing* both published by Scott, Foresman. Eight of my first sixteen publications between 1976 and 1984, were co-authored with Randy. It is Randy with whom I credit a significant portion of my success. It was his friendship, collaboration, encouragement, and mentoring that played a very important role in the shaping of my career during my early years at Minnesota. This was an important relationship, because UMD was not a research university, there were no doctoral programs, nor was there a large number of research active organization behavior scholars. It was, therefore, important to be connected with a bright, energetic, and active organizational behavior scholar. Randy provided me with that connection, as my career quickly advanced. I was promoted from Assistant to Associated and tenured in the fall of 1979 and then promoted to professor in the fall of 1983 – five years after leaving the U of Wisconsin and Bascom Hill.

In 1982, Randy and I were awarded the prestigious Yoder-Heneman Personnel Research Award by the national chapter of the Society for Human Resource Management. Dale Yoder and Herbert Heneman were two early scholars of distinction in the area of industrial relations and human resource management. This research award given in their name is intended to recognize individuals who have made significant contributions to the study of the individual-organization relationship. Randy and I were being recognized for our research in the area of alternative work schedules.

Then, in the fall of 2000 I was inducted, as a charter member, into the Academy of Management Journals Hall of Fame. The Academy of Management inducted the 33 individuals who had published the largest number of articles in the Academy’s journals since its inception in 1954. Both Randy and I were among those 33 inductee. It was, in large part, through my collaborative efforts with Randy that I received this honor.

L. L. Cummings was the name that I frequently encountered in the organization behavior literature during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was his writings that played an important role in my decision to study for my doctorate at the University of Wisconsin. Quite simply, I wanted to be exposed to him. L. L. Cummings was to become Professor Cummings and a major force influencing my thinking about the individual as an organizational member and the individual-organization relationship. Later, it was Professor Cummings along with Dr. Andre Delbecq who would co-chair my doctoral dissertation – Professor Delbecq bringing to the table an intimate understanding of complex organizations (structure and process), Professor Cummings provided the lens to make sure that I maintained an accurate understanding of the complex psychological processes that are triggered by the organization-individual interaction. Cummings along with Dunham were largely responsible for my understanding of the psychology of work and organization.

During the post Wisconsin years, Professor Cummings was to become Larry Cummings. During the next twenty years and until his untimely death in 1997, Larry was to continue
his role as mentor, become a colleague collaborating on numerous research and writing projects, become my best friend and my biggest ‘cheerleader.’ What a truly amazing person – scholar, mentor, educator, developer of people, and friend– Larry was. I miss his presence, friendship and involvement in my life.

During the early 1980s, Randy Dunham, Larry Cummings (while he was on the faculty at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University), and I received a large research grant from the U. S. Department of Naval Research to study work and organizational issues. We hired Dr. Gardner, who took a leave of absence from the University of Colorado-Colorado Springs, to join us on this research project. This launched my working relationship with Don, a relationship that is now decades long.

Don and I have published more than a dozen studies, most of them focused on the psychological constructs – focus of attention, and organization-based self-esteem. We shared an interest in management and organizational behavior, which resulted in the 2002 publication of a textbook with South-Western Publishing Company (Management and Organizational Behavior) focused on the integration of these two disciplines. Don and I have also collaborated on and continue to collaborate on research involving organization-based self-esteem. I see this stream of research to be one that Don and I will remained involved in for, possibly the remainder of my career – there remain many interesting and unanswered questions. Don has been a great colleague, a good friend, and inspirational in my academic life.

I have been extremely fortunate to have collaborated with people with whom I have developed a fondness and good personal friendships. Among my best friends are people who whom I have collaborated Randy Dunham, Donald Gardner, John Newstrom, Geoff Bell, and Steven Rubenfeld. My closest friend, mentor, cheerleader, and for more than 20 years fishing partner was Larry Cummings. What a wonderful career it has been, in large part due to the interwoven connection between work that I enjoy doing, experiences of accomplishment and success, experiences of recognition, and the opportunity to work with, learn from, and the development of close friendships with one’s colleagues.

In addition to framing my career around the institutions and individuals who were to play a central role, my career is also reflective of the work that I have done. There appear to be several streams or cluster of activities around which my work and contributions can be organized. These include research focused on: job (work) design, measurement and construct validation, alternative work schedules (flexible working hours, the compressed work week, and the hybrid compressed/flexible work schedule), sources of work environment structure, focus of attention, organizational commitment, employee ownership, organization-based self-esteem, and the psychology of ownership, property, and mine.

Early in my career it was my job design and alternative work schedule research that lead to my early promotions and tenure at Minnesota, and to my visibility in the academy. This research resulted from the collaborative efforts that I had with Randall Dunham (University of Wisconsin) and John Newstrom (a colleague here at UMD).
The two pieces of research, because of their impact and potential importance, that I am most proud of include my work with organization-based self-esteem and psychological ownership. It is the former that has had the largest impact upon the organization behavior discipline, and I anticipate that the later will eventually come to equal importance.

I have always been fascinated with the genesis of ‘ideas’ that we as scholars ultimately pursue with our research agendas. It was during the mid-1980s that I had the good fortune to have several very fascinating and ultimately very important conversations with Dr. Johan Amondt. Johan was a friend and colleague of Dr. Kjell Knudsen. Both had worked for the Norwegian Center for Organizational Learning in Norway. Trained as a social-psychologists, Johan made frequent reference to what it is that happens to people when they work for prolonged periods of time in an environment that signals to them that ‘they don’t matter,’ and that ‘they are not an important part of this place.’ As a result of these conversations, I found myself frequently thinking about what it meant to have woven into the fabric of one’s self-concept the belief that ‘I don’t count around here,’ and what were the individual and organizational consequences of such a belief.

It was these thoughts and long conversations with Larry Cummings that we came to realize that we were dealing with a very specific dimension of what psychologists call global or chronic self-esteem. It was out of this context that we began to think in terms of a new construct – Organization-based Self-esteem (OBSE). Working with Randy Dunham and Donald Gardner, we eventually elaborated the OBSE construct, specified its nomological network, developed and construct validated a measure of OBSE. Since the publication of that work in 1989, there have been more than four dozen different investigators from different parts of the world who have now conducted research employing the OBSE construct and our research instrument. (A Google Scholar search – December, 2009– of the term ‘organization-based self-esteem’ produced 568 ‘hits,’ suggesting that OBSE has captured the attention of many researchers in the organizational sciences – I must admit that when Don Gardner told me this, it made feel good as it is nice to have one’s work ‘make a difference.’) Today, there has emerged a rich understanding of the organizational determinants and effects of organization-based self-esteem. All of this started with my conversations with a very fascinating Norwegian who himself wondered about the meaning and effects associated with an individual coming to believe that — I don’t count around here, I am not a very important part of this place!

The question, where do our research questions/idea come from, relates well to my most recent research interests – psychological ownership. It was during the later part of the 1980s that a UMD colleague Steven Rubenfeld, Susan Morgan one of our undergraduate students, and I became involved in a research project involving an organization that was making the conversion from conventional to employee ownership. As a traditional student of organizational behavior, I did not have any particular interest in employee ownership but I was keenly interested in the individual-organization relationship and thought studying this conversion might prove interesting. This involvement required an extensive review of the employee ownership literature. As we reviewed this literature it
became apparent to us that the empirical employee ownership literature was not supportive of what had become conventional wisdom—that being an employee owner would be positively associated with satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and performance.

This prompted us to write an article focused on a review of the employee ownership literature, focused on the question what is employee ownership, and what are its behavioral and socio-psychological effects. As a part of this paper we developed an employee ownership effects model and proposed that unless the employee owner comes to psychologically experience themselves as owners, the legal reality of ownership is unlikely to produce positive attitudinal, motivational, and/or behavior effects. We also noted that many employee ownership arrangements fail to fulfill common ownership expectations and the ‘rights’ typically associated with ownership. Without the full complement of ownership rights—a right to some of the financial value of the owned object, a right to be informed about the status of that which is owned, and the right to exercise some influence/control over the target of ownership—the employee is unlikely to experience being a owner and then behaving as if one is the owner.

One anonymous reviewer of our work suggested that probably the most significant contribution of our work was the suggestion that ownership is not only a ‘real’ (i.e., objective and legal state), but that it is also a ‘psychological state’ (i.e., part ‘real’ and part in the ‘mind’). In the article that published our work (Pierce, Rubenfeld & Morgan (1991, in the Academy of Management Review) we presented the results of our review of the employee ownership literature. While introducing the notion of psychological ownership, the construct was not elaborated in this article.

Shortly after the publication of this paper, I mentioned the reviewer’s comments to Larry Cummings. Over the couple of years, we had several conversations as to what it means to be a psychological owner. The question became one that we addressed with several of Larry’s doctoral students in the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

It was during the fall of 1996, that I was awarded a Visiting Scholar appointment to Department of Psychology, at The University of Waikato, in Hamilton, New Zealand. I decided to dedicate my time at The University of Waikato to the articulation and elaboration of the construct psychological ownership. By the time that I returned to Minnesota in 1997, I had the opportunity to read some very illuminating animal behavior, child and life-span development, and philosophical writings that provided me with a lens into the psychology of property, ownership, and ‘mine.’ It was after my return from New Zealand that I would write the first draft of a paper focused on the meaning and genesis of psychological ownership. Along with Larry, two of his doctoral students—Tatiana Kostova (University of South Carolina) and Kurt Dirks (Simon Fraser University)—we developed a theory of psychological ownership. This work appears in two publications (‘Toward a Theory of Psychological Ownership in Organizations,’ appearing in the Academy of Management Review, 2001, and “The State of Psychological Ownership: Integrating and Extending a Century of Research” appearing in the Review of General Psychology, 2003), unfortunately both works were finished and published after Larry’s
My work with the construct psychological ownership has lead to several professional relationships, relationships with people whom I have come to both admire and appreciate for their contributions to my thinking about the ownership as a psychological state. Among them are Linn Van Dyne (Michigan State University), Michael O'Driscol (University of Waikato), Loren Rodgers (Ownership Associates), Iiro Jussila (Lappeenranta University), Graham Brown (University of British Columbia), and Craig Crossley (Schwan Foods). Linn Van Dyne, who was one of Larry’s students at Minnesota, and I worked on the development and validation of a measure of psychological ownership. The results of this work was published in the Journal of Organizational Behavior in 2004.

There are additional projects that I have been involved in, each involving a field test of propositions related to the organizational determinants and consequences of psychological ownership. These propositions stem from the theory paper that was published with Kostova and Dirks. Two of these studies were conducted in New Zealand with a colleague, Dr. Michael O’Driscoll, a relationship that I developed while visiting at The University of Waikato. In addition, work with Iiro Jussila has resulted in the publication of a book focused on psychological ownership (Psychological Ownership within the Organizational Context, 2011), while work with Graham Brown and Craig Crossley has focused on psychological ownership within the context of job (work) design. Finally, Iiro and I have been working on theoretical and empirical work that elevates the psychological ownership construct from the individual-level with a focus on ‘mine,’ to the group-level and a focus on the psychology of ‘us’ and ‘ours.’ Our work with collective psychological ownership deals with the existence of a collective cognition – that is, the existence of a joint (collective) sense of ownership.

Given the interest that has been expressed by doctoral students working both here, in Asia and Western Europe, I fully expect that our development and introduction of the construct to the organizational sciences will prove to be an important contribution. Something that I am obviously looking forward to with great anticipation. Early evidence pointing toward the attractiveness of psychological ownership are over one hundred manuscripts published by the end of 2013 in which the construct has been employed. In addition, there was a workshop held at Vienna University that focused on ‘ownership’ and the majority of those presenting had focused their work around the psychological dimensions of ownership. In addition, at the 2014 International Congress of Applied Psychology (ICAP) held in Paris, there was a symposium organized around ownership as a psychological phenomenon. I was fortunate to be invited to be both a participant in and the key not speaker at the Vienna workshop, and to be a presenter at the ICAP symposium on psychological ownership.

Over the next several years, I plan on the continuation of my research into the individual-organization relationship. A research agenda started while I was a student at Wisconsin. I have clear intentions to continue exploration of organization-based self-esteem and psychological ownership, as there appears to be many rich and interesting research
questions that surround both constructs.

The spring semester of the 2004-2005 academic year was extremely rewarding. First, I was the recipient of the Chancellor’s Award for Distinguished Research. Second, I was honored by being a recipient of the University of Minnesota Horse T. Morse Alumni Award for outstanding contributions to undergraduate education. This award was given to six individuals from the entire university system. While I have known many of the former recipients, my friend and colleague John W. Newstrom received this award in the early 2000s. John is an individual, who as a dedicated educator, I have admired and employed him as a role model since our joining the faculty of UMD in the late 1970s.

Finally, I have every intention to maintain my affiliation with the University of Minnesota Duluth. It appears that I will both begin and end my post Ph.D. academic career on one campus. I suspect that I am currently among a rare breed—an organizational member whose entire academic career is with but a single employer and platform from which to exercise my academic freedom. To date it has been a good relationship, a wonderful career, and the university remains that magical place that I experienced as a young child.

Part of that magic was captured by former Wisconsin Governor and US Senator (heart and soul of Wisconsin’s Progressive movement) Robert M. LaFollette (1911) when he said,“The university should be a place of free thought, free investigation, free speech, and of constant and unremitting service to the people who give it life.” To that end the university is the only institution in society that has as its primary responsibility ‘the creation and dissemination of knowledge’ (the former through research, and the later through teaching, writing and speaking) for public consumption and the people who sustain her. Within this context, I hold ‘academic freedom’ very dear. Not as a shield behind which academically incompetent people can hide, but in the spirit with which it originally expressed. Hanging on my office door, for several decades has been the following expressions, taken from the Board of Regents at the University of Wisconsin (1894) “... In all lines of investigation ... the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the paths of truth wherever they may lead. ... Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the [University] should encourage the continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which the truth can be found.” What a remarkable objective and a truly incredible place is the university.

Some Very Important People

As I reflect on my career there are several other individuals who have played an important role. I need to recognize and give credit to my immediate family—wife Janet, and children Tanya, Eric and Sarah, and step daughter Shawn. I have been ‘tight, also most stingy,’ with my time and have had a very strong job/work focus—some have accused me of being a workaholic, a charge that I deny as I can and do find time to enjoy life away from campus. Yet, I am fortunate to have found the ‘perfect’ job (occupation). These people have seen and experienced my devotion to the academy, and I have been blessed by the fact that they have not tried to change me, or make me feel guilty. They
never once gave me a difficult time for how I use my time. Their understanding and acceptance of me for the person that I am is a treasured gift.

Finally, there several other individuals (I would particularly like to note: Richard S. Blackburn, Kurt Dirks, Tatiana Kostova, Geoff Bell, Paul Taylor, and Michael O’Driscoll) with whom I have had the good fortune to work with on one or more research projects. These collaborative efforts have in most instances contributed to the development of good friendships, while simultaneously providing me with a learning and growth experience. During the past few years, I have had the opportunity to work closely with three of Larry’s former students –Kurt Dirks, Tatiana Kostova, and Linn Van Dyne. In each of these instances we have continued to work on research projects that Larry was involved in before his fishing accident and death. These working relationships have proven rewarding in a uniquely personal way –all four of us, through I of a different generation, were Larry’ students. Finally, I note that Anne Cummings joined our faculty in the fall of 2004, after several years on the Wharton School faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. While I have known Anne for years, it has been a personally rewarding and rich experience to have had her as a colleague. My connections with Kurt, Tanya, Linn, Geoff and Anne enable me to remain, in a small way, emotionally and intellectually connected with Larry as they were his last set of students, and Anne is his daughter.

In Closing

I consider myself very fortunate. After more than thirty years as a university professor and as a faculty member at the University of Minnesota Duluth, I find myself extremely satisfied and passionate about my job and career. Too many ‘institutions’ manage to extinguish the flame to do well, to make a contribution, that burns in all of us. I have been fortunate that the University of Minnesota Duluth has been an environment that has allowed me to express myself. It is still fun to come to campus, no longer at 5:30a.m. and no longer met by John Newstrom as he has now retired.

As noted earlier, I have a good set of colleagues to work with. In addition, I still find working with students to be extremely challenging and gratifying. My research program continues to move forward, as I continue to find myself motivated by a curiosity about different aspects of the individual-organization relationship.

The university remains a magical place. We are always surrounded by 18 to 22 year old people. People with fascinating interests, wild dreams and aspirations for the future, and a rich and diverse array of backgrounds. A walk through the halls is commonly met with intriguing lectures. On frequent occasion one comes upon an empty lab, studio, or lecture hall only to hear a student playing an instrument, singing, or practicing a speech. Students conversing in the halls and court yards about a stunning lecture, the anxiety of an upcoming exam, expression of concerns about rising tuition, and questions about where the party is this evening.
One of the greatest joys of course is coming across that student who is hungry for knowledge, witnessing student growth and development, and seeing students succeed and excel whether it is in the classroom, working with a student organization, giving time to a community project, playing hockey, or singing the national anthem at the opening of a sporting event. It is when a student turns their passion into an accomplishment that I become emotionally stirred from within. Finally, watching the young generation of student walk across the commencement stage to receive their diploma, accompanied by the cheers and smiles of family and friends, closure at the university for this student is accompanied by the opportunity to work with a new class of students. Oh what a wonderful profession this being a university professor has proven to be!

– June 2005
– Amended November 2013