

**SEINFELD, PROFESSOR OF
ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR:
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT
AND SYSTEMS THINKING** _____

Eric B. Dent
University of Maryland University College

By now, the hoopla and hype of the end of the television series *Seinfeld* is a memory. The syndication of sitcoms ensures the availability of episodes of *Seinfeld*, daily, in many countries of the world for the foreseeable future. This is very good news for faculty members and students of organizational behavior or general management classes. Although the viewing of television shows is often thought to be contrary to the goals of higher education, *Seinfeld* is a showcase for two very important concepts in such classes.

The first of these concepts is that of the "psychological contract." Kolb, Rubin, and Osland (1995) noted,

When individuals join an organization, they form an unwritten, implicit, or (less frequently) explicit, psychological contract with the organization. This contract consists of the mutual expectation employees and employers have of each other. The psychological contract is based on the perception of both the employee and the employer that their contributions obligate the other party to reciprocate. (p. 5)

Sherwood and Glidewell (1972) suggested that the ideal way of addressing these unstated expectations is to make them explicit by articulating them. Although *Seinfeld* is not specifically about organizational life, part of the

Author's Note: Correspondence should be addressed to Eric B. Dent, University of Maryland University College, University Boulevard at Adelphi Road, College Park, MD 20742; phone: (301) 985-7266; fax: (301) 985-4611; e-mail: edent@umuc.edu.

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brilliance of the show is that nearly every episode articulates the social psychological contract in many dimensions of life. Characters on the show frequently find themselves wondering about unstated expectations in social settings and in “pinch points,” the term Sherwood and Glidewell used to describe an incompatibility in expectations.

The second concept is the notion of interdependence as it relates to systems thinking. I have found that in general, my working, adult graduate students have a very difficult time completely grasping the interrelatedness of the aspects of a system. Other professors have noted the same difficulty, even among senior executives of Fortune 50 companies (Vaill, 1996, p. 104). Interdependence is a central component of several systems approaches that identify feedback loops within whole systems (Capra, 1993; Senge, 1990). Interdependence is manifest in a number of ways: when apparently independent phenomena are in fact connected somehow, when there are gaps in time or space between feedback loops, or when cause and effect are so enmeshed that each cannot be clearly distinguished. The notion of unintended consequences is often used to reveal interdependencies that are not obvious on the surface. In the past, the top policy makers in the United States did not realize, for example, that rent control legislation and the building of low-cost housing units are indirectly related through feedback loops. Even today, most people do not see a connection between, for example, electric garage door openers and the possible loss of a sense of neighborhood community because neighbors do not have to see one another when they park their cars in the street or their driveways. Nearly every *Seinfeld* episode reveals a surprising connection between seemingly unrelated plot lines. Over time, as students get sensitized to look for the interdependencies on *Seinfeld*, I have found that they get much better at seeing the indirect connections in their work and nonwork lives.

***Seinfeld*: An Introduction**

For those readers not familiar with the television show, it is relatively easy to explain. It is a show about “nothing” (although Jerry Seinfeld has noted that a show about nothing is also about everything). The four principal characters are Jerry Seinfeld (played by Jerry Seinfeld), George Costanza (played by Jason Alexander), Elaine Benes (played by Julia Louis-Dreyfus), and Cosmo Kramer (played by Michael Richards). The series revolves around these four single characters, who live in Manhattan. Jerry seems to date a different girl on nearly every episode. Kramer introduces some crazy antic on nearly every episode (warming his clothes in the oven before putting them on,

reversing the peephole in the door to his apartment, enlisting homeless people to pull rickshaws through Manhattan, etc.). Much of the show takes place in Jerry's apartment or in Monk's, a coffee shop frequently visited by the four characters. The sitcom, cocreated by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, often comprises meandering chitchat about trivial subjects that define the relationship among the four lead characters, or as one commentator put it, "anthropologically speaking, it's about the mores and folkways practiced by a small but fascinating tribe that's native to certain stretches of Manhattan's Upper West Side" (Wild, 1998, p. 8).¹

The Social Psychological Contract

Although Seinfeld and David have probably never heard of Sherwood and Glidewell (1972) or their pinch model, they describe their show in the same way. "We didn't change the culture," Seinfeld has said, "we just reflected it a little more intimately" (Marin & Hammer, 1998, p. 55). David has said that the show filled the gap of collective shorthand for the neurotica of our everyday lives (Marin & Hammer, 1998, p. 55).

This collective shorthand, this intimate reflection, is the articulation of the social psychological contract. A *New York Times* article noted that *Seinfeld* is about the way people really are with their friends and suggested that "the beauty of 'Seinfeld' was that art and life were often indistinguishable" (Wild, 1998, p. 43). Before *Seinfeld*, there were always ways in which people were with their friends, but people did not talk about them. When do two friends discuss whether or not they are close enough for one to expect a ride to the airport from the other? Or, when do they discuss whether their friendship is such that one can call the other on the telephone and say, "It's me," rather than saying his or her name?

Let's go to film to see two detailed examples of *Seinfeld* characters giving voice to the mutual expectations people have in various settings. In "The Wife" (Mehlman, 1994), which first aired March 17, 1994, Elaine finishes a workout at her health club. She has a departing conversation with an acquaintance, Greg, who then leans over and gives her an "open-lipped kiss." Elaine doesn't expect this from an acquaintance and interprets it to mean that Greg wants to change their relationship. See how many other assumptions Elaine makes in the abridged dialog below. We rejoin the characters at their next encounter in the health club:²

Greg: Do you know where I can get some good olives?

Elaine: Hmm. I can find out.

Greg: Would you?

Elaine: [to herself: So, now I have a project. That's a definite signal!]

Greg: You know, by the way, you look really great in that leotard.

Elaine: Oh, thanks. [to herself: That's no signal. Who wouldn't like me in this leotard? I look *amazing* in this leotard.]

Greg: Hey, you know what's weird? I think I had a dream about you last night.

Elaine: [to herself: Okay, he open lips me, he dreams about me, we have an olive project. That's it, I'm asking this guy out.] Um, you know, Greg— [he interrupts]

Greg: Can I have a sip of your water? [He vigorously wipes the bottle opening before drinking.]

Elaine: [to herself: Oh my God!]

Greg: I'm sorry, what were you saying?

Elaine: It was nothing

Scene: Later that day, in Jerry's apartment.

George: You said the guy gave you an open-lipped kiss.

Elaine: Yes, but then he wiped his hand on the top of the bottle when I offered him water.

George: That doesn't mean anything!

Elaine: Are you kidding? That's very significant! If he was interested in me he would want my germs, he would just crave my germs!

Jerry: [authoritatively] She's right, George. Bottle wipe is big.

George: But what about the open-mouthed kiss?

Jerry: [still authoritatively] Bottle wipe supercedes it.

George: Yah, you're right. You're right.

Scene: Inside the New York Health Club. [Elaine is talking to Greg as he works out on an exercise machine.]

Elaine: I got the machine next buddy [to a guy walking up to the machine].

Greg: [he gets off the sweat-covered machine] It's all yours!

Elaine: [to George] Look at the signal I just got. He knew I was going to use the machine next and he didn't wipe the machine off. That's a gesture of intimacy! . . .

Greg: There's the manager . . . I'll take any chance I can to talk to her.

Elaine: Oh, you are interested in her?

Greg: Very!

What is the psychological contract Elaine has with Greg? She receives an open-lipped kiss, gets a project assignment, receives a favorable comment on her appearance, and is dreamed about, and she is convinced that these are all signs of his interest in a romantic relationship. All of this evidence, however, is more than offset in her mind by his dreaded wiping of the bottle to rid it of her germs. The teaching value of this episode is enhanced by the final scene, in which Elaine's assumptions are proved wrong. Elaine has very clearly articulated her assumptions, but to Jerry and George, not Greg.

A second classic example of the articulation of the unstated expectations in a work context is found in "The Caddy" (Kavet & Robin, 1996), which first aired January 25, 1996. George works for the New York Yankees. The Yankee executives make the common assumption that someone who spends more time at the office is getting more work done. They further assume that if an employee's car is in the parking lot, he is actually at work.

Scene: George has locked his keys in his car. His immediate boss is Mr. Wilhelm, who, in turn, reports to Yankee owner George Steinbrenner. George begins in Jerry's apartment, explaining the situation.

Jerry: How did you lock your keys in the car?

George: How? Because I'm an idiot.

Jerry: So why don't you get a locksmith?

George: I was going to, but then I found out the auto club has this free locksmith service, so I signed up. Just waiting for the membership to kick in.

Jerry: How long has your car been sitting in the Yankees' parking lot?

George: I don't know, about 3 days.

Scene: In the offices of the New York Yankees.

Mr. Wilhelm: George.

George: Mr. Wilhelm?

Mr. Wilhelm: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but Mr. Steinbrenner and I *really* want you to know we appreciate all the hours you've been putting in. And, confidentially, Sezunko, our assistant to the general manager hasn't really been working out and the boss thinks you're the man for the job. So keep it under your hat.

Scene: Back in Jerry's apartment.

George: Assistant to the general manager. Do you know what that means. He could be asking my advice on trades. Trades, Jerry. I'm a heart beat away!

Jerry: That's a hell of an organization they are running up there. I can't understand why they haven't won a pennant in 15 years.

George: And, it is all because of that car. See, Steinbrenner is like the first guy in at the crack of dawn. He sees my car, he figures *I'm* the first guy in. Then, the last person to leave is Wilhelm. He sees my car, he figures I'm burning the midnight oil. Between the two of them, they think I'm working an 18-hour day.

Jerry: Locking your keys in the car is the best career move you ever made.

Although these two lengthy examples show how the psychological contract gets verbalized on *Seinfeld*, some of the most brilliant articulations are briefer yet delicious snippets. How long should one retain a greeting card from his girlfriend? (It depends on whether or not he has a mantle or other appropriate display place.) Can you make a condolence call from a cellular telephone? (No.) If Elaine has dinner with a man who asks his parents to join them, does that automatically make it a date? (Yes.) *Seinfeld* has given America (and management education students) a clear example of how to articulate the psychological contract.

Interdependence

The second management education concept that *Seinfeld* episodes beautifully illustrate is the interdependence aspect of the systems perspective. One of the breakthroughs of *Seinfeld* was that it dramatically increased the number of scenes in a half-hour sitcom. The traditional formula called for about 6 scenes, but *Seinfeld* (and many sitcoms thereafter) would feature up to 20 scenes (Wild, 1998, p. 3). The larger number of scene changes often allowed the show to pursue four separate plot lines, one for each major character (Marin & Hammer, 1998, p. 50). At first, each of these plot lines seems completely unrelated: A new girlfriend will come into Jerry's life, George and Kramer will order Chinese takeout food, and Elaine will run her car into a delivery person. Soon, however, the plot lines will form a web of interdependence. The delivery person Elaine hits was making the delivery to Kramer and George. Jerry's girlfriend will turn out to be the attorney the delivery person retains to sue Elaine.

In "The Marine Biologist" (Hague & Rubin, 1994), which first aired February 10, 1994, Elaine, Jerry, George, and Kramer seem to have some unrelated experiences. Elaine learns that there is no entry about George in his alumni magazine, but Jerry receives positive publicity for his successful

career as a comedian. Later, Jerry and George are having a conversation about how impressed George is with marine biologists who study whales.

Next, Kramer joins the two and tells them about one of his typically crazy antics. Somehow, he has come into the possession of 600 Titleist golf balls, and he is incredibly excited about the prospect of going to the ocean and practicing his golf swing by driving balls into the sea. Later still, Jerry is running an errand when he runs into a friend from college, Diane. She inquires about George. Jerry, trying to bolster his friend's reputation, lies, telling Diane that George is a successful marine biologist. Diane is suitably impressed.

As it turns out, Diane was George's main college heartthrob, and he is ecstatic that she might be interested in him. George, posing as a marine biologist, calls Diane and initiates a relationship. On one date, they go for a walk along the beach. Suddenly, they come on a group of people who are surrounding a whale that seems to be dying in the surf. Someone calls out, "Is anyone here a marine biologist?" Diane says, "Save the whale, George . . . for me." Faced with the choice of blowing his cover and relationship or trying to save the whale, George walks slowly into the ocean. He has an experience of divine intervention or "kinship of all living things" as he comes face to face with the dying beast. He sees that something is obstructing the whale's breathing. A huge wave pushes George to the top of the whale, where he reaches into the blowhole and pulls out a Titleist golf ball.

A second detailed example comes from "The Stall" (Charles, 1994), which first aired January 6, 1994. While attending a movie, Elaine uses the women's restroom and discovers that her stall contains no toilet paper. She tries to negotiate with the woman in the adjoining stall for even one square of toilet paper, but the other woman, who just happens to be Jerry's current girlfriend Jane, refuses to share any toilet paper with Elaine. The two women have not met yet, so they don't recognize each other's voices. Meanwhile, Kramer has gotten hooked on the telephone service for which callers are charged by the minute for erotic, sexual conversation. Sometimes, he makes these calls from Jerry's telephone. Once, Jerry picks up the phone to make a call and hears some of the banter between "Erica" and "Andre" (Kramer's phone pseudonym) before he realizes that Kramer is using his phone.

Later, Elaine explains to Jerry the awful experience she had at the movie theater restroom. Jerry realizes that Elaine's altercation was with his girlfriend (who had told him her side of the story), but he doesn't mention this connection to Elaine. In subsequent scenes, Jerry and Kramer have the sensation that Erica's voice is familiar to them, but they cannot place it. In the hilarious final minutes of the episode, the web of interconnections is made clear. Kramer is suspicious that Erica is Jane, and he invites Erica to meet him at

Monk's coffee shop. Kramer, Jerry, and Elaine are in Monk's when Jane walks in. Elaine asks Jane for a tissue, and when Jane refuses, Elaine becomes suspicious that Jane is the woman from the movie theater restroom. When Jane goes to use the restroom at Monk's, Elaine races ahead of her and removes all of the toilet paper from the restroom. The show ends with Jane realizing that she had "met" Elaine in the movie theater restroom and acknowledging that she is Erica of the phone sex line.

As with the example of the psychological contract, the "mini" interdependencies are often as surprising, insightful, and funny as these two more elaborate examples. Elaine throws her boyfriend's coat out of a tall Manhattan apartment building, and of all the people in Manhattan to find it, Kramer and his friend Newman (played by Wayne Knight) are the ones. Jerry throws a watch away in a sidewalk trashcan, and it is later salvaged by his Uncle Leo (played by Len Lesser). Elaine accidentally knocks a sharp object out of an apartment window, and it punctures a Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade balloon manned by her boss.

At one level, these incidents can seem contrived and improbable. Yet, Bell's theorem, proposed in 1964 and confirmed experimentally in 1972, demonstrates that there are no pure coincidences. In ways we do not yet understand, everything is connected to everything else. I use *Seinfeld* episodes with my students to help develop this consciousness, which Jaworski (1996, p. 81) has suggested may be the most critical change needed in American society.

Using *Seinfeld* in the Classroom

The students in our program all have access to televisions and VCRs to record episodes that may air at a time that conflicts with another activity. Thus, an additional benefit of *Seinfeld* to a professor is that students can watch the episodes outside of class so that class time is not used viewing footage (and the students don't experience it as extra work). Because the show airs at least five times per week in every major television market in the United States (and many other countries), and so many episodes include excellent examples, I have had no difficulty selecting a couple of episodes for the students to watch near the times in the course when the concept is discussed. I typically ask the students to watch three or four episodes during the semester, and I refer to several others in class (most of which are familiar to most of our students).

I use the *Seinfeld* clips in two main ways:

1. As part of introducing the concepts of the psychological contract or interdependence, I use a dialogical "lecturette" in which I explain the concepts but also get constant feedback from the students about how well they understand the concepts. When the students get "stuck" and don't seem to be understanding the relevant concept, I find that introducing an analogy from *Seinfeld* often causes the "aha" experience of a concept understood.
2. In my classes, I often have students write case studies, role plays, or scenarios to help them retain the concepts. I find that having the students shift "modes" into pretending to be writing a *Seinfeld* episode again brings a clarity to their thinking about interdependence that otherwise doesn't occur.

Let me illustrate these two uses with examples. In teaching the psychological contract, my objective is to have students define the concept and offer several examples of psychological contracts from their own life experiences. The text I use (Kolb, Rubin, & Osland, 1995) provides several excellent workplace examples of psychological contracts. Yet, many students often have difficulty grasping the contract and identifying psychological contracts to which they are a party. By sharing some of the examples listed above, students seem able to make the lateral thinking shift (de Bono, 1992) necessary to understand a concept that had been foreign to them and "see" psychological contracts operative in their lives.³

Students report that they better understand a number of concepts pertaining to the psychological contract by viewing and discussing *Seinfeld* episodes. Perhaps foremost, the huge number and variety of unstated assumptions become clear. Students claim not to talk about subjects important to them (e.g., what is your obligation to someone you have dated three times who then has a life crisis, or after how many dates can you no longer break up with someone over the phone?). Students learn the importance of trying to articulate up front any important expectations and assumptions they hold. Secondly, they see more apparently pinch points and "crunch points" in action when implicit assumptions have been unmet.

In the case of the concept of interdependence in systems thinking, one session objective is for the students to be able to make linkages among apparently unrelated dynamics in an organization so that the organization is viewed as a system. The supplementary reading is "Paradigms and Systems Thinking" (Dent, 1995, chap. 3). I begin with several examples on which to conduct the "The Five Whys" exercise (Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, & Kleiner, 1994, pp. 108-112). This technique has students trace an effect back at least five steps to its often surprising root cause. Students usually have a fairly easy time grasping the linear trace back to the root cause. The difficulty arises when students are asked to see and describe parallel, interdependent phenomena. Ashby (1956, pp. 53-54) has demonstrated that human minds

lose comprehension of systems with as few as four interdependent parts. Karl Weick (1979, p. 88) has also observed that managers are not oriented to thinking systemically. To increase their comprehension, the next step is for students to develop an interdependence diagram of their own organizations. Putting some things on paper relieves some of the strain of tracing parallel paths mentally. I also encourage them to play with some "simulation" programs outside of class, such as SimCity, a computer game that creates complex interactions of tax rates, unemployment rates, zoning, pollution, infrastructure creation, and other municipal concerns.

If students have difficulty "seeing" the interdependence in their own organizations, I invite them to write about their organization as if they were *Seinfeld* episodes. Senge et al. (1994, pp. 103-105) encouraged storytelling as a successful mechanism for surfacing interdependence. Such storytelling is a method for initial model building. In doing so, students will often even think of Jerry as a representative of their finance organization, Kramer in marketing, and so forth. Somehow, this mental shift taps into a patterning system that is more familiar to students and allows them to develop an interdependence diagram in their own organizations or lives. For example, I have students diagram all of the interdependencies they can discern. Next, I ask them to visualize a conversation between Jerry (in finance) and Kramer (in marketing) if Kramer were to drop by Jerry's office.⁴ I ask them, "What would they discuss? What would Kramer say? What would Jerry say?" Probing with questions such as these has always resulted in students identifying interdependencies they had not previously discerned.

Students seem to learn and retain better a number of systems-thinking concepts after viewing and discussing *Seinfeld* episodes. They are more attuned to "synchronicity" (Jaworski, 1996), the apparently chance meeting of unrelated causal chains that are in fact connected. They are better trained to look for an effect several steps removed from a root cause, a cause having different effects in the short and long terms, a cause having different effects locally and at a distance, and an obvious action leading to an unintended consequence. Finally, they are more persuaded that cause and effect are often not distinct entities. In many instances in organizations and on *Seinfeld*, cause and effect are so blurred as to be indistinguishable.

Conclusion

Learning in the 21st century will occur in many different ways. Learning opportunities will arise in places not commonly thought of as learning venues. One such opportunity is the television show *Seinfeld*. It more vividly and

thoroughly addresses the concepts of interdependence and the psychological contract than can occur within the constraints of the typical college classroom. It also makes for a fun way to learn, "not that there's anything wrong with that."⁵

Notes

1. The show is rightly criticized for rarely portraying a perspective other than those of the four White Manhattanites.
2. All dialog was transcribed by the author.
3. Some *Seinfeld* episodes include work examples. My experience has been, though, that these are not the best examples to use. The workplaces of the *Seinfeld* characters are more like caricatures of the workplaces of students. These scenes do not convey the same powerful social commentary that the *Seinfeld* interpersonal examples do. The students say that they can relate directly to the social examples but not as directly to the workplace examples. Having said that, the most useful are George's experiences as an employee of the New York Yankees.
4. On *Seinfeld*, Kramer routinely drops by Jerry's apartment, so this similarity begins tapping the pattern.
5. A phrase made famous in the episode "The Outing" (Charles, 1993).

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