University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Building ODC as an Academic Discipline (2006) Conferences

January 2006

The Yin and Yang of OD

Matt Minahan
Organization Development Network

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/od_conf_2006

Minahan, Matt, "The Yin and Yang of OD" (2006). *Building ODC as an Academic Discipline (2006)*. 13.
http://repository.upenn.edu/od_conf_2006/13

Originally published in *OD Practitioner,* Volume 38, Number 1, 2006, pages 27-31. Reprinted with permission of the Organization Development Network.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/od_conf_2006/13
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.

The Yin and Yang of OD

Abstract
It appears that our OD graduate schools and certificate programs are stressing more yin principles than yang principles, and that our practitioners are believing them less. Those are the tentative conclusions of an informal survey of 304 OD practitioners conducted in the spring of 2005.

Comments
Originally published in *OD Practitioner,* Volume 38, Number 1, 2006, pages 27-31. Reprinted with permission of the Organization Development Network.

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/od_conf_2006/13

> *"The working hypothesis for the survey was that our OD graduate schools and certificate programs are responsible for the overemphasis on the yin orientation, and we wanted to track these trends over time."*

The Yin and Yang of OD

By Matt Minahan

IT APPEARS THAT our OD graduate schools and certificate programs are stressing more yin principles than yang principles, and that our practitioners are believing them less. Those are the tentative conclusions of an informal survey of 304 OD practitioners conducted in the spring of 2005.

YIN AND YANG DEFINED

Just what are these yin and yang principles and why should we care? The *I Ching,* or Book of Changes describes *yin* as energy that is receptive, responsive, and docile; in western terms, we might call it feminine. *Yang* is described as energy that is creative, powerful, and active; in western terms, we might call it masculine.

These terms come from the *Tao*, the great eastern philosophy of life and change, in which the distinction between subject and object vanishes, embracing both form and matter, unifying wholeness and multiplicity. From the *Tao* flows *ch'i,* the energy that surges through all, and is characterized by *yin* and *yang*. (Banet, 1976)

In trying to determine how to differentiate between yin and yang behavior, we made a few educated guesses, each of which could, and should be debated further. For example:

Yin	Yang
Participative Decision Making	Executive Decision Making
Conflict reflects communication problems and misunderstanding	Conflict reflects competing interests
Leadership is visionary	Management is about "nuts and bolts"
Organizational politics are dysfunctional	Organizational politics should be understood and appreciated
Win win solutions are better for organizations	Winning and losing is natural in organizations
Group and team interests should prevail	Individual interests are natural and legitimate
Authoritarian power is dysfunctional	Power is always present, and is neither good nor bad
Taking the time to change the culture is best	Short term, quickly developed solutions are better
Dialogue is often best	Argument and debate are often best

THE SURVEY'S HYPOTHESIS

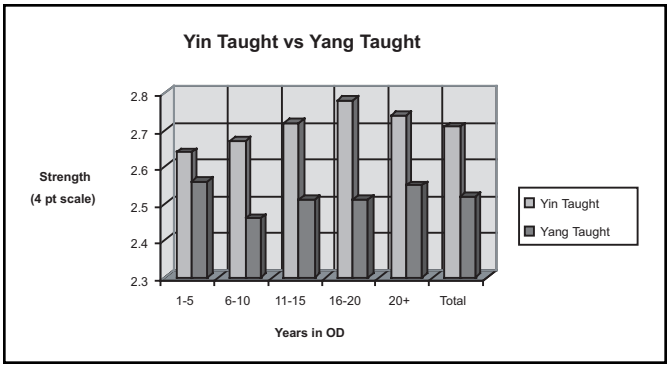
The survey grew out of a conversation that began on the Odnet email discussion list, hosted by the Organization Development Network. Several OD practitioners and academics were talking about the values and principles being taught in our graduate OD programs. Some held that the field of OD has become so feminized and yin oriented that it has lost its yang strength. The survey tends to prove this point of view about what's taught in our schools, but disproves the point about what practitioners are actually doing.

The working hypothesis for the survey was that our OD graduate schools and certificate programs are responsible for the overemphasis on the yin orientation, and we wanted to track these trends over time. The results show a surprisingly high degree of agreement; of the 40 questions, 33 have standard deviations of .99 or lower, 7 have SDs of 1.00 or higher, with the highest being 1.06.

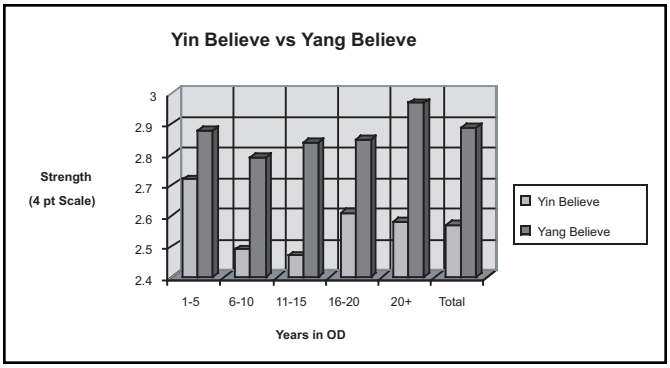
THE RESULTS

Comparing Yin versus Yang, by Years of Experience

At every level of experience, our population reports that it was taught – in graduate schools, in certificate programs, by mentors, etc – more yin principles than yang principles. The difference is most notable among those with 16 -20 years in the field; the difference is least notable among those with 1-5 years in the field. Statistically, all of these differences are significant:

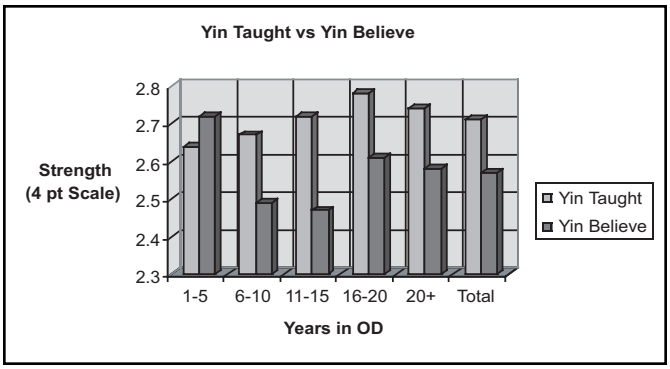


However, after at least a year beyond graduate schools, OD practitioners tend to believe more yang principles than yin principles. The largest differences are among 6-10 and 11-15 year practitioners, and smallest differences among 1-5 and 16-20 year practitioners:

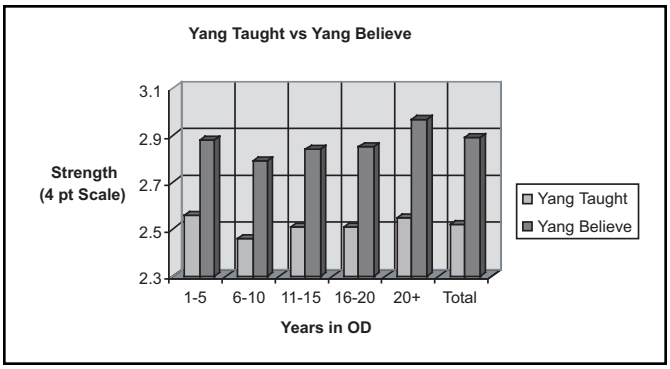


Comparing Taught versus Believe, by Years of Experience

It is only among 1-5 year OD practitioners that yin beliefs exceed the yin principles taught in school; every other age group believes they were taught yin principles more strongly than they currently believe:

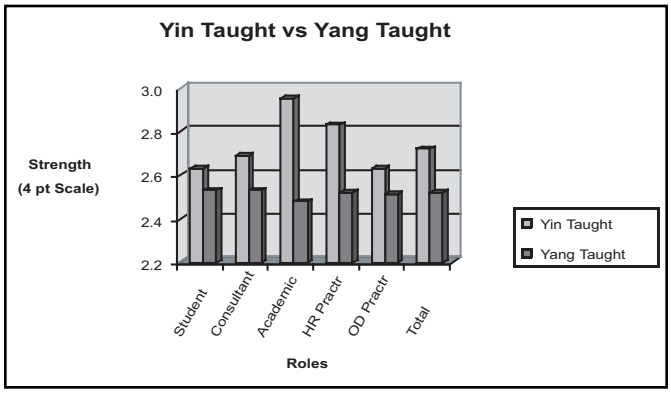


And our yang beliefs tend to grow from what we were taught, at approximately an even rate over our years in the field:

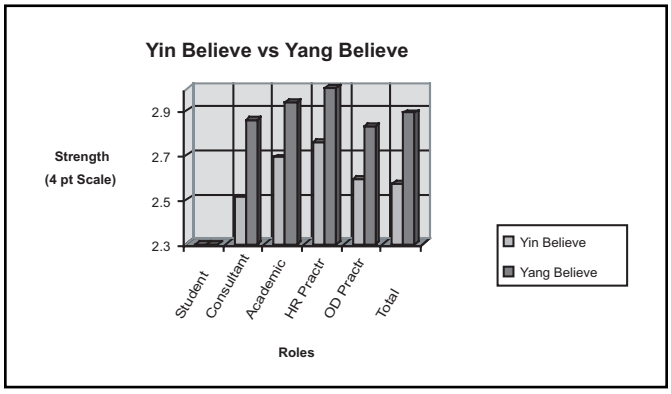


Comparing Yin versus Yang, by Roles

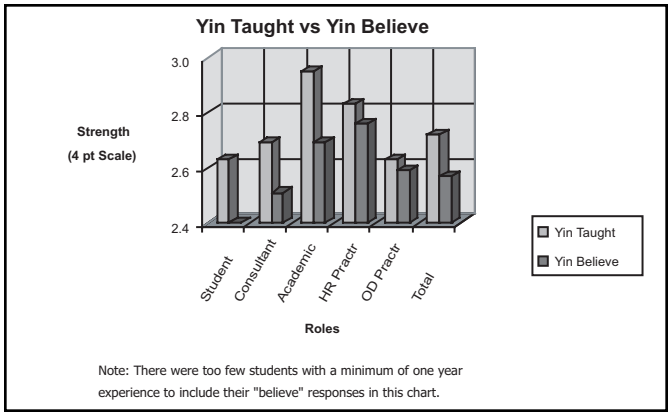
Academics and HR practitioners report the largest differences between yin taught versus yang taught, while students and OD practitioners reported the lowest difference between yin taught versus yang taught:



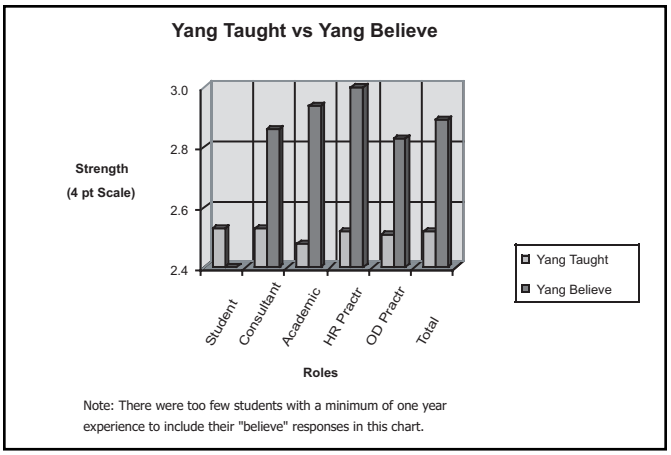
Because we were looking to understand the differences between what OD practitioners are taught, versus what they believe over time, we excluded "believe" responses from students with less than one year experience. Across the 4 remaining roles, yang beliefs are stronger than yin beliefs, by between .3 and .5:



Consultants and academics report that they believe much less yin now than what they were taught. OD and HR practitioners say that they believe somewhat less yin than what they were taught:



Interestingly, the yang taught is approximately as strong across all 5 roles, as is the yang believed:



STRONGEST EXAMPLES OF YIN AND YANG RESPONSES

At every level of experience, our respondents reported a heavier emphasis on principles that the survey assigned to yang values than on yin values. On our 4 point scale, the most strongly held yang principles, in descending order, were:

- I believe: Understanding and appreciating the politics of an organization is important for OD consultants *(mean: 3.85)*
- I believe: Individual interests (what's-in-it-for-me) is a natural and legitimate part of human and organization dynamics *(mean: 3.69)*
- I believe: Power is ever-present in organizations, and, as such, is neither good nor bad *(mean: 3.60)*

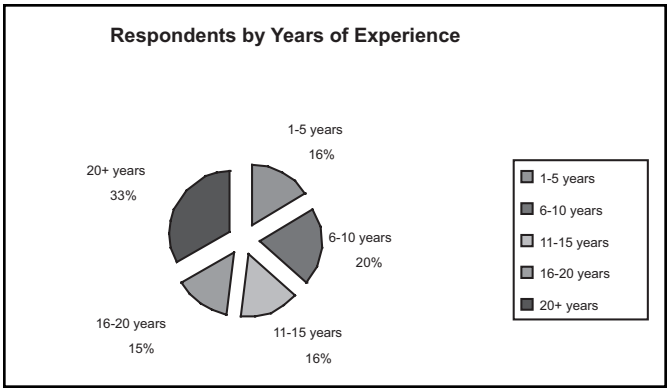
By contrast, the most strongly held yin principles, in descending order, were:

- I believe: Participative decision-making yields higher quality decisions *(mean: 3.22)*
- I believe: The best way to resolve issues is through dialogue rather than debate or argument *(mean: 3.13)*
- I believe: Changing culture is the most effective and long-lasting way of improving organizations *(mean: 3.00)*

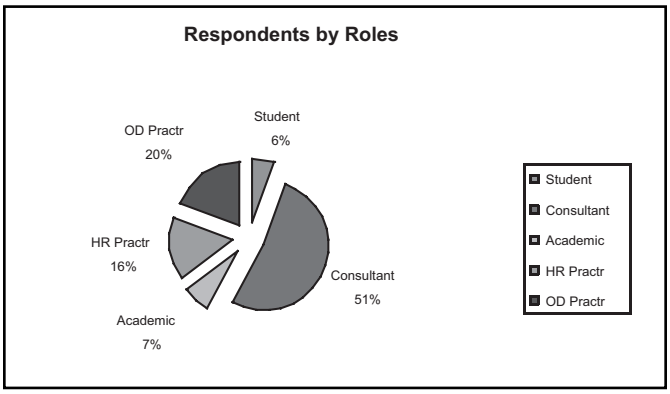
DEMOGRAPHICS SNAPSHOTS

Of our 304 respondents, 299 identified their gender, breaking 55.9% female and 44.1% male.

The largest percentage—fully one third of respondents—have 20+ years of experience in the field:



More than half of respondents identified themselves as consultants:



SUMMARY OF QUALITATIVE COMMENTS

There were several additional themes that emerged from the open ended comments at the end of the survey. Of the 78 comments, among the most consistent comments were:

- 11 respondents noted that graduate and school training was a long time ago, perhaps too long ago to really remember. For example,
  - *"Recalling what I was taught 30 years ago is unreliable."*
  - *"It's been 34 years since my OD training. Not sure if I recall the details too well."*
- An additional 5 said that they had a hard time sorting between what they were taught and what they believe. For example,
  - *"Some thought provoking questions! Hard to sort out what I was taught from what I've come to believe."*
  - *"I found it hard to separate what "I was taught" from what "I have learned." My MSOD degree was earned in 1993. I have remained an avid reader in the field since and have had many influences from reading [so] it's hard to separate the graduate school lessons from those learned in other forums.*
- 6 respondents said it was difficult to answer the questions without more context. For example,
  - *"The answer to many of these questions depends on the situation but I answered the best I could with no context."*
  - *"My OD education stressed the uniqueness of any organization and the situation in which it finds itself. For most of my responses, therefore, I would add a qualifying clause to this effect."*
- 5 reinforced the point that they've learned their OD on the job rather than in schools. For example, "
  - *"My training in OD & facilitation consisted of grounding and facilitator training. My answers represent the philosophy of the consulting company."*
  - *"I am not "trained" in OD–I am trained in T-group training by NTL and widely read in what I consider "OD"—but my definition of the field is at odds with some."*
- There were 18 comments about the survey itself, some expressing appreciation for the chance to participate, and other expressing frustration at the questions and underlying assumptions. For example,
  - *"While I applaud your efforts to understand, I'm not sure you're getting what you want with this survey. It's difficult if not impossible to splice apart in such detail where a particular emphasis was placed. For instance, I have accumulated my knowledge about OD from my education and through lots of interaction with others and voraciously reading. It comes across from this survey that it's either culture change or short-term quick fixes."*
  - *"This survey has certain built in biases that will not provide the developers with as deep and broad section of issues as they may hope. I don't know why you call this the "Yin Yang" of OD, since it is not truly reflective of yin/yang and doesn't include the Tao. My understanding, education and experience in OD is much more complex and robust than this survey allows for."*

AUTHOR

MATT MINAHAN, EdD, has been a member of the OD Network for 20 years, coordinates the odnet email discussion lists, and is working as a volunteer on several OD Network projects. He is president of MM & Associates, a small consulting firm specialzing in strategic planning and organization design. Matt can be reached at *matt@minahangroup.com*.

Finally, we were reminded of the shortcomings of dualistic thinking:

- *"These are polarities, where both "opposites" are true. With Nielhs Bohr: "The opposite of a great truth. . . is another great truth."*

WHAT'S THE "SO WHAT" HERE?

Of course, the central truth of the final comment above is what yin and yang are all about. There is an ebb and flow of both energies in systems simultaneously, and, over time, both energies are present and balance each other out. To a certain extent, that's what we found in the survey overall. But the difference between and among populations tell us something about that ebb and flow within the field of OD.

For instance, it appears that students drawn to our OD schools and certificate programs are taught more yin than yang by teachers who believe more yin than yang. That shows up as preferring participative decision making, visionary and facilitative leadership, win-win solutions to conflict, dialogue over debate, long-term culture change, to a statistically significant degree.

However, it appears that, as early as the first year after school, practitioners give up their yin beliefs for yang beliefs, such as power is ever-present in organizations and is neither good nor bad, winning and losing are necessary realities, individual interests are natural, argument and debate are often important, and short term solutions are often more useful than attempts to change cultures.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT, AND WHY IT IS NOT

What makes the responses of the 304 survey participants so interesting is that they are so tightly aligned across roles, gender, and experience groups. The confidence intervals in this data are very high, which means that more analysis needs to occur, to help discover other meanings in the data.

But—and this is the big one – we really have no idea, for certain, what we're measuring. Four behavioral scientists made up some questions about power, decision making, participation, and communication, and sorted them so that the stronger, more assertive questions pointed to yang results, and the more receptive, responsive, and some would say, feminine questions pointed to yin results. Construct validity can not be assumed with this survey, even as tempted as we are to trust our intuitive sense about the results.

END NOTES

Many thanks to the 304 people who took our survey, and to the survey collaborators and co-conspirators: Karl Albrecht for hosting our web survey on his company web site, to Bill LeGray for doing the initial analysis and data reporting and keeping an analytical eye on our work, and Stan Herman for animating the project.

Finally, a huge "thank you" is due to Dr. Bea Carson for managing the quantitative data analysis that generated the main findings in this article. ■

REFERENCE

Banet, A. 1976. *Creative psychotherapy: A source book.* University Associates. La Jolla, CA.