

# David J. Hickson

20 April 1931 – 22 June 2016

David J. Hickson died on Wednesday, June 22, 2016. That statement baldly puts a full stop at the end of a well-lived life, a life that made a difference to family and friends and to the worldwide academic community of scholars of organizations.

David made a significant difference to our field in three important, substantive, ways: through his own research; through his involvement in the founding and early years of EGOS; and through his role in *Organization Studies*. These contributions were recognized by him being the first ever Honorary Member of EGOS in 1998 and by receiving the Joanne Martin Trailblazer Award from the Organization and Management Theory Division of the Academy of Management in 2013. And yet, David arrived in academe by an unusual route. After a time as Assistant Secretary of the Bristol Stock Exchange, he had gone to the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology to pursue his ambition of becoming a personnel manager. However, Reg Revans spotted his potential as a researcher and he went on to do a Master's degree, studying restriction of output in a machine shop. It was from there that he was recruited by the new head of the Department of Industrial Administration at Birmingham College of Advanced Technology (later the University of Aston), Tom Lupton, and his career as an academic researcher took off.

In terms of the research that he carried out over a period of four decades, his contributions are through the Aston group, the strategic contingencies theory of power and strategic organizational decision-making. David was a leading member of the Aston group, central to the development of those concepts and findings on organization structure and context that have remained important to our understanding of organizations to this day. In particular, the work he led on operations technology and organization structure helped formulate the terms of that debate. The role of technology in organizational design still features as an important set of ideas about organizations. During his time with the Aston programme, two qualities began to be apparent in David. One was his keen sense of the relationship between theory and data. Yes, he wished to spend time sorting out concepts, but equally, it was important to him to collect and analyse data. Another, was his tremendous attention to detail; no one could get away with shoddy work in David's presence. Nothing was to be missed, no stone to be left unturned. These qualities remained with him all of his life and have been important to the mark he has made on our field.

But during his time at Aston he was able to appreciate the role of theory more and more and when he was invited to spend time at the University of Alberta from 1968–70, the project he led there bore all the hallmarks of his approach to research. What became known as the strategic contingencies theory of power showed his commitment to theory, his concern with data, and the rigour and thoroughness of his approach to research. The original paper of that research has been highly influential and the ideas were an important grounding for resource dependence theory. It also inspired a continuing theoretical and empirical discussion of power. These ideas still have to be dealt with in any discussion of power in organizations. Indeed, the latest citation of this work is in the April 2016 issue of the *Academy of Management Review*. Forty years after the work was done, it continues to help shape debate on the nature of power in organizations. Thus, David was important in establishing the conversation about power in organizations.

From this work came his invitation to apply for a professorship at the University of Bradford, where, from 1970 on, he was to spend the rest of his academic life. It was also from the work that he had initiated at Alberta that his lifelong interest in strategic decision making became crystallised. At Bradford he led research teams, worked with PhD students and developed concepts and theories on how decisions are made by senior managers. One of the outcomes of this research was the book "Top Decisions" that remains, a path-breaking, benchmark study. During this time, David dealt with issues of the production of strategic decisions, the shape of the decision making process, the implementation of those decisions, and the nature of organizational processes within which decision making is embedded. David Hickson's name is synonymous with the study of strategic, macro, organizational decision making.

So, from an academic research perspective, David's contribution was much more than most of us can hope to achieve. He was centrally involved in three major studies, which have become part of the accepted canon of literature on organizations, namely, the Aston studies, the strategic contingencies theory of power, and strategic decision making. Surely this was more than enough for any one person. But no, David made a massive contribution to our professional community through the European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS), and our journal, *Organization Studies*.

David was one of a small group of people who made EGOS a reality. Soon after arriving back in Britain after his two-year sojourn in Canada, David began to explore the possibility of a European grouping of organizational researchers. While in North America he had seen the influence of bodies such as the American Sociological Association and the Academy of Management, and, as a committed European (unlike so many British of the 1970s and now this decade), he also saw the possibilities on a European scale. So, a small group of people, including David, launched the European Group for Organization Studies, with its first Colloquium in Breauxsans-Nappe in 1975. EGOS has since played a major role in developing organization theory initially in Europe, and latterly as an international forum that increasingly draws together European, North American and Asian scholars. As the links between North America, Europe and Asia have increased in strength, we can easily take for granted the vibrancy of European organization theory. But without the trailblazing work of David Hickson, through EGOS (and *Organization Studies*), those links that we now accept as being part of the globalization of organization theory would not be so strong. David's important contribution enabled new ideas to circulate and new conversations to take place.

David's experience at Aston and in Alberta had demonstrated the influence and importance of Administrative Science Quarterly, but he was interested in the possibility of a journal with a non-North American focus come into prominence, although he had grave doubts about whether it was really a possibility. The birth of *Organization Studies* and his doubts about the whole thing was chronicled by David in an 'Inside Story' in *Organization Studies* with its beginnings in a bedroom in Speyer in 1977 ("Inside Story: the Bedroom Scene", *Organization Studies*, 1: 87–90). Suffice it to say that David was an important midwife in the birth of the journal in 1980 and then served for eleven years as its Editor-in-Chief. It was in this role that David ensured that not only did *Organization Studies* get off the ground, but that it became the leading European-based journal for organizational analysis. As an editor, he was tireless in searching out papers and authors, encouraging submissions, giving critical but positive feedback, and encouraging all things associated with the journal. Very few of us have any idea of what it takes, as an Editor, to launch a journal and build it into a leading journal, and when one thinks of this being done in a multi-cultural environment, across nation states and languages, then the challenge is enormous. We need to remember that David did this while occupying a chair at Bradford and leading

a groundbreaking series of research studies on strategic decision making. As editor for the first eleven years, he was central in developing that distinctive voice of OS and ensuring that a variety of alternative ways of thinking about organizations were established.

At this time of remembering David Hickson's life I would like to add a more personal note. He was not only my colleague but my friend and I will miss him. We worked together very intensively for twelve years and then continued to discuss ideas, research, EGOS, *Organization Studies* over the succeeding 35 years. All the time David was very willing to give of himself. He was always committed to working with others. Right from the days of Aston, David worked in teams for research and professional purposes. In doing that, he has contributed immeasurably to the life of colleagues and they have contributed in the same way to his life. He certainly contributed to my life.

I would also like to remember David's family, which was very important to him, as they go through a time of grieving but also, I know, a time of really good reminiscences. I think of his wife, Marjorie, and the difficulties that she has surmounted with incredible strength and optimism. She has been an extremely important part of David's life and his success as an academic. His children, Adrian and Luci, and their spouses together with his five grandchildren were important in providing a space away from academia, in which other interests and activities could be indulged. I know that his grandchildren will miss 'Bompa'. I wish all of his family well as they move into this different phase of their lives.

Thank you for your life and your contribution, David.

Bob Hinings