
Spotlight on Edgar Schein

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Editor's note – The “Spotlight” series is intended to highlight important historical figures who contributed to the science of military psychology. If you have suggestions for future Spotlight articles, please reach out to the editor at hami3505@bears.unco.edu. Thank you to William Douglas Woody, PhD for his feedback on a draft of this article.

For many military psychologists with an Industrial and Organizational (IO) background, the name Edgar Schein is quite familiar. What may be surprising for some is to learn that he began his career, like so many military psychologists, as an intern for the United States Army. His time in the Army served as a springboard for future successes and scientific contributions made to the field of psychology. Edgar Henry Schein is now a Professor Emeritus from MIT Sloan School of Management and a visionary scholar in organizational culture, process consultation, career dynamics, and organizational learning and change. He is a recipient of multiple achievement awards including the 2015 Bechgard Award for a lifetime of outstanding contributions to the field of Organizational Development given by the International Organization Development Association (IODA). Schein has authored 14 books, which contributed to total of more than 240 publications across more than 60 years.

Dr. Schein's story begins in Zurich, Switzerland, where he was born to two physicists. His father, Marcel Schein, served as a professor of physics at the university of Zurich until a political dispute between Switzerland and Czechoslovakia forced the family to immigrate to either China or Russia in 1935 (Schein, 2016). The family moved to Russia, where Schein's father continued teaching physics at the University of Odessa until 1937 when the Schein family were once again forced to leave their host country due to Stalin's Great Purge (see Shatz, 1984). After moving to the United States, Schein's father continued his professorship at the University of Chicago where he was recruited as part of a greater effort to develop an atomic bomb (Schein, 2016).

Edgar Schein began his academic journey at his father's own University of Chicago but later transferred to Stanford University where he completed his Bachelors and Masters degree in social psychology under the tutelage of Harry Helson (Schein, 2016). In 1949, Schein entered Harvard University's social psychology Doctoral program where he studied under the likes of Gordon Allport and Henry Murray, among other prominent social psychologists. In 1950, the US activated the draft to meet military necessity during the Korean War. It was shortly thereafter when Schein found his way to the United States

Army and accepted a paid internship at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in 1952 (Schein, 2016).

Korean War Repatriate Work

The Korean War introduced Americans to shockingly influential interrogation tactics by Communist China eventually termed *brainwashing* (Hunter, 1956; HCUAA, 1958), a term which is largely misunderstood to this day (Schein, 2016). The concerns expressed by the American public and government leaders drove the response by the US military to better understand the tactics used by China and provide a means of resistance to American servicemembers in the event of capture (Woody, Gretz, Lafary, & Rosenblum, 2022). Two prominent prisoner exchanges between North Korea and the United States provided an opportunity for psychologists and others to interview returning POWs in order to provide treatment as well as better understand the psychological forces that were levied against American POWs (see Woody et al., 2022). These prisoner exchanges occurred in the Spring and late Summer of 1953 and were termed the *Little Switch*, and the *Big Switch* respectively (Schein, Cooley, & Singer, 1960). During the second prisoner exchange more than 3,000 former POWs were returned.

Captain Schein received a telegram in the summer of 1953, and within 48 hours he reported to Travis Air Force Base in order to prepare for the repatriation of POWs captured in the Korean War (Schein, 2016). The plan was to meet POWs in Inchon Korea and accompany them back to the US. During the 16-day voyage, Captain Schein and his colleagues expected to provide therapy and assess the POW's mental health. Upon arrival in Inchon, Schein was met with the news that the ship chartered to facilitate the journey back to the US was delayed for three weeks. Turning frustration to opportunity Schein began to interview former POWs about their experiences. Over the three weeks Schein conducted 20 interviews lasting between two and four hours each as part of a greater effort to interview over 200 POWs prior to boarding (Schein, 1956a; Schein, 1956b).

Keeping the Faith and Returning with Honor

Schein's commitment to military psychology continues to positively impact servicemembers' lives to this day. During the repatriation effort, Schein and others conducted nearly 4,000 psychological assessments of returning POWs (Lifton, 1954; Schein, 1956a; Schein, 1956b; Schein et al., 1957; Singer & Schein, 1958). The lessons learned from these studies as well as other sources (see Woody et al., 2020) directly led to the advancement of interventions designed to fortify US servicemembers against coercive persuasion efforts during captivity

(Schein, 1961a). The contributions made by these early scholars continue to aid servicemembers in keeping the faith and returning with honor.

Following repatriation, Schein and his colleagues continued to collect data from former Korean War POWs for an additional 2 years. The study, published two years after Schein was discharged from the Army, included 113 repatriates who were asked about their post-repatriation experiences in respect to education, health, occupation, social and family relationships, community integration, and their retrospective perceptions of POW experiences (Schein, Cooley, & Singer, 1960). Schein et al (1960) highlighted what would likely be termed posttraumatic growth today. Among those interviewed, between 22% and 25% indicated they “learned enough from the [POW] experience to be willing to endure it again” (p.34). The assertion that former POWs would endure such horrendous conditions again and that they had benefited in some way is especially remarkable given that their release from captivity had occurred between 3 and 5 years earlier.

Schein’s commitment to POWs is made clear when he combined advocacy with scientific results in the face of serious accusations levied against those who collaborated with Chinese interrogators. In direct contradiction to the assertions of Kinkead (1959) of widespread “moral collapse among the prisoners resulting in extensive failure of men to help each other,” Schein et al. (1960 p. 37) noted that only 14% of the sample consisting of both collaborators and non-collaborators made mentioned moral collapse during interviews. Indeed, *moral collapse* was far too simplistic an answer to explain why approximately 16.5% of POWs, according to Schein et al. (1960) collaborated with their captors. Most importantly, the 2-year study demonstrated that 65% of former POWs felt that they were not adequately prepared for being a Prisoner of War. 29% of former POWs highlighted the importance of having information about the enemy while 27% identified information about what it is like to be a POW would have been invaluable during enemy captivity (Schein et al., 1960). These research findings led directly to various SERE training initiatives that are still relevant today. Undoubtedly, the accounts of former POWs highlighted by Schein and his colleagues continue to aid U.S. servicemembers today.

Continued Commitment

Following his time in the Army, Schein accepted a position at MIT Sloan School of Management where he taught until his retirement in 2006 (Schein, 2012) As a professor, Schein shifted his focus toward IO psychology and published multiple works pertaining to organizational culture (Schein, 1983; Schein, 1985), career anchors (Schein, 1977), management education (Schein, 1961b), process consultation (Schein, 1969), and leadership philosophy (Schein, 1992; Schein, 2003). Harnessing his developing expertise in these areas, Schein once again returned to the health and welfare of former POWs and returning Vietnam veterans but this time he focused on career rehabilitation and vocational guidance.

Schein (1972) highlighted the difficulties former POWs may encounter with career progression and how employers might best support former POW employees. He identified five main areas of focus that remain relevant today in terms of reintegration. Creating a psychologically safe environment or a place “where trial and error are possible without severe consequences, yet valid feedback is provided” (Schein, 1972, p.9) is critical for a POW’s successful career progression. He also identified the importance of listing the POW’s job abilities “graded from easy to difficult in order to encourage the testing of his limits” (p.9), and understanding what job opportunities exist in the market (Schein, 1972). Next, Schein explains how important consistent therapeutic opportunities where the focus of treatment should be to process career frustrations and be encouraged to once again “test himself against new opportunities” (p.9). Finally, Schein stated that supportive but accurate feedback is important for employers to share with former POW employees. By providing such feedback repatriates are better able to assess their current performance and make necessary changes in order to further their occupational ambitions.

Clearly, Edgar Schein maintained a strong affinity for former POWs decades after his time in the Army. His commitment to growth and strength-based interventions were far ahead of industry standards in terms of both vocational counseling and therapy. Many of these same assumptions about former POWs or Isolated Persons (IP) are maintained by psychologists fortunate enough to assist in their reintegration. The notion that repatriates are expected to make a full recover following captivity is a longstanding assumption made by current SERE psychologists (Hiller Lauby & Morgan, 2022). Schein’s clear philosophical stances continue to challenge military psychologists broadly to identify the strengths in their patients, build upon their resilience and not over-pathologize survivors of austere life experiences.

Military psychologists have undoubtedly benefited from the work of Edgar Schein. His contributions to the field of military psychology over more than 60 years has made lasting impacts on IO, clinical, research, and operational psychology. His clear commitment to POWs and servicemembers more broadly was maintained throughout his career both in and out of uniform. As a Society, we carry his legacy of advancing the science and practice of psychology to promote the health and welfare of current and former servicemembers across a diverse array of specialties. For these reasons it is important that as a community we celebrate a lifetime of commitment and dedicated service that highlights many of values that since 1945 we as a society have held dear.

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