

A Structure-Function Approach to Organization¹

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As our graduate seminars teach us, there are many points of view from which human behavior may be studied: as motivations or as the outcome of social forces; as an expression of neuromuscular set or of the history of the society; genetically or contemporaneously. The problems of organization are similarly susceptible to more than one approach. Two orientations are discernable in our work to date: an emphasis on organization as a setting within which human beings spend a part of their life, and alternatively, an emphasis on organization as a social form. In the one case the individual is figure and the organization ground. In the other it is the other way around.

Which of these emphases is the more appropriate in a given situation depends on the problem to be dealt with. The effect of the organization on the well-being of its members is best studied by concentrating on the

1 Much of this material will appear in Robert S. Weiss, Processes of Organization, to be published by the Survey Research Center. The theory is based on the points of view expressed by Newcomb, Parsons, Hawley and Levy. (Newcomb, Social Psychology, New York, Dryden Press, 1950. Parsons, The Social System, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1951. Hawley, Human Ecology, a Theory of Community Structure, New York, Ronald Press, 1950. Levy, The Structure of Society, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1952.) The sections having to do specifically with organization draw on the work of Weber, Barnard, Simon, Bakke, and Selznick. (Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization, translated by A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons, New York, Oxford University Press, 1947. Barnard, The Functions of the Executive, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1938. Simon, Administrative Behavior, New York, Macmillan Co., 1947. Bakke, Bonds of Organization: an Appraisal of Corporate Human Relations, New York, Harper, 1950. Selznick, TVA and the Grass Roots, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1949.)

members. The functioning of the organization is best understood by concentrating on the organization itself.

The social scientist who is interested in human beings in organizations, rather than in the organization itself, tends to conceptualize problems in terms of the motivations of the individuals who become members of the organization; the rewards, punishments, or other influences the organization brings to bear on them; and the consequent satisfaction or dissatisfaction of the members. He tends to see the history of the organization, the techniques it uses to maintain itself as a functioning unit, its power blocs, cliques, and divisions, its lines of authority, its structure and function, all as background material. He may be interested in these things and quite sensitive to them, but they are useful in his analysis only as they bear on what happens to the member of the organization.

Where the individual emphasis involves the organization only as it bears on its members, the organizational approach deals with individuals only as they contribute to the organization. The organization is conceptualized from the very beginning completely apart from its members. One way this can be done is by thinking of the organization as a structure of offices and relations between offices, like the models chemists make of molecular structures, with different colored balls to represent atoms, and rods which connect the balls to represent chemical bonds. The atoms are offices; jobs to be filled, with titles, authorities, and responsibilities. The bonds are working relationships among offices. It is true that individuals must fill the offices before the organization can function, but their motivations and goals are secondary questions. The more

primary questions have to do with the operation of the organization; how tasks are assigned to offices; what the range is within which individuals are adaptable to demands made on them by the organization; how coordination comes about among the staff of the organization.

Unfortunately the molecular figure emphasizes the structure of the organization at the expense of its functions. A fuller statement would be that the organization is a social form which has the following characteristics:

- (a) a set of individuals in offices,
- (b) individual responsibility for definite tasks -- functional activities -- which are parts of a division of labor,
- (c) an organizational goal to which the activities of the staff contribute, and
- (d) a stable system of coordinative relationships, i.e., a structure.

An office is a position in the organizational structure in regard to which role prescriptions exist: i.e., there are shared expectations among the members of the organization regarding the duties to be performed by the individual who occupies the office. In addition the office has associated with it a title, a salary scale, formal specifications of duties, and a place on an organizational chart. These latter elements are formal representations of expectations regarding the duties, privileges, and proper coordinative relationships of the individual who fills the office.

Individuals in organizations habitually function as occupants of offices, as is apparent at those exceptional times when they do not; at

office parties, for example. Then the staff members are faced with the serious problem of finding new ways to relate to one another.

The organization allocates to offices tasks which then become the responsibilities of whoever fills the office. These tasks contribute to the organization's efforts to reach a goal. In this sense, they are functional activities.

The method of allocation of functional activities adopted by the organization contrasts severely with the method of more informal groups. In the group anyone who recognizes something which has to be done, and is capable of doing it, is likely to set about it. In the family an executive will answer the phone, the door, and the mail, and will type his own letters. The same executive doing the same things in his office would be drawing attention to something unusual in his situation, perhaps that his secretary was overworked or incompetent. The jobs still require doing, but they're someone else's responsibility. In the organization, one has a definite job, and one does it, and that is that.

The organizational goal is the basis for the existence of the jobs, and of the organization. Individuals, by doing their jobs, help the organization reach its goal. The organizational goal may not be a personal goal of all, or even of any, of its members. All the organization asks is that its members be committed to doing a good job. It assumes that if they do their job well, they will thereby contribute to the goals of the organization adequately enough. The leaders of the organization may be required to show deeper commitment, since their roles require an ability to identify actively with the collectivity they are heading. Yet they do not set the organization's goals any more than do other members. Leaders

may come and leaders may go, and the organization will maintain its direction.

We will find no organizations without goals, but it is of interest to speculate on what such a social form might be like. Franz Kafka's inventions probably capture the essential elements: an organization which strives for nothing, where there is no reason for one activity to be preferred to another, except perhaps tradition. The total effect is of unbearable pointlessness.

The goal of the organization is embedded in the organization's very definition. The organization is defined from its beginning as a collectivity for the achievement of something. From then on, as individuals become members of the organization, they "understand" the organization, identify with it, as a collectivity with definite aims. The aims may not be their personal aims, but they can pitch in and help with them nevertheless. And, by reference to them, they can estimate what actions will serve the collectivity, and what actions will impede its progress.

The high ranking executives of an organization do have a special role in relation to the organization's goals. They are responsible for the development of a program, a plan of action for the organization, by which the goal may be achieved. This program should not be thought of as setting the goal, in any way. Instead it interprets it -- operationalizes it -- and sets the means.

Turning now to the organizational structure, it should be noted that the coworkers of an individual tend to remain the same over time and, if the individual leaves the organization, his replacement will pick up most of the relationships he maintained. The overall system of coordinative

relationships changes only slowly in the ordinary course of events, and it is in part this stability which is emphasized by the phrase "organizational structure." It should also be noted that the structure of the organization reflects the organization's division of labor; the distribution of the total task among the staff. It is possible to think of the structure as the characteristic of the organization which reflects its method of operation in the same way that anatomy reflects physiology. The routes of coordination, and thus the way in which the segmented functional activities are integrated with each other are embodied in the organizational structure.

The organization, as a social form which achieves its goals through the coordinated effort of individuals in offices, faces three basic problems:

- (1) the problem of the allocation of responsibility for particular functional activities to particular members of the organization;
- (2) the problem of acceptance of responsibility by the member of the organization (referred to as the problem of adaptation);
- (3) the problem of the coordination of the functional activities of the members of the organization.

If the assumption is made that these problems are continuous in their demands, and that any breakdown in the way they are met would be disastrous to the organization, then their solutions must also be continuously in evidence. To convey this the solutions to these problems may be thought of as continuous processes, each necessary to the maintenance of the organization.

To quite an extent the processes are built into the organization, although they require a properly trained staff member to make them work. One process of coordination, for example, may be based on the allocation to an important executive of the responsibility for allocating tasks to others, and checking on their completed work. He will be expected to do his own job in such a way that his subordinates' efforts are coordinated. But even here coordination is dependent on the executive being someone who knows how to supervise, and the lower level personnel being individuals who know how to work under supervision.

The question regarding individuals which is relevant to an organizational approach is not so much "How is the individual affected by the organization," as it is "What does the organization require of the individual?" What seems to be the case is that the organization requires, once it has conveyed to the member what his job is, that he accept the assignment fully enough to perform it adequately. Different levels of acceptance are required of the individual, depending on the job. The elevator operator, the switchboard girl, and the filing clerk perform adequately so long as they know the formal requirements of their role and contrive to meet them. The executive who must choose from many courses of action the course which is best for the organization, represent and interpret the organization to subordinates and others, and serve as a flexible yet reliable link among separate units, must identify with his job much more fully.

While individual acceptance of the job is a process crucial for the organization, it is one over which it has only partial control. The organization may try to make its jobs as desirable as possible, and may

hire individuals who have done well elsewhere, but beyond this it can only rely on the individual to be motivated to do his job. It cannot itself supply the motivation. On the other hand, the organization can count on the individual's basic desire to do a good job, and willingness to identify with the organization as a collectivity.

These two psychological tendencies in the organization member -- desire to do a good job, and willingness to identify with the organization -- allow the organization a certain amount of leeway in its construction of jobs, and allow it to de-emphasize authority relations and sanctions for poor performance. The source of these tendencies may, perhaps, be traced to a socialization theme in America. The baseball team of nine-year-olds may settle the assignment of positions on the basis of ownership of ball, bat, and gloves, assuming that the owner of the equipment is entitled to determine its use. But a group only a few years older will have the best pitcher pitching, and the boy who is best at getting on base as the first batter. The socialization theme is partly learning to take a role, but more than that, it is learning to contribute to a collectivity through taking a role.

From this cultural emphasis would develop good organization members: individuals who can understand the necessity for accepting a role as a way of contributing to a collectivity. Some positions would require the good organization member more than others. The lower level executive, and particularly the non-specialist, who cannot make of his job what he wants, and cannot expect a job tailored to a person with his training, might do best if he were a good organization member. The organization, so long as it can hire this kind of person, designs its jobs accordingly.

Yet the range of activities to which an individual may be expected to adapt is not unlimited. The organization will first be required to combine responsibilities in a way acceptable to most potential staff members. In addition it must associate with these responsibilities rewards sufficient to keep the staff member preoccupied with mastering the activities allocated to him, even when other jobs in other organizations become available.

The organization which has constructed jobs that are difficult to staff is in a serious way once it begins to lose the staff it has. A vicious circle may develop of problem, inadequate solution, further problem. Since the organization is understaffed, the remaining members are forced to take on activities which would not ordinarily be parts of their job. If the activities are beneath them, they threaten their sense of occupational status. If the activities are of high status the employees resent the allocation of tasks for which they are not qualified and not paid. If the organization seeks a solution by curtailing its goals, so that it no longer requires some functional activities, the goal which is dropped is likely to be its most idealistic, just because it is this goal which is least related to the problem of organizational survival. Some staff members are likely to have identified strongly with it, the more so since the organization began to have trouble, and its loss will result in their demoralization. So, while the organization may count on a range of adaptability among its members, it is imperative to it that it not construct its jobs so that they overstep this range. The good organization member takes up some of the slack; the organization must take up the rest.

This particular relationship between individual and organization is a reflection of the larger American scene. A different culture would require a different kind of organization, or, possibly, might support none at all. For example, the German emphasis on role-taking as an element in superior-subordinate relationships, in contrast to the American emphasis on role-taking as a way of pitching in, is reflected in organizations where there is much more emphasis on lines of authority, and much less emphasis on informal communication. One would guess the result to be a more efficient, less flexible, organization, capable of fixing a higher basic level of contribution from its members, but incapable of sponsoring creativity. It would be traditional, rather than innovating, except as innovation is introduced by leaders; more responsive to the demands of chief executives, but less responsive to the needs, demands, and wishes of the rank and file; in general, dependent on leadership rather than on cooperation.²

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- 2 A German student of industrial psychology and I discussed the way group decision might work out in the American factory and in the German factory. We took the problem of deciding on a vacation time. In the American factory there would be give and take, probably ending with a vote, and the agreement that the majority should rule. In the German factory the first suggestion would be that the foreman decide. If the foreman said, "No, you men decide," the men would individually state the period best for them: "May," "Early August," and so on. If the foreman then said, "We can't shut down the plant all that time, You have to decide on one time," they would say, "All right. You decide on one time. We have told you our preferences." Further insistence by the foreman on group decision would be met by increased opposition among the men. The difference is that Americans are able to see themselves as forming a group, aside from their working relationships. The Germans are a group only as they are led by their foreman. The informal group is a potentiality in America in a way it probably is not in Germany. For a description of the problems met in attempting to work with Germans as one would with Americans, see Watson and Lippitt, Learning Across Cultures, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1955, pp. 75-96. The experiences of the authors with group decision involving visiting German students are uniformly discouraging.

The question of the kind of organization which would be supported by a different culture from our own is a different kind of question from one asking how organizations meet the needs and goals of their members. It has to do with the organization as a social form, with its own problems and properties, responsive to the culture of which it is a part. For the right problem -- one example of which arises when we think about exporting along with our surplus goods the organizational forms which produced them -- it is the right approach. Then it is as practical to think about the organization as the unit of analysis as, in other situations, it is to concentrate on the individual.

Suppose that the inferences regarding German adaptation to role demands are correct; that here adaptation is founded on early experiences with a strongly hierarchic family structure and a strongly hierarchic school system. What must we recognize as necessary modifications of our understanding of organization as we move from the American to the German? Perhaps most strongly affected will be coordination processes, which, even in the most formal American organizations, leave to the individual some responsibility for coordination with others. In the German organization we must expect the peer relationship this involves to be not so trustworthy. Instead we should expect a more elaborate formal system for the achievement of coordination, with heavier responsibility on centrally placed executives. We should be willing to grant sharper status differentials between levels, commensurate with the sharply increasing responsibility. We should be wary regarding group decision, not because the tradition is different, but because the prerequisites of group decision are not met.

This is pure speculation, and submitted only as an example of an application of organization-level conceptualization. Its leading idea is that we must understand what organization really is, and how it works, if we are to plan organizations. If we have this understanding, we can work toward social forms which are effective in their settings, and which in achieving their goals utilize and express, rather than clash with, the personalities of their staffs. Without this understanding we can only design our organizations from tradition, projection, and the unrealistic extrapolation of experience from one situation to another.