second edition

the
social psychology
of organizing

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TOPICS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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foreword

This series *Topics in Social Psychology* is directed toward the student with no prior background in social psychology. Taken as a whole, the series covers the ever-expanding field of social psychology reasonably well, but a major advantage of the series is that each individual book was written by well-known scholars in the area. The instructor can select a subset of the books to make up the course in social psychology, the particular subset depending on the instructor's own definition of our field. The original purpose of this series was to provide such freedom for the instructor while maintaining a thoughtful and expert treatment of each topic. In addition, the first editions of the series have been widely used in a variety of other ways: such as supplementary reading in nonpsychology courses; to introduce more advanced courses in psychology, or for the sheer fun of peeking at recent developments in social psychology.

We have developed second editions that serve much the same purpose. Each book is somewhat longer and more open in design, uses updated materials, and in general takes advantage of constructive feedback from colleagues and students across the country. So many people found the first editions of the individual books useful that we have tried to make the second editions even more thorough and complete, and therefore more easily separated from the rest of the series.

Karl Weick's contribution to this series centers on the psychology of organizing—when and why people do it. Weick's fresh and innovative approach to this classic problem provides an intriguing introduction for the beginning student. Indeed, Weick's creativity is so evident in this volume that more advanced students will find it very stimulating.

Charles A. Kiesler

acknowledgments

Piet Hein delights in defining man as that animal who himself draws lines that he himself stumbles over. I delight in the fact that my world has a few people who understand line drawing and stumbling, people who gloss the stumbling artfully and who are tolerant patrons of those artists in everyday life who insist on drawing still more lines. These rare and wondrous people made this book possible. This is as much a book by Ellen Berscheid, Michel Bougon, Justin Davidson, Craig Lundberg, James March, Marge Marquis, Fritz Mulhauser, Lou Pondy, Gerald Salancik, Milton Trapold, Peter Vaill, Caroline Violette, Gene Webb, and our Swedish son Björn Lorentzon, as it is a book by me. From close in, our three sons, Kirk, Kyle, and Kris, live line drawing rather than write about it, which makes it a fleshy, human, often gentle world. Finally, Karen's artlessness, sense of humor, and patience stitch the whole thing together so that occasionally it makes sense, which is why we all dedicate this book to her with love.

contents

an introduction to organizing

This book is about organizational appreciation. To understand organizing is to appreciate events such as these:

A professor, named Alex Bavelas, often plays golf with other professors. "Once, he took the foursome down to the golf course, and they were going to draw straws for partners. He said, 'Let's do this *after* the game' " (Brand 1975, p. 47).

"The story goes that three umpires disagreed about the task of calling balls and strikes. The first one said, 'I calls them as they is.' The second one said, 'I calls them as I sees them.' The third and cleverest umpire said, 'They ain't nothin' till I calls them' " (Simons 1976, p. 29).

"A police officer with a special ability for resolving sticky situations in unusual ways, often involving a disarming use of humor, was in the process of issuing a citation for a minor traffic violation when a hostile crowd began to gather around him. By the time he had given the offender his ticket, the mood of the crowd was ugly and the sergeant was not certain he would be able to get back to the relative safety of his patrol car. It then occurred to him to announce in a loud voice: 'You have just witnessed the issuance of a traffic ticket by a member of your Oakland Police Department.' And while the bystanders were busy trying to fathom the deeper meaning of this all too obvious communique, he got into his cruiser and drove off" (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch 1974, pp. 108-9).

In 1938 the Ford Motor Car Co. tried to reach a new group of customers by introducing a car that was smaller than their V8 in size and power. After several years of development they produced a car (dubbed 92A) that was narrower, shorter, and 600 pounds lighter than the regular Ford. However, the small motor cost only $3 less to manufacture and the entire car could be built for only $36 less than the big car. By mid-April the project was abandoned, signifying that the company would not expand the range of its models downward (Nevins and Hill 1963, p. 118).

Farmers have been buying heavier and more advanced machinery to save labor. The heavier machines have caused problems. "They pack the soil

and sometimes harden the subsoil and keep water from penetrating to the plant's roots. The subsoil then must be tilled with an even larger, deeper plow which, of course, requires a more powerful tractor to pull it" (Reed 1975).

"Uruguayan conductor Jose Serebrier stabbed himself through the hand with his baton when he became 'over-passionate' while leading 180 members of a brass-percussion ensemble and chorus through a special Easter musical festival in Mexico City recently. 'The baton broke into pieces,' Serebrier said. 'One piece was sticking through my hand. I guess I was more surprised than anybody. Ironically I never use a baton. But I decided to use one for this performance because I thought it would help achieve greater musical control. That was a mistake because I got over-passionate. All of a sudden I had stabbed myself. But I didn't stop conducting. I managed to pull the piece of baton out of my hand without stopping the music.' The band played on and the chorus sang for another 20 minutes until the finale. Afterwards Serebrier was taken to a local hospital for treatment" ("Suicide attempts?" April 10, 1975).

"Time-motion and eye-movement studies confirm my observation that conductors are able to fix visually different performers at precisely defined times and then make sweeping gestures in their direction. In a previous study I found that successful quarterbacks do the same thing, singling one player out of many after a precise number of counts and, with a precise overhand motion, projecting a score object in that player's direction. Since plots of quarterback and conductor ages show little overlap, it is evident that one could quite successfully become the other. This concept, called Sequential Career Commonality Utilization, is now being applied in many other fields, and the Sequential Career Commonality Utilization Branch is slated to achieve bureau status in a few years. The greatest breakthrough achieved by this branch was the finding of politician-night watchman commonalities, such as random walking, peering into darkness, and lack of a requirement for intelligent conversation suggesting that either could serve as the other" (Anderson 1974, p. 727).

"Secretary of the Army Howard H. Callaway is asking that his 'Glad You Asked' policy be considered throughout the Army. Secretary Callaway explained the 'Glad You Asked' concept this way: suppose that tomorrow morning someone calls you and asks about your stickiest problem—the last thing in the world you wanted anyone to call about. You answer, 'Glad You Asked,' and mean it. This is possible when your attitude and actions result from an open, candid, honest evaluation of the facts at hand" ("Glad you asked," 1975).

"If the National Hockey League has been wondering why it cannot keep expanding indiscriminately, the final round of the Stanley Cup playoffs between the Buffalo Sabers and the Philadelphia Flyers may have provided one big reason: fog. . . . Last night the temperature was about 76 degrees at game time, but near the 90 mark inside the rink. For the last 33 minutes, including 18½ minutes of overtime, the contest was halted 12 times by

referee Lloyd Gilmour when the clouds of steam made it impossible to see the puck. . . . Rene Roberts of Buffalo burst out of one fogbank in sudden death to tally the gamewinning goal" (Keese 1975).

"Computer simulations (of organizations) have a propensity for luring researchers into Bonini's paradox—the more realistic and detailed one's model, the more the model resembles the modeled organization, including resemblance in the directions of incomprehensibility and indescribability" (Starbuck 1976, p. 1101).

All ten of those episodes illustrate *organizing*, which is defined as a *consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors*. To organize is to assemble ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes.

Two contrasting definitions will help the reader understand what is being asserted:

1 Organizations are "structures of mutual expectation, attached to roles which define what each of its members shall expect from others and from himself" (Vickers 1967, pp. 109-10).

2 An organization is "an identifiable social entity pursuing multiple objectives through the coordinated activities and relations among members and objects. Such a social system is open-ended and dependent for survival on other individuals and sub-systems in the larger entity—society (Hunt 1972, p. 4).

Organizing is first of all grounded in agreements concerning what is real and illusory, a grounding that is called *consensual validation*. This term was coined by Harry Stack Sullivan; Ruth Munroe, in describing Sullivan's work, captures the phrase's nuance that we wish to incorporate into organizing:

In my glossary of Sullivanese, consensual validation seems to be "common sense" of a high order—the things people agree upon because their common sensual apparatus and deeply common interpersonal experiences make them seem objectively so. It is a critical and cautious term for the "reality" so often used by other psychological schools (Munroe 1955, p. 356, f.n.).

The important issues of consensus in organizing concern rules for building social processes out of behaviors and interpretations that can be imposed on the puzzling inputs to these processes.

Organizing is like a grammar in the sense that it is a systematic account of some rules and conventions by which sets of interlocked behaviors are assembled to form social processes that are intelligible to actors. It is also a grammar in the sense that it consists of rules for forming variables and causal

linkages into meaningful structures (later called cause maps) that summarize the recent experience of the people who are organized. The grammar consists of recipes for getting things done when one person alone can't do them and recipes for interpreting what has been done.

Organizing is directed initially at any input that is not self-evident. Happenings that represent a change, a difference, or a discontinuity from what has been going on, happenings that seem to have more than one meaning (they are equivocal) are the occasion for sizable collective activity. Once these inputs have become less equivocal, there is a decrease in the amount of collective activity directed at them.

Finally, the substance of organizing, the raw material that supplies the stable elements for the grammar, is interlocked behaviors (Buckley 1967, chap. 4). This interlocking is circular and was described by Allport:

> When individuals respond to one another in a direct, face-to-face manner, a social stimulus, given, for example, by the behavior of individual A, is likely to evoke from individual B a response which serves in turn as a stimulus to A causing him to react further. The direction of the stimuli and of their effects is thus *circular*, the response of each person being reevoked or increased by the reactions which his own responses called forth from others" (1924, pp. 148-49).

The sequence Allport describes is called a double-interact throughout this book and is analyzed in Chapter 4.

For the moment, it is sufficient to say that Bavelas's golfers, Callaway's colonels, Serebrier's musicians, and the other characters depicted in the initial examples are all engaged in the same organizing that we associate with General Motors, NASA, IBM, and McDonald's. In every case there is a shared sense of appropriate procedures and appropriate interpretations, an assemblage of behaviors distributed among two or more people, and a puzzle to be worked on. The conjunction of these procedures, interpretations, behaviors, and puzzles describes what organizing does and what an organization is (see Fig. 1.1).

With this preliminary understanding in hand we can review the relevance of each example for the arguments to be presented.
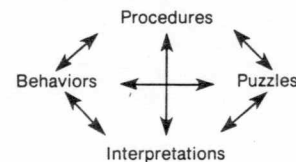
Figure 1.1

BAVELAS AND RETROSPECT

Bavelas's crazy foursome is interesting because for 18 holes they participate in a puzzle. What they've been doing for those 18 holes won't be known until the match is finished and they find who their partner is (was?). For example, the putt that I worry about on the 16th hole is worth the worry if my partner turns out to be Professor Bavelas, but if my partner is either Professor Webb or Professor Leavitt, then my worry is inappropriate.

But chronic and enduring puzzles like this aren't confined to the golf course. Organizations run into them all the time. But organizations are often reluctant to admit that a good deal of their activity consists of reconstructing plausible histories after-the-fact to explain where they are now, even though no such history actually got them to precisely this place. "How can I know how I've played until I see who my partner was?" On the 18th green that's the puzzle that has to be managed within Bavelas's foursome. But in the form of the related assertion, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" that puzzle has to be managed day after day by everybody who deals with organizations. The consequences of that reality will unfold as we proceed.

With a touch of regret we also note that Bavelas's world gains relevance for organizations because he was unable to get any takers for his proposal. In the actual match where this innovation was proposed, people found the prospect so strange that they all refused to try it. Collectivities such as the ones we will explore in this book also have their aversions to risk. Thus, we become much more interested in the question of when they will take chances, foster mutations, become playful.

UMPIRES AND ENACTMENT

The umpire who correctly asserts "They ain't nothin' till I calls them" rather neatly fingers a key element in organizational life: the important role that people play in creating the environments that impose on them. Organizations, despite their apparent preoccupation with facts, numbers, objectivity, concreteness, and accountability, are in fact saturated with subjectivity, abstraction, guesses, making do, invention, and arbitrariness . . . just like the rest of us. Much of what troubles organizations is of their own making; before completion of this essay, the ways in which organizations figure prominently in their own landscapes will become more evident.

COPS AND EQUIVOCALITY

The puzzle posed by Bavelas and the puzzle that faces the umpire who creates the reality of baseball both pale in comparison to the equivocal puzzle posed for an unruly crowd by the Oakland policeman. In their attempts to get

"behind" the meaning of the remarks about writing tickets and to discover what input produced that output, members of the crowd probably turned to one another, sought some kind of help in figuring out what was up, and in their mixture of puzzlement and social activity proceeded to inattend the sergeant long enough for him to leave.

The basic raw materials on which organizations operate are informational inputs that are ambiguous, uncertain, equivocal. Whether the information is embedded in tangible raw materials, recalcitrant customers, assigned tasks, or union demands, there are many possibilities or sets of outcomes that *might* occur. Organizing serves to narrow the range of possibilities, to reduce the number of "might occurs." The activities of organizing are directed toward the establishment of a workable level of certainty. An organization attempts to transform equivocal information into a degree of unequivocality with which it can work and to which it is accustomed. This means that absolute certainty is seldom required. It also means that there can be enormous differences among organizations and industries with respect to the level of clarity that they regard as sufficient for action.

Members of organizations spend considerable time negotiating among themselves an acceptable version of what is going on. The activity itself is preserved by the phrase *consensual validation* and the content of the activity is preserved by the phrase *reducing equivocality*. The policeman's utterance could be interpreted to have two or more meanings (he's giving a ticket, he's nuts, he's signaling an accomplice, he's acting on TV, he's a clown, it's a trick, etc), and the true meaning can't be determined. That's what makes the scene equivocal. As the cop might have said, "We aim to police." When any outcome, such as the word *police* in the preceding sentence, could have been produced by two or more inputs ("We aim to keep law and order," "We aim to please"), the display is equivocal and people turn to their similar associates for help in sorting through the meanings and for help in stabilizing one of them (Festinger 1954).

FORDS AND MEMORIES

The troubles that the Ford Motor Car Company had in the 1930s producing a compact car suggest that one of their problems resulted from the fact that they presumed small cars are made the same way as large cars: take a big car and shrink it. Since Ford knew how to make large cars, they thought there was no problem. Suppose, however, that the Ford people had entertained some doubts about their expertise. Suppose they said both "Yes, we know how to make small cars," and "No, we don't know how to make small cars." The latter doubt suggests that small cars might not be simply scaled-down large cars. After all, shrinking a clock into a watch is neither easy nor cheap. Furthermore, even the

belief among watchmakers that they can make watches is proving troublesome as the electronic watches built by firms who never before made watches begin to grab a sizable share of the market ("Seiko's smash" 1978).

The expensive Ford compact provides a handy summary of the possibility we will explore later, namely, that an ambivalent stance toward past wisdom makes adaptive sense. Organizations that both believe and doubt their past experience retain more flexibility and adaptive capacity.

Repeatedly, we will look at organizational practices for their relevance to the theme that adaptation precludes adaptability. Specialization in the production of large cars with technology, tasks, and skills devoted solely toward this production makes the organization profitable and efficient in the short run, but vulnerable in the long run. The biological version of this point is described by Dunn:

> Environmental changes often transform earlier adaptive specializations into cruel traps. As a changing environment passes beyond the range of a gene pool narrowed and made less versatile through specialization, it often forces the extinction of whole species. Just as in species formation those individual organisms fail to survive whose genetic range is inadequate to match the requirements of a changing environment, a species that generates a narrower genetic range (genetic pool of the population) through specialization may, when faced with environmental change, fail to support a dynamic adaptation and thus bring about extinction of the biotype (1971, p. 45).

TRACTORS AND VICIOUS CIRCLES

The problem created when heavy machinery packed the soil and necessitated heavier machinery to break it up is an eloquent example of feedback loops that sometimes turn into vicious circles. The cause-effect relationships that exist in organizations are dense and often circular. Sometimes these causal circuits cancel the influences of one variable on another, and sometimes they amplify the effects of one variable on another. It is the network of these causal relationships that impose many of the controls in organizations and that stabilize or disrupt the organization. It is the patterns of these causal links that account for much of what happens in organizations. Though not directly visible, these causal patterns account for more of what happens in organizations than do some of the more visible elements such as machinery, time clocks, and pollution equipment.

CONDUCTORS AND CONTROL

A glimpse of misplaced beliefs about control is found in the tragically charming anecdote about the enthusiastic conductor. The problem of coordinating 180 musicians *is* immense, but the idea that a mere baton "would help achieve

greater musical control" seems pathetically heroic. Under these circumstances, again it is the pattern of alliances, causal loops, and norms that exist *between* people that accomplish or defeat efforts at control. Mutual influence between pairs of people is at the root of most control observed in much larger aggregations. While the conductor may presume that he and the baton produce an ordered performance, in actuality they probably are minor contributors to the outcome. Of more importance are the bonds and mutually supportive relationships that have been built up among small subsets of the musicians. It is these interpersonal bonds that hold the organization together and that become activated in response to the conductor, whether he stabs himself in the process or not.

QUARTERBACKS AND INTERCHANGEABILITY

The quarterback-conductor episode illustrates some possible consequences that occur when activity becomes overrationalized, overmanaged, overorganized. A recurrent theme in this book is that managers often get in the way of activities that have their own self-regulation, form, and self-correction tendencies.

These natural control circuits frequently are disrupted by managerial meddling. Management intervenes in the mistaken belief that single individuals do the controlling and that control is not implicit in causal circuits and interpersonal influence processes. Failure to acknowledge these sources of control, coupled with interventions that actively disrupt them, are the occasions for much mismanagement in organizations.

Although the theme is introduced with tongue-in-cheek by Anderson (1974), the issue of interchangeability of persons and positions is also a crucial one within organizations, and we shall refer to it frequently. If making hand motions at people really is the core of conducting, and if this is the only crucial activity involved in conducting, then it *is* true that aged quarterbacks might be substitutable for conductors . . . Sonny Jurgenson conducts Bruckner.

CALLAWAY AND OPENNESS

"Glad you asked" is an uncommonly rich summary of much that goes on in large organizations. The necessity to invoke this slogan and to push for its acceptance suggests a prior history of nasty surprises when outsiders started poking around. Incidentally, at the time Callaway first enunciated this policy he also went on record as saying that women would never enter West Point. ("Why are women now at West Point? Glad you asked.")

If it worked the way it was supposed to, the "Glad you asked" campaign should lead to more openness, more willingness to admit poor judgment in prior decisions, and a more candid and honest evaluation of the facts at hand. These outcomes are valued by many organizational theorists who try to

enhance the authenticity with which organizational actors deal with one another (e.g., Argyris 1964). "Glad you asked," followed up by honest answers, would certainly seem to be a way to enhance authenticity. If this policy really did have the effect of making people relax in the belief that there was nothing to hide, then it might be the case that confidence and pride in work would result and that dealings with the public would be less deceptive.

Whenever policies such as "Glad you asked" are introduced, it is valuable to examine the internal consequences of such policies. "Glad you asked" seems to be a policy designed to manage external dealings. Historically the "Glad you asked" policy was articulated soon after the Watergate revelations. But to view "Glad you asked" as a policy that is responsive to the public is to miss much of its potential for *internally* organizing the actions of organizational members.

Think, for example, of the internal implications of "We're only number two—we try harder." If customers who have been alerted by this advertising "send back" to Avis workers cues that allow the Avis workers to try harder or to demonstrate that they are trying harder, if those slogans help Avis workers to make their work activities more sensible (e.g., "I wasn't sure before what I was doing, but now I know: I'm trying harder so that we can become number one"), and if the recognition of that symbol by the public has the effect of making Avis workers feel more pride in their organization, then a policy that looks as if it is directed mainly outward may in fact have its largest effect on actions of those insiders about whom the policy comments.

In short, when "Glad you asked" is implemented effectively, organizations become more open, candid, and trusting. However, the felt need to introduce this policy in the first place suggests that organizations have other values that supercede openness—one of them being managing the indicators that the public is responsive to.

HOCKEY FOG AND CAUSAL CHAINS

The fog-clouded Stanley Cup playoffs in Buffalo are an excellent illustration of the point that causal chains within organizations are lengthy as well as dense (Reynolds 1974). It seems hard to imagine that expanding the number of teams would result in a controversial playoff due to fog. Nevertheless, there is a kind of inevitability once some of these small beginnings of expansion are set in motion. As you sign more teams, it takes a longer season for all teams to play all other teams; the playoffs also last longer. This means that hockey, normally a cold-weather sport, now spills over into the spring for the playoffs and into the early fall for exhibition games. Both of these encroachments on warmer seasons raise the odds that hot air will mix with cold air coming from the ice and that the mixture will form clouds of vapor on the surface.

Notice that this long chain of causes also has the potential for being self-defeating. Not only does the fog cut down visibility for spectators, television cameras, and news photographers, but it also contains the potential for some genuine feuds over whether scores should be allowed.

The presence of fog is even self-defeating for players because it lessens the quality of play:

> What made last night's action even more bizarre was the spectacle of nearly exhausted players being asked to skate around the rink to stir up air currents and make the fog rise, with the game tied 4-4, and at its tensest in the sudden death. . . . "It was brutal out there," said Jerry Korab, the big Buffalo defenseman. "Not only did I lose at least 10 pounds, but I couldn't breathe. The fog smelled like gas or ammonia and got in my eyes, too" (Keese 1975).

In analyzing organizations we will want to examine the density of causal linkages and their circular patterns, but we will also want to examine the length of these chains of interdependence. Immediate activities can have remote consequences.

The ludicrous playoff might also look like a classic case of poor planning. That may be. But it's not obvious that even more planning is the answer: plans have been overrated as a crucial component for accomplishment of effective actions.

Plans are important in organizations, but not for the reasons people think. Cohen and March (1974) argue that plans are symbols, advertisements, games, and excuses for interactions. They are *symbols* in the sense that when an organization does not know how it is doing or knows that it is failing, it can signal a different message to observers. If the organization does not have a compact car in its line, it can announce plans to have one. On the basis of this announcement the firm may be valued more highly than an organization that makes no such announcement. It is less crucial that the organization is actually planning to make the car than that all concerned imagine this to be the case. It is in this sense that plans are symbols and that they negotiate a portion of the reality that then comes back and rearranges the organization.

Plans are *advertisements* in the sense that they often are used to attract investors to the firm. Plans show the organization at its best; they are documents designed to persuade, but again, they are more valuable externally than internally. One earmark of a plan that advertises is that it lacks relevant information about the organization. "Real" plans, those that bind the energies and time of people, contain a maximum of relevant information; plans that pass as advertisements are deficient on information.

Plans are *games* because they often are used to test how serious people are about the programs they advocate. If departments want programs badly

enough, then they should be willing to spend the effort necessary to justify the program and to embed it in a plan. "If an administrator wishes to avoid saying 'yes' to everything, but has no basis for saying 'no' to anything, he tests the commitment of the department by asking for a plan" (Cohen and March 1974, p. 115).

Finally, plans become *excuses for interaction* in the sense that they induce conversations among diverse populations about projects that may have been low-priority items. The interaction may yield immediate positive results, but such outcomes are usually incidental. Much of the power of planning is explained by the people that it puts into contact and the information that these people exchange about *current* circumstances. When people meet to plan for contingencies five years away, contingencies that seldom materialize, they may modify one another's ideas about what should be done today. But that is about all that can be accomplished.

Plans are a pretext under which several valuable activities take place in organizations, but one of those activities is not forecasting. As Ambrose Bierce said, to plan is to "bother about the best method of accomplishing an accidental result" (1946, p. 327).

STARBUCK AND CLUTTER

Starbuck's summarization of the dilemma faced by Bonini (1963) when he tried to simulate an organization holds true for a much bigger set of inquiry procedures than computer simulations. Thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of organizations may well be disorganized because that's the way organizations are. Organizations deal with equivocality, but their ways of dealing are often themselves equivocal and subject to many interpretations.

Cohen and March (1974) have suggested, for example, that university organizations have *goals* that are inconsistent, ill-defined, and loosely coupled; *technology* that no one understands; and *participants* who vary in how much time and effort they invest in the organization. If that's partially what a university organization is like, then a thick description of that organization will be confusing when it starts to comment about goals (e.g., Friday they wanted to discourage graduate students, but Thursday they wanted to encourage them), technology (e.g., they don't have the foggiest idea how people get educated), or participants (e.g., the president didn't realize her provost was on sabbatical for the year). The irony is that this confusion in the observer's report testifies to its authenticity and not to its sloppiness.

Confusion as a indicator of validity is a crucial nuance because many of the ways of thinking about organizing that will be introduced in this book will portray organizations as superimposed structures. This imagery implies that there is not an underlying "reality" waiting to be discovered. Rather, organiza-

tions are viewed as the inventions of people, inventions superimposed on flows of experience and momentarily imposing some order on these streams. Notice, however, that many portions of the streams of experience will remain unorganized, and those portions being temporarily organized by imposed ideologies will remain equivocal. These enduring equivocalities should be detected by scrupulous observers, but since that which is noticed is partially indescribable and partially incomprehensible, the efforts at description will appear flawed. Such are the dilemmas that face those who choose as their topic of interest phenomena that are complex, fluid, collective.

Summary

We stated at the outset that this was a book about organizing and about the appreciating of organizing. Through examination of a diverse set of events, the reader has been exposed to both appreciating and organizing.

The activity of appreciating was implicit in the approach taken to each incident. Brief attempts were made to embellish each example, to examine it from a variety of angles, and to add to its richness.

A significant portion of the existing organizational literature is steeped in criticism (Lumsden 1973). Less often do we see analyses patterned after those found in such fields as rhetoric, literary criticism, and aesthetics (Elbow 1973; March 1976; Wimsatt 1976; Gass 1975; Silverman 1975). I feel there is a need for a dialectic between criticism and affirmation as modes of apprehending organizations. At the moment we are heavily into criticism. A balancing of this with more emphasis on affirmation would lead to more activity of this kind:

> The critic (of poetry or art) more commonly looks for interpretations that discover aspects of an artistic expression making it more interesting or more beautiful than when first observed, or developing the uncertainties of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. Truly distinguished pieces of criticism are almost always ones in which a critic enlarges our appreciation of the beauties and complexities of art that is loved (March 1976, p. 18).

In the process of embellishing, reworking, and contemplating each prior example, we began to identify some elements associated with organizing. In each example some portion of a stream of experience was bracketed, and efforts were made to turn the stream into information and then to do something about the information that had been constructed. The raw data which people tried to make sensible consisted of such diverse displays as packed dirt, a moving baseball, a pierced hand, a fog-shrouded puck, opponentless golf, a cryptic policy, an even more cryptic traffic citation, and an expensive cheap

car. In each case our interest was in the genesis of the puzzling raw data, attempts by groups of people to transform those puzzles into information, and what was done as a result of the momentary imposing of meaning on those puzzles (e.g., the car project was abandoned, skaters created a human fan, the conductor conducted for another 20 minutes).

This very general picture of organizing was supplemented by brief mention of some elements that compose it; those elements will be discussed further in subsequent chapters. These elements include suggestions such as these:

1 Equivocal information triggers organizing.

2 Efforts to stabilize meanings for equivocal displays typically involve the efforts of two or more people.

3 Most efforts at sensemaking involve interpretation of previous happenings and of writing plausible histories that link these previous happenings with current outcomes.

4 Interdependencies among people are the substance of organizations, but these interdependencies are fluid and shifting.

5 Organizations have a major hand in creating the realities which they then view as "facts" to which they must accommodate.

6 An ambivalent stance with respect to "lessons of experience" is a major way in which organizations preserve some adaptability to cope with changed contingencies.

7 Events in organizations are held together and regulated by dense, circular, lengthy strands of causality perceived by members.

8 Networks of self-regulating causal links are realized in the form of coordinated behaviors between two or more people.

9 Organizations frequently use only parts of persons, and those portions used vary in the ease with which they can be replaced.

10 Most policies within organizations have both internal and external consequences, whether intended or not, and these consequences may work in opposite directions.

11 There is ambivalence within organizations toward being open and closed and toward being suspicious and trusting.

Additional properties of organizations will be developed as we proceed. However, we have already hinted at some of the directions that will be taken. To gain some perspective on how these hints mesh with and play off existing ideas about organizations we can examine a stunning example of the organizing process *in vivo*.

Organizing: The Emergence of "Majority Rule"

Piet Hein's aphoristic poem (or *grook*) entitled "Majority Rule" tells us a great deal about how organizing occurs:

> His party was the Brotherhood of Brothers, and
> there were more of them than of the others.
> That is, they constituted that minority
> which formed the greater part of the majority.
> Within the party, he was of the faction
> that was supported by the greater fraction.
> And in each group, within each group, he sought
> the group that could command the most support.
> The final group had finally elected
> a triumvirate whom they all respected.
> Now of these three, two had the final word,
> because the two could overrule the third.
> One of these two was relatively weak,
> so one alone stood at the final peak.
> He was THE GREATER NUMBER of the pair
> which formed the most part of the three that were
> elected by the most of those whose boast
> it was to represent the most of most
> of most of most of the entire state —
> or of the most of it at any rate.
> He never gave himself a moment's slumber
> but sought the welfare of the greatest number.
> And all the people, everywhere they went
> knew to their cost exactly what it meant
> to be dictated to by the majority.
> But that meant nothing — they were the minority.

One way to understand the events portrayed in this poem is to transform them into an organizational chart (Stieglitz 1975). It is common practice to depict organizations graphically and to regard the lines in the chart as indicating such things as communication relationships, lines of authority, chain of command, levels within the organization, superior-subordinate relationships, etc. A simplified organization chart for "Majority Rule" is found in Fig. 1.2. The numbers attached to each level are arbitrary, and the labels at each level correspond to the labels used in the poem with three additions. "Other parties," those forming the lesser part of the majority, have been dubbed Sisterhood of Sisters (SOS), Sisterhood of Brothers (SOB), and Brotherhood of Sisters (BOS).
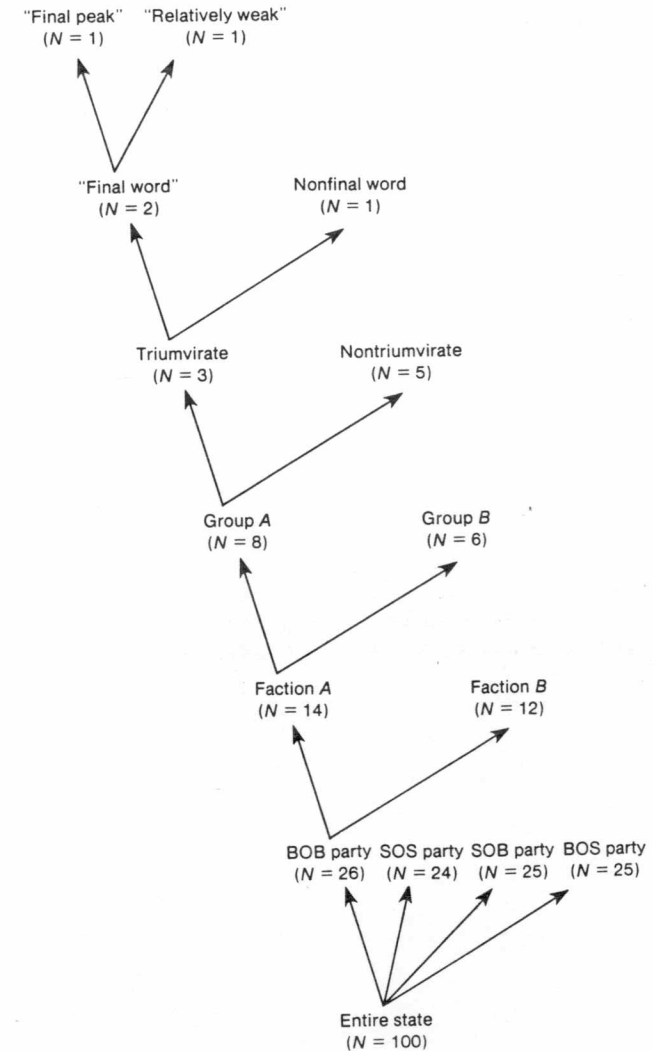
Figure 1.2

If we look at the chart, we can see several interesting features. For example, note the direction of the arrows. In most charts they would point from the top to the bottom, yet in this case they point in the reverse direction. This is partly because we are discussing the *process* of organizing and how organization emerges. Our discussion is consistent with the sizable literature (e.g., Partridge 1978) that talks about the emergence of leadership and demonstrates that this emergence is viewed as more or less legitimate—depend-

ing on the extent to which members participate in selecting the leader. The arrows in the chart, however, make an even more important point. They imply that subordinates ultimately determine the amount of influence exerted by those who lead. This is a prominent theme in organization theory (e.g., Mechanic 1964). The argument is presented in perhaps the clearest form by Barnard:

> If a directive communication is accepted by one to whom it is addressed, its authority for him is confirmed or established. It is admitted as the basis of action. Disobedience of such a communication is a denial of its authority for him. Therefore, under this definition the decision as to whether an order has authority or not lies with the persons to whom it is addressed, and does not reside in "persons of authority" or those who issue orders. In the last analysis the authority fails because the individuals in sufficient numbers regard the burden involved in accepting necessary order as changing the balance of advantage against their interest, and they withdraw or withhold the indispensable contributions (1938, pp. 163-65).

This quotation suggests several additional properties of the grook: (1) the person at the top can be in a vulnerable position; (2) subordinates often do not realize the amount of control they actually have—an observation that occurs repeatedly in experiments on coalition formation (e.g., Vinacke *et al.* 1966); (3) if the hierarchy is to be maintained, it must be continuously reestablished by the person above sending *acceptable* orders to the person below—in Barnard's language, orders must be within the "Zone of Indifference" for subordinates (1938, p. 167); (4) the acceptance of orders is always determined in part by self-interest—not only do orders vary in their acceptability, but subordinates vary in their interests and definitions of what is acceptable.

As a sidelight on the issue of authority, it is interesting to note that even though there are seven levels in our chart, the last three levels involve the *same* three people in different combinations. Three are picked to rule; of these three, two can override the third; and one of the two is weak, so one person winds up in actual control. The crucial property here is that effective influence in the large collectivity depends on alliances among a very few members. Several theorists describe organizational functioning in terms of alliances that are established (e.g., Caplow 1964; Cyert and March 1963). These theorists argue that to understand an organization is to locate the crucial alliances that control large numbers of people. This is precisely the point made by the grook. Despite the size of the original group ($N = 100$) and despite the fact that there are supposedly 100 different influential people, in reality the crucial decisions—those thought to be the *majority* decisions—are made by one person: the minority. The important point is not that one person rules; the important point is the fact that this control is made possible by the pattern of alliances that

exists in the group. It is the pattern of relationships, *not* the fact that a "great man" sits on top of the heap, that makes it possible for influence to be concentrated.

Although control relationships are regarded by many as the key element for understanding the organization (e.g., Smith 1978; Scott *et al.* 1967; Tannenbaum 1968), there are other features commonly discussed in organization theory that are visible in the grook. For instance, the number of levels present in an organization (seven levels are depicted in the example) is regarded by many theorists as a crucial property that explains much of organizational functioning (e.g., Porter and Lawler 1965; Evan 1963). This property is commonly referred to as *flat versus tall organizations*.

There are several reasons why this dimension is judged important. Levels determine the number of subordinates that report to a given supervisor (Van Fleet and Bedeian 1977). If we hold the size of the organization constant, the fewer the number of levels, the greater the number of subordinates who report to a single supervisor, the less closely can the supervisor monitor his subordinates, and the more autonomy they have to make their own decisions. Thus the structural variable of *tall versus flat* has the important psychological consequence of determining the closeness and frequency with which any member can be supervised; this in turn affects the member's feelings of freedom vs. coercion. Generally, it is posited that the more self-determination allowed to the worker, the higher the worker's productivity and satisfaction (e.g., Blauner 1960; Katz 1964).

The distinction between tall and flat organizations also affects communication. In general, the flatter the organization, the less likely that communication will become distorted, since there are fewer decision points through which it passes before it reaches the unit that must take action. Phrased in a converse form, the rule is this: the greater the number of people through whom a communication must pass, the greater the likelihood that the communication will be transformed (Campbell 1958).

From another point of view, it is possible to interpret tall vs. flat in terms of another venerable concept in organization theory, the informal organization. Informal organization consists of the interaction patterns that develop in addition to those that are formally prescribed by lines of authority (Carzo and Yanouzas 1967, chap. 5). The relevance of the informal organization to the present discussion is that as organizations become flatter and as supervision becomes less direct, a greater number of informal contacts will probably be initiated and maintained, and these contacts will have a more substantial effect on performance (Cohen, Robinson, and Edwards 1969). When supervision is less frequent and less direct, informal contacts may be initiated for the purpose of getting work done (Blau 1954). In other words, assistance cannot be counted

on from a supervisor to whom several persons report, so this support is sought at a parallel level from those who are engaged in similar activities. Added impetus for these informal alignments comes from the fact that in her role of helper the supervisor also sooner or later assumes the role of evaluator. She judges the output of the subordinates and bases her promotion and demotion decisions on these assessments. This means that the supervisor plays an extremely complicated role. Subordinates are hesitant to ask for assistance from the supervisor because they think it will reveal their incompetence and will affect subsequent decisions about their salary and promotion. The major point to be drawn from this is that organizations vary in their number of levels, and that the number of levels directly affects supervision, communication, and informal alliances and indirectly produces psychological consequences.

Most organizational theorists assume that organizing is done in order to promote goal attainment (e.g., Hauschildt and Hamel 1978; Etzioni 1964, pp. 5-19). This emphasis was apparent in Hunt's definition mentioned earlier (1972, p. 4). But a goal is not readily apparent in the grook unless we wish to speculate that something as nebulous as "survival," "attainment of welfare," or "attainment of control over the environment" is the "reason" why these people united. This would seem to stretch unduly the information contained in the grook. This point should not be dismissed, because in subsequent chapters it will be argued that organizing is *not* necessarily an attempt to attain some specified goal. The absence of a goal in the grook makes it *more*, rather than less, like an organization.

In the grook, one gets the impression that first organizing occurred; then, *after* it was concluded, the reason for the organizing became apparent. It is as if the persons acted so that they could eventually determine what it was that they had done. This sequence in which actions *precede* goal definition may well be a more accurate portrait of organizational functioning. The common assertion that goal consensus must occur prior to action obscures the fact that consensus is impossible unless there is something tangible around which it can occur. And this "something tangible" may well turn out to be actions *already completed*. Thus it is entirely possible that goal statements are retrospective rather than prospective.

Since any organization theory has to specify why members consent to join and remain in organizations, most theories discuss the "social contract" that is implicit in organizational membership (e.g., Barnard 1948, pp. 113-18; Thompson 1967, chap. 8; Levinson 1972, pp. 337-38). Schein designates this contract as a psychological contract and describes it this way:

> The notion of a psychological contract implies that the individual has a variety of expectations of the organization and that the organization has a variety of expectations of him. These expectations not only cover how

> much work is to be performed for how much pay, but also involve the whole pattern of rights, privileges, and obligations between worker and organization (1965, p. 11).

It should be noted that implicit in the concept of the contract is the notion that there is an exchange of commodities, and it is this feature of the contract which has been given considerable prominence in writings about organization (e.g., Whyte 1959; Jacobs 1974; Hollander 1976). Satisfaction, productivity, interpersonal ties, and the likelihood of leaving are all dependent on the terms of the contract and its fate at any given moment in time. What is demonstrated in the grook is perhaps the most basic form in which a contract exists. Individual members consent to be governed; in return, some smaller body agrees to govern in a beneficient manner. Phrased in terms of the grook, the majority consents to become the minority in the belief that their interests are more likely to be promoted.

One way to contrast small groups and large organizations is to view the latter as a group of groups (e.g., Simon 1957). This feature is illustrated in the grook and affords the wedge by which additional psychological concepts become relevant for organization theory. Two such relevant notions are link pins, people with membership in two or more overlapping groups who promote cooperation between the separate groups (Wager 1972), and ethnocentrism, ingroup loyalty coupled with outgroup deprecation. If one views an organization as a group of groups, this implies that there may be some competition among the several groups for scarce resources (Sapolsky 1972). This competition often leads members to overrate the virtues of their own group and to downgrade those of other groups (Le Vine and Campbell 1972). These divisive forces are often reduced when one or more members hold joint membership in or are acceptable to both groups (Likert 1961; Heiskanen 1967). Presumably, the "excluded groups" on the right side of Fig. 1.2 would exhibit some hostility toward the groups on the left side. The groups on the left side control the scarce resource of power, which has been removed from the control of the members on the right side. The left-side members themselves would probably have their own hostilities—toward the people in "higher" ingroups. Working against this tendency of excluded members to deprecate "included members" are the facts that there are link pins and that all groups may share the goal of leading a good life. To the extent that all groups share this goal despite their differences, and to the extent that they believe the leader is capable of improving their state, then intergroup hostility should decrease.

Anyone who samples the literature on organizations will soon notice a term that occurs over and over again, *rationality* (Diesing 1962). This concept does not necessarily mean that organizational actions are logical or sensible, but rather that they are intended, thought about, planned, calculated, or

designed for a purpose. The emphasis is on the idea that what happens in an organization was at one point in time expected or planned to happen (Mintzberg 1978). The fact that organizations typically exhibit a great deal of turbulence, disorder, and unpredictability does not necessarily disprove the theory that their *origins* were rational or that they are trying to be rational.

Rather than demonstrate rationality as such, the grook shows the trouble one has in trying to apply this concept. If there is "calculation" or "intent" present in the grook, the only person to whom this might safely be attributed is the person on top. If "rationality" is used this way, it means an expedient set of alliances composed for the ultimate purpose of gaining control. Rationality lies in the several means that were used to gain control. We could say that the other members tacitly "consented" to this rational plan; but if we do this, we lose the force of the concept.

To keep the concept from becoming meaningless, one alternative is to adopt a convention suggested by Simon (1957, pp. 33-41)—the concept of *bounded rationality*. The essence of this notion is that individuals have perceptual as well as information-processing limits, and even though they may intend to act rationally, they can do so only in a limited fashion. This limited fashion consists of acting on the basis of sufficient knowledge rather than complete knowledge (the concept of satisficing); of using simple, unlaborious rules to search for a solution when a problem arises (e.g., searching in the immediate vicinity of the problem); and of using shortcuts whenever possible.

In terms of bounded rationality, we could say that the persons in the grook facilitated the form of control that finally emerged; when faced with decisions, they used simple decision rules (e.g., the majority wins) and applied a criterion of sufficiency (e.g., "If this agreement will enable us to get on with our work, let's accept it"). There was little review of all possible consequences. The members dealt with "here and now," and did so in the way that involved the least possible effort.

While some of us may balk at this unflattering portrait of mankind, to do so is to miss the point being made. The point is that *if* one assumes that the actors have limited rationality, then it follows that decisions will be made in terms of localized disturbances to which abbreviated analyses will be applied, with short-term recommendations as the result. A search for more stable solutions (i.e., those that will solve the problem once and for all) is unlikely; consequences are not given much attention, and apparently logical solutions may prove faulty as their consequences ramify. Furthermore, since the consequences of a decision often occur much later than the decision itself, it is difficult for the members to trace backward from these disruptive consequences to determine precisely what caused them. The members cannot make such an analysis, simply because there are too many competing explanations. Thus, the

only thing members can do when a new problem arises is to engage in more localized problem-solving.

What all this suggests is that rationality is best understood as in the eye of the beholder. It is *his* aims and how he consciously sets out to accomplish them that constitute the clearest, most easily specified component of rationality. To say that "systems" or organizations engage in rational decision-making makes sense only if we can specify some set of persons who agree on some desired outcome, on a specified set of means to attain this outcome, on ways in which the specific means will be activated, and on how it will be known whether the desired outcome was attained or not. Since this fourfold agreement is more difficult when large numbers of persons are involved, it is likely that rationality will characterize mostly small groups of actors and that, at any moment in time, organizations will have several different and contradictory rationalities.

There are some newer models that take considerable liberty with the notion of rationality. Many of these seem more appropriate for examining the Brotherhood of Brothers. In particular, models which suggest that organizations are collectivities that "make do" suggest the value of relaxing the constraints of rational models.

A good example of this newer class of models is the attempt by Cohen, March, and Olsen to characterize organizations as garbage cans into which are dumped problems, people, choice situations, and solutions. The resulting definition of an organization is interesting:

> An organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work (1972, p. 2).

A crucial variable that is emphasized in this model is timing. It is assumed that there is a continual stream of people, solutions, choices, and problems that flow in an organization. Every now and then some clusters of these elements coincide, and a decision is produced. In other words, problems may attach themselves first to one choice situation and then to another, and the same holds true for people and solutions.

These investigators have created a computer simulation to see how an organization behaves when it operates like a garbage can; they find an interesting property of decisions. Two major decision strategies in a garbage can organization are the strategies of *oversight* and *flight*. The strategy of *oversight* involves making quick choices. You make a choice whenever the important problems are attached to some other choice and before they can drift to the choice you're making. Having made the choice you solve nothing, since the problems are still attached to other choices. Likewise, the decision

style of *flight* involves delaying a choice until the problems wander away and attach themselves to other choices. Once the problems have left, then you make the choice. Again the choice solves no problems, since none are attached to it.

This is not meant as a cynical commentary on organizations. Instead, it is simply what actually happens in a computer simulation when you set up organizations as if they were streams of people, choices, problems, and solutions. It's striking that most decisions involve flight and oversight because this fact suggests why organizations can keep making decisions yet never solve any of their problems.
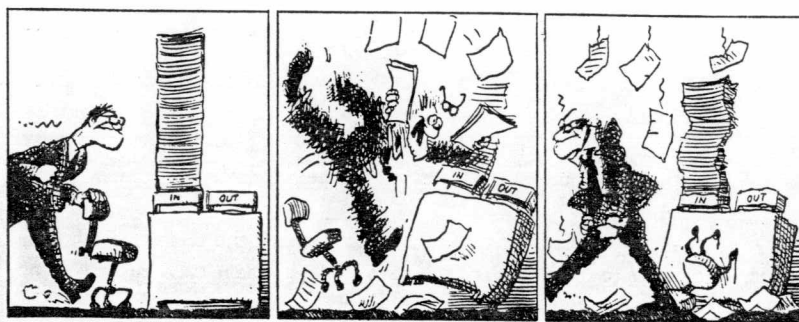
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While numerous other relationship linkages between the grook and organizational theory could be highlighted, a final set of subtleties should be noted; these suggest the unusual appropriateness of this display as an exhibit of organizing. There is motion and a glimpse of process and emergence in this example. It is also clear that much of whatever stability or organization exists in the Brotherhood exists in the minds of the actors. The actors, with one exception, conclude from their particularistic experiences that they are all members of a minority, that their groups are all members of a minority, and when this view of the world is superimposed on their collective activities, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. They indeed act like and become the minority, even though a casual head count buttressed by a reflective moment would reveal that this is incorrect.

Conspicuously missing from the grook are two prominent elements in organizational theory: technology and the environment. Given the position we will develop, these omissions are not serious. Environments will be treated as the outcomes of organizing and as the creations of actors within the organization. Technology will be viewed as relevant solely for the information that it provides the organizational members and for the effects it has on equivocality.

The whole set of groups, factions, and fractions in the grook also has a decidedly arbitrary quality. It's apparent that the entire collection of people plus votes plus power attributions could be carved up differently. Different subsets of the 100 could easily be composed (e.g., losers and winners, supporters and supported). The point is that most collectivities and most objects on which collectivities work can be made sensible in a wide variety of ways. Furthermore, the various versions are relatively equivalent in their reasonableness. Organizations continuously make different kinds of sense of their inputs and of themselves. These continuous operations manage some equivocalities, ignore others, and create still others. Repeatedly organizations find themselves trying to stabilize the stream of experiences that flow through them and the streams of actions being directed at the flows. Positing "minorities" and "majorities" is just as good a device to make the world sensible as any other one.